

The Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

FIRST FRUITS

Month of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, August 2021 / Issue 53



*“You nourished Your people
With food of Angels...”*

— Wisdom 16:20



YEAR OF ST. JOSEPH & YEAR OF THE FAMILY
900TH JUBILEE YEAR OF THE NORBERTINE ORDER — 1121-2021



From our Archives: 1999 - Mother and the other four founding nuns kneel before the tomb of St. Norbert at the Norbertine Monastery of Strahov, in Prague, Czech Republic, during the beginning days of the founding of our community.

On the Cover: Detail of a stained glass window made by our sisters and installed in our chapel July 11, 2021 (see also events page).

Dear Confreres, Family and Friends of the Bethlehem Priory,
*"You nourished Your people with food of angels...
 that Your sons whom You loved might learn, O Lord,
 that it is not the various kinds of fruits that nourish man,
 but it is Your Word that preserves those who believe in You."*
 – Wisdom 16:20 & 26

During his life, our Holy Father St. Norbert was able to accomplish very great things: from his intense personal austerity and love for God, frequent exorcisms, miracles of healing and prophecy, to the conversion of pagan peoples, to the overcoming of heresy, and the founding of a religious order that had numerous monasteries by the time of his death. As the *Vita Norberti B* states, it was through St. Norbert's faith that he was able to accomplish so much, that is, by the surrender of himself to the God of the Eucharist, Whom he daily held in his hands at Holy Mass. Nine hundred years later, our Order is still experiencing the grace of God, drawn down to earth by the faith and charism of this saint. Nine hundred years later, though our Order has been through countless persecutions and trials, it is still sustained by the Word of God in the Eucharist, following the example of St. Norbert.

And so, in this Jubilee Year, in the month of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we give thanks to the God of the Eucharist, Who, in His great mercy, nourishes us daily with the Food of Angels, and will continue to do so, for He is ever ready to sustain those who believe in Him.

Prayerfully in Christ, Our Lady, St. Joseph and St. Norbert,
Mother Mary Augustine, O. Praem.

Mother Mary Augustine, O. Praem., Prioress
 & the Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

To Show Forth His Splendor

PREMONSTRATIENSIS & THE EUCHARIST

In his lifetime, St. Norbert proved himself an Apostle of the Eucharist by his great devotion to, reverence for and deep faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

When the Real Presence was doubted, disbelieved and challenged in the 16th century, the intercession of St. Norbert was invoked, and images emerged in which a monstrance, the vessel used to display the Consecrated Host at adoration, was placed in his hands.

Though monstrances were not in use at the time of St. Norbert, this depiction demonstrates the spirit that St. Norbert has bequeathed to his sons and daughters: that, as we *"follow the Sacred Scriptures with Christ as our Leader"* (*Vita Norberti B*), we should ceaselessly have before our eyes and show forth to the world the splendor of Most Holy Eucharist, in which *"is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ Himself"* (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1324).



Mass at our Priory on the Solemnity of our Holy Father St. Norbert, June 6, 2021



From Prémontré to the Present Day



THE HISTORY OF OUR PRIORY — FROM THE BEGINNING

Our story begins with the mercy of God, which one day, in the year 1115, literally struck a canon named Norbert of Xanten like a bolt of lightning, knocked him from his steed, and ignited the fire of divine love in his heart. Norbert was completely converted to God, and henceforth the Gospel way of life inflamed him (1).

PRÉMONTRÉ

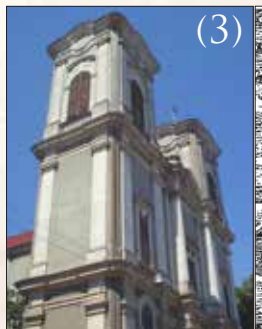
Soon, through his preaching, he gained a host of followers — clerics, lay brothers and women — with his first men taking up religious life under his direction in the swampy, cross-shaped valley of Prémontré, France, making their profession on Christmas Day in the year 1121.

THE HUNGARIAN HOUSES

The love for God and neighbor which permeated Prémontré blazed forth to found an abundance of daughter houses in many European countries and beyond, and in 1131, confreres were sent to Hungary, were welcomed by King Stephen II (2) and founded the monastery of Magnovarad (3), which founded Hatvan in 1150 (4), which, in turn, founded Csorna in 1180 (5), which itself grew, despite suppressions, challenges and wars (6).

COMMUNIST CRISIS

In 1950, Hungary was invaded by Soviet Communists, who proceeded to confiscate and suppress religious houses, arresting or disbanding the religious. News reached the ears of the Abbot of Csorna, Eugene Simonffy, that his monastery would not be spared. A few confreres asked if they could attempt an escape, to preserve the Norbertine way of life in a free land ...



CELEBRATING THE 900th Anniversary of the Norbertine Order 1121-2021



Our Community
 May 2021



(1)



(3)



(6)



(4)



(7)



(2)



(5)



(8)



(9)



(11)



(12)



(10)



(13)

ESCAPE FROM COMMUNISM

Abbot Simonffy gave his blessing for this dangerous mission on July 11th, 1950. In the dead of night, the courageous confreres left their abbey, making their way toward Austria. Their escape was not an easy one: they had to cross a field covered with land mines, forge a 60-foot-wide river, disguise themselves to elude Communists, and eventually cross the Austrian border. (They were fortunate: monks of another Order trying to make the same escape around the same time were captured, shot and killed.) Soon after they left, Csorna was suppressed, and the religious were dispersed. (1) *(the Hungarian confreres, Fathers Gerlac, Benedict, Hubert, Ladislav, Clement, Paul and Siard, later in life)* After reaching Rome, they set sail for America, where they were graciously helped by the Norbertines in Daylesford, PA and De Pere, WI, and eventually were invited to take up residence in California, where they taught at schools and served at a Hungarian parish, saving their earnings to one day re-establish their community life.

THE ABBEY

That day came in 1961 (2), when St. Michael's Priory and High School was officially blessed. In 1984, the Priory was raised to an abbey (3) with Fr. Ladislav Parker elected as first Abbot. The

canons, like the early Norbertines, drew many to their monastery who sought to imitate their life of prayer and conversion. One such person was Monique, who spent many hours praying at the abbey, until one day she was asked by one of the Fathers if she would help to found a community of Norbertine Canonesses.

THE FOUNDING NUNS

Monique agreed, and was eventually joined by four other women who became the founding sisters of the first Norbertine Canonesses in North America, which was erected as a public association of the faithful on October 7, 1997. Relying on the generous brotherly support, formation and priestly care of Abbot Eugene Hayes (elected in 1995 after Abbot Ladislav's retirement) and the canons at St. Michael's, the five were vested in the white habit on the Solemnity of St. Norbert, June 6, 1998 (4), and immediately afterward set off to make their canonical novitiate year with the kind and welcoming Dominican Nuns in Buffalo, New York (5). Upon returning to California, they stayed at the abbey (6) and then in Santa Ana, thanks to the kindness of Rev. Enrique Sera and his vacant Immaculate Heart of Mary parish convent, while preparing for a place of their own.

HOME IN TEHACHAPI

In 1999, the providence of God led them to a property in the Diocese of Fresno, in the mountains outside of Tehachapi, nestled away in a valley, much like the valley of Prémontré. And also like the valley of Prémontré, there was much work to be done to make it habitable (7). Again, the brotherly support, priestly care and, this time, construction work of the confreres (along with other friends) provided invaluable assistance to the

sisters, converting the old, 1960's ranch house game-room into a temporary chapel (8) *(still used today)*; erecting a "convent" of modular trailers (9); and repairing pre-existing ranch buildings, making all suitable for the nuns and their Norbertine canonical monastic life of prayer.

ERECTION OF OUR CANONRY

Our community, striving to live the Norbertine way of life, gradually grew to twenty. On January 29, 2011, in a solemn and beautiful Holy Mass at St. John's Cathedral in Fresno, our Norbertine Abbot General, Thomas Handgräter, Abbot Eugene Hayes, and other confreres and priests from around the world celebrated the erection of our community as an independent Canonry of the Norbertine Order (10), with nine nuns professing Solemn Vows. The event was also attended by other Norbertine Canonesses, Sisters, friends and family.

CONSTRUCTION OF A MONASTERY

Thereafter, in God's grace and mercy, our community experienced a flourishing of vocations, making the need for monastic living space all the more pressing: the chapel was expanded, and expanded yet again; the trailers were not only crowded, but were deteriorating, leaking and becoming a health concern. And so it was with much gratitude that in 2012, after years of fundraising and generous donations, construction began for a convent building (11), with the nuns moving in the following year.

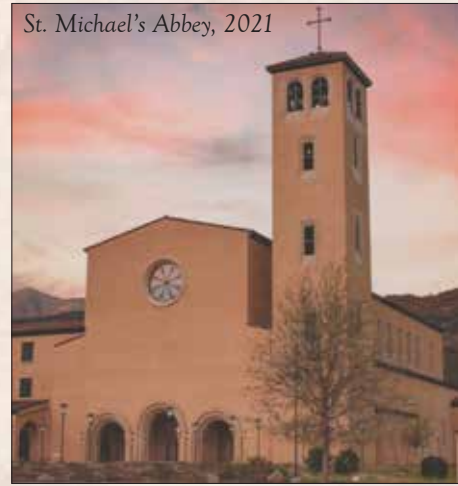
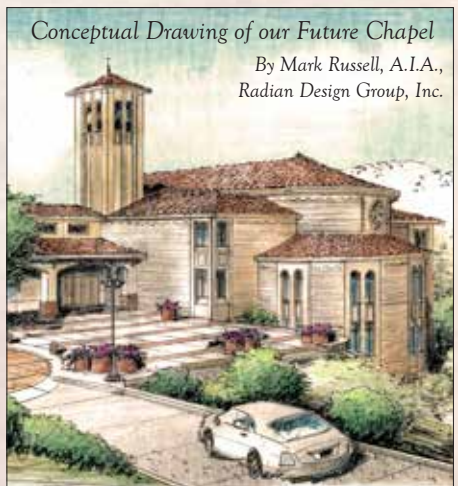
HIS MERCY ENDURES FOREVER

As our story began nine-hundred years ago, so it continues in our own present day again and again we are struck (though

perhaps not as literally as St. Norbert) by the mercy of God, who, in his great love, continues to call sinners to Himself (12), igniting anew, in our own times, the fire of divine love in the hearts of St. Norbert's new host of followers, calling each heart to communion with Him, and also to communion with one another, in our own community and with the larger community of our Order.

Through the past nine centuries, our world has seen tremendous changes, and in the past century, it has seen unprecedented upheavals and turmoil. Yet, while the world may change and seem to spin almost out of control, the Gospel and Apostolic way of life that so inflamed St. Norbert remains – day by day the ancient Psalms are sung, the hymns of the Church still call out to heaven (13), conversion of heart is still sought, penance is still offered. Indeed, men and women are ever striving to love God above all things, and their neighbors for His sake, trusting in His grace to do so.

We may see hard times ahead – the Church and those who follow Christ will always have a share in their Lord's Cross – but with Our Lady and St. Norbert as our model and our Order as an example, we know that we can remain firm in faith, for the mercy of God endures forever.



Events at the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph



IN MARCH

1) On the 25th, we celebrated the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, and welcomed several aspirants into the cloister for a period of discernment.

IN APRIL

2&3) We celebrated the Triduum and Easter, here pictured during the Good Friday Service and the renewal of our baptismal vows at Mass Easter Morning, with our confrere Rev. Stephen Boyle, O.Praem., presiding.

IN MAY

4) On the 14th, we honored Our Lady with a May Crowning, which included a Rosary procession to our Holy Family statues and the chanting of the Litany of Loretto.

IN JUNE

5) On the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, we held a Eucharistic procession, during which Fr. Stephen offered Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament at four different altars (N, S, E, W).

IN JULY

6) Our nuns joyfully completed a stained glass window of our Holy Father St. Norbert and installed it in our chapel on July 11th, the former date of the Solemnity of St. Norbert.

7) On the 16th, Sr. Mary, who had been discerning with us since a young age, entered our community as a postulant.

GUEST SPEAKERS:

In this 900th Jubilee Year of our Order, as a part of our Jubilee series, we have enjoyed conferences and classes given by priests, spiritual masters, professors and scholars including:

- 8) Dr. Carol Neel, Colorado College, a medievalist and expert in early Norbertine History, who spoke to us about the history and role of religious women in the Order of Prémontré.
- 9) Dan and Stephanie Burke, founders of the Avila Institute, who offered conferences on discernment of spirits.
- 10) Rev. Chad Ripperger, SMD, who gave conferences on spiritual warfare in light of *The Life of Saint Norbert*.
- 11) Rev. Quan Tran, of the Diocese of Orange and author of *The Imitation of Mary*, who offered conferences on his book.
- 12) Dr. Rosemary Sands, recently-retired Director of the Center for Norbertine Studies at St. Norbert College, who spoke to us about various Norbertine women, the Spanish history of our Order, and other Norbertine historical themes.
- 13) Rev. Charles Ryan, FSSP, professor of dogmatic theology at the FSSP Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in NE, who taught classes on Trinitarian theology and the Sacraments.
- 14) Dr. John Nieto, a tutor at Thomas Aquinas College, who gave classes on the proofs of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.



Monastery Expansion & Our Current Needs



We invite you to help with Phase II of our Monastery Expansion Project and other pressing needs:

COMMUNITY LIVING EXPENSES:

Not unlike a large family, our community's household, kitchen, dairy kitchen, farm/animal, garden, vehicle, maintenance, utilities, office, clothing, medical, insurance, and other needs are significant. Your support is deeply appreciated, whether by check or cash, online credit card donations via PayPal (www.norbertinesisters.com/donate/), or donations which we can arrange in-house for you. Please call (661-823-1066) or email us if you have questions (norbertinecanonesses@gmail.com).

PHASE II OF OUR MONASTERY EXPANSION PROJECT:

We remain deeply grateful to all of you who are helping to build our future chapel, which will replace our current chapel, still housed in the twice-expanded converted game room and living room of the property's original 70-year-old ranch home. The estimated cost of Phase II's chapel and wing construction is \$12 million, with \$8 million required to take the next step of commissioning a complete architectural design and blueprints. With over \$4 million raised to date, thanks to the continuing generosity of our dear friends like you, we continue to place all in God's loving providence, trusting that He is blessing all of you, and will raise up our chapel in His perfect timing and according to His holy will.

www.norbertinesisters.org

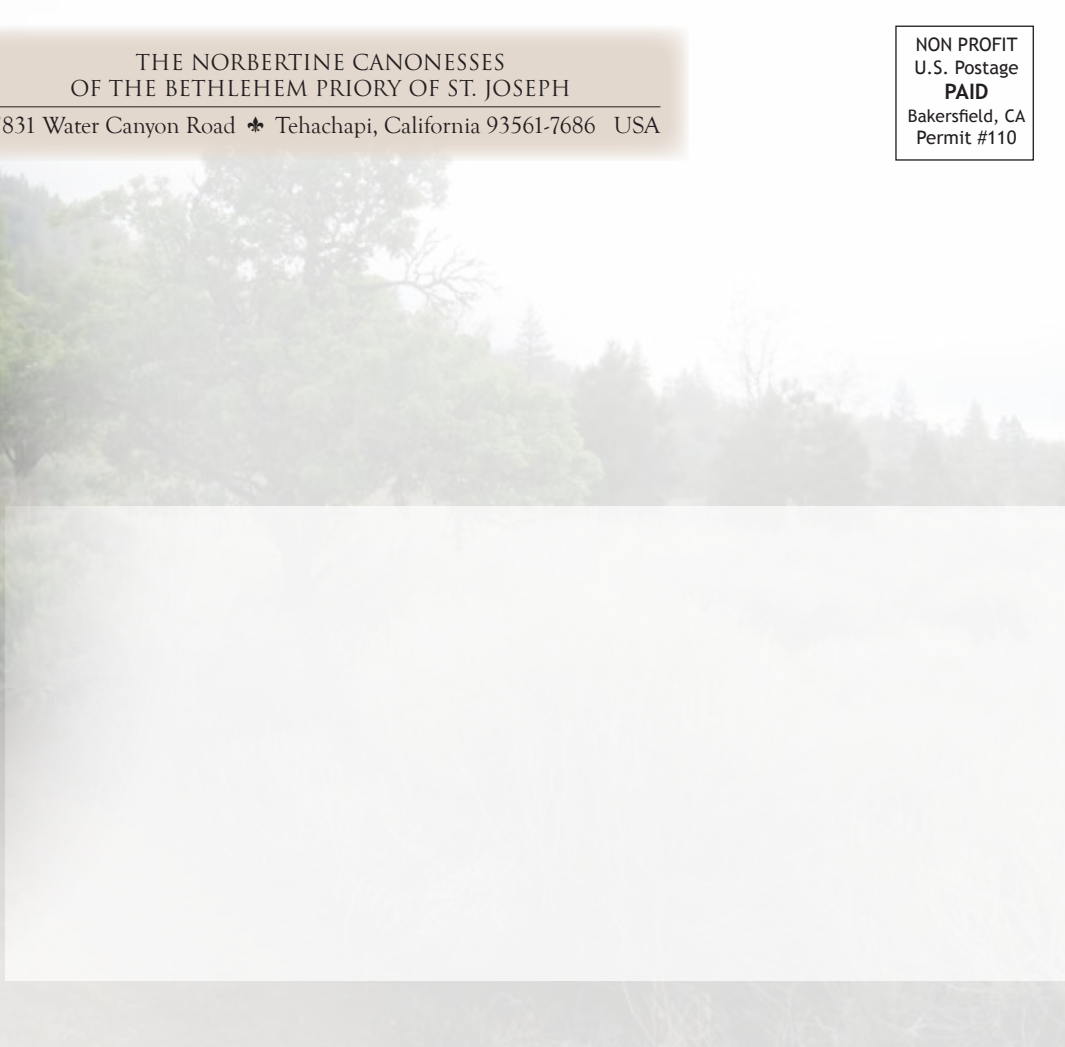
Monies Needed

\$12.0M		FOR PHASE II: CHAPEL & WING \$12,000,000
\$8.0M		Current Goal \$8,000,000
\$4.0M		Funds Raised to Date \$4,000,000

R. Belcher

Conceptual Drawing of our Future Chapel By Mark Russell, A.I.A., Radian Design Group, Inc.

God Bless You!



— A Special Thank You —

To our friends of Our Lady of the Desert Men's group and our farm manager for graciously sawing and clearing away many fallen trees and dead logs in our forest, making it possible to follow the trail through our property on our annual community hike (pictured, May 2021).

Norbertine Canonesses

— WEBSITE —

- ♣ [Online Monastery Gift Shop](#)
- ♣ [Photo Gallery](#)
- ♣ [Horarium in Photos](#)
- ♣ [Information on our Holy Founder, St. Norbert](#)

www.norbertinesisters.org

♣ **MONASTERY GIFT SHOP HOURS:**
Daily 10-11:30 am, 2:30-5 pm
(except Fridays, 2:30-4:15 pm)

♣ **FOR GIFT SHOP PURCHASES:**
Please visit our website at
www.shop.norbertinesisters.org

♣ **WE ARE HERE TO OFFER PRAYERS FOR YOU AND YOUR INTENTIONS:**

You are welcome to call us:
(661) 823-1066 – or –
email us: pray_req@cybersurfers.net or
MotherMaryA@aol.com

Please kindly help us update our address & email database by sending us your current information.

*“ST. NORBERT HAD AT HEART TO FORM FOR THE GOD OF THE EUCHARIST
holy and devoted priests and a whole people of adorers and witnesses.
They adore and bless Our Lord Jesus Christ and glorify the Father in Heaven.
With Jesus they intercede for the culpable and unfortunate world.”*

– Mere Marie de la Croix, O.Praem., 19th century