

The Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

FIRST FRUITS

The Holy Season of Lent, March 2022 / Issue 55



“FATHER I HAVE SINNED AGAINST HEAVEN AND AGAINST YOU...”

And his father was filled with compassion...

– Luke 15:18, 20



Dear Confreres, Family and Friends of the Bethlehem Priory,

During Lent, we begin the holy journey toward the Sacred Triduum, the most solemn liturgical days of the year, when we celebrate in a more profound way the mercy of God as shown to us in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout these forty days, a time consecrated by the Lord's own prayer, fasting and penance in the desert, we are reminded time and time again of the steadfast faithfulness of God, despite the stubbornness and hardness of heart shown to Him by us, His people. We are reminded of His faithfulness so that the "priceless kindness, forbearance, and patience" of God might lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4); that is, by the conversion of our hearts to Him, He may make us fellow heirs with His Son, Jesus Christ.

In this edition of *FirstFruits*, we share with you a taste of God's steadfast faithfulness toward this little community of Norbertine canonesses in the Tehachapi mountains: from the recent first profession of vows, to the ancient traditions of the monastic life forming the rhythm of our day-to-day lives, to the beauty and depth of the Roman Catholic liturgy, to the first sale of our Mountain Priory Cheese, to the progression of our future Chapel and Convent expansion — all of these are tangible ways in which the Lord has manifested His mercy and divine love.

As we give thanks to God, we also give thanks for and to all of you, who in so many ways have supported, encouraged, and contributed to our way of life. May you see in your own lives, throughout this holy season and always, the steadfast faithfulness of God who never ceases to pour out His mercy and grace upon those who seek Him.

With prayerful gratitude in Christ, Our Lady, St. Joseph, and St. Norbert,

Mother Mary Augustine, O. Praem.

Mother Mary Augustine, O. Praem., prioress, and the Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

— Ephesians 2:4-7

BUT GOD WHO IS RICH IN MERCY,

because of the great love

He had for us,

even when we were dead in our transgressions,

RAISED US UP WITH CHRIST,

that He might show

the immeasurable riches of His grace

in His kindness to us

IN CHRIST JESUS.

— Ephesians 2:4-7

On the Cover: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*,
Alessandro Turchi, 1578-1649

"I will sing forever of Your mercy Lord."

As we approach the solemn celebration of

— Holy Week and Easter —

WE CORDIALLY INVITE ONE AND ALL

to join us at our monastery for the prayer of the whole Church,
the Sacred Liturgy,
especially on the occasions of

HOLY THURSDAY:

April 14th, Tenebrae and Mass of the Lord's Supper

GOOD FRIDAY:

April 15th, Tenebrae, Good Friday Service and Stations of the Cross

HOLY SATURDAY:

April 16th, Tenebrae

EASTER OCTAVE:

April 18th - 23th, Weekday Holy Mass 8:30 am

Solemn Paschal Vespers 5:10 pm

Please contact us for specific times for the
Sacred Liturgy during the Holy Triduum.



I Will Arise and Say to My Father...

THE MONASTIC PRACTICE OF DAILY CONVERSION

"I renounce the world, and I promise a conversion of my ways, and life in community, especially in poverty, consecrated chastity, and obedience, according to the Rule of St. Augustine and the Constitutions of the Canonesses Regular of the Order of Prémontré, to you Mother Prioress, and to the sisters..."

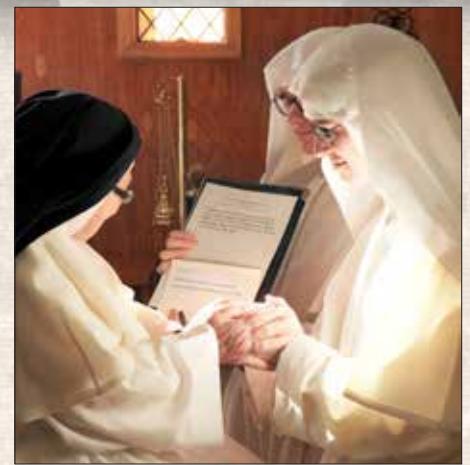
So promises each novice on the day of her first profession, as she recites her vows, becoming a more integrated member in the Order of Prémontré. The first promise that she makes is a conversion of her ways, something that was very dear to the heart of our Holy Father, St. Norbert.

In the days of St. Norbert and beyond, it was taken for granted that a man or woman who left the world to enter the Order of Prémontré was entering a penitential Order in which the "old man" (the self given to sin and vice), was constantly put to death, so that the "new man" (the self re-fashioned and set free by Jesus Christ), could rise.

This commitment to daily conversion is, 900 years later, still a vital part of the Norbertine way of life, a life that seeks to realize in a concentrated and intense manner the mystery of the Church. Daily conversion is built into the very structure of our day: among these are the daily chapter of faults, the regular spiritual readings that call us to perfection, and the practice of striving to build up peace and charity in community, which frequently calls one to transcend oneself and to "lay down one's life" for the other in both small and significant ways.

For conversion—by its very root meaning—involves a sort of turning: a turning away from that "old man" who desires to close in on the self and live in a selfish and isolated manner, and a turning toward the Source of Life, Jesus Christ, Who is made present to us in the the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, and in the concrete presence of our brothers and sisters. Every day we are, in a sense, like the Father's Prodigal Son: every day, we find ourselves in some way unhappily huddled over our proverbial swine-pods; every day, we consider that it might just be better to be a servant of the Father than to live in humiliating isolation with the swine.

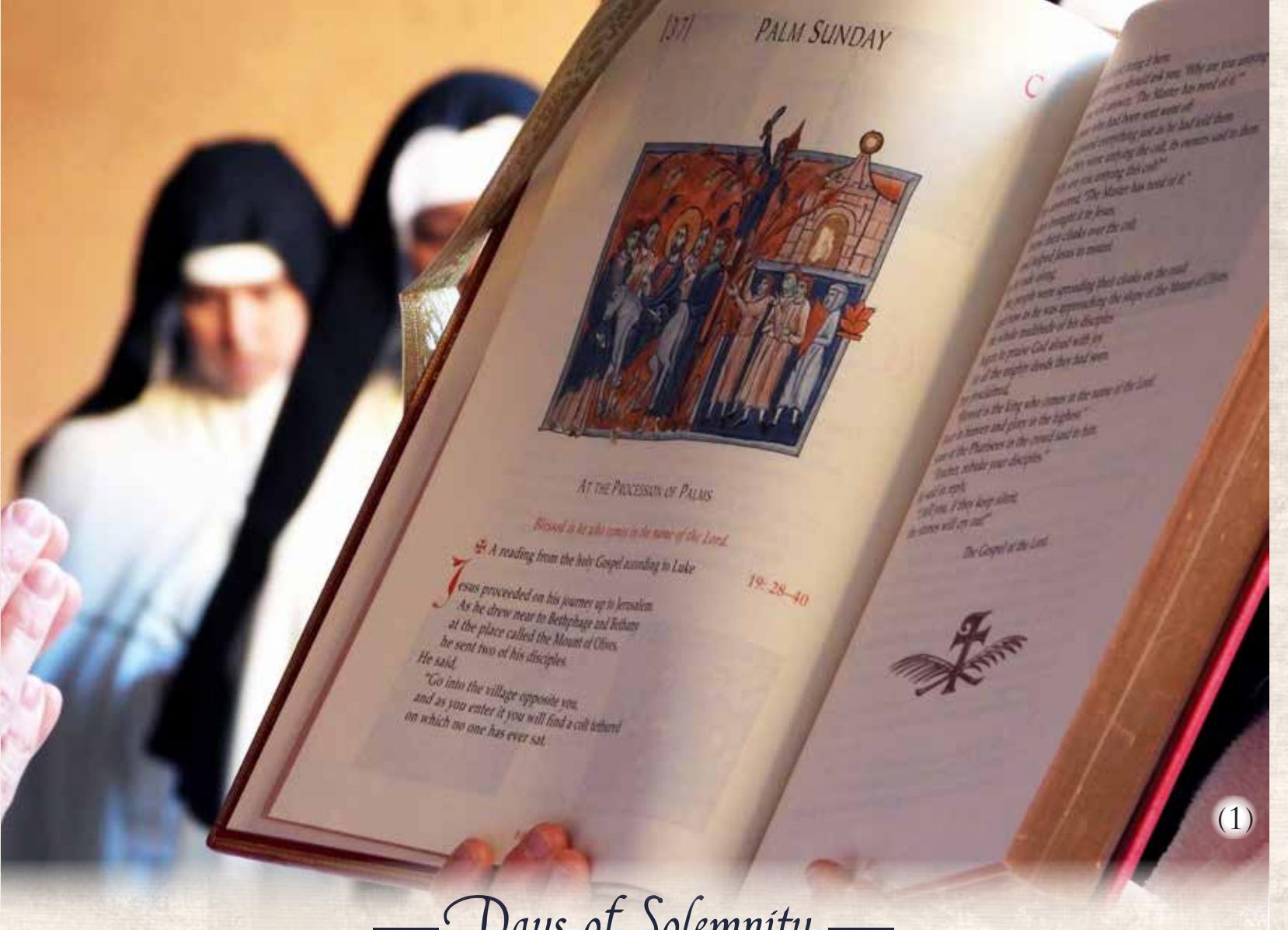
Through our promise of daily conversion, we every day arise from the swine-pods and begin the journey back to the Father, that we might work in His vineyard with more fidelity and zeal than ever done before, than if perhaps we had not fallen away. And the Father mercifully catches sight of us, runs out to meet us, and raises us up to a new life—a life beyond the narrow confines of ourselves, a life lived in the freedom of the sons of God.



ANNOUNCING THE First Profession of Vows

On November 21, 2021,
the feast of the Presentation of
Our Lady in the Temple,
Sr. Elisabeth Marie, O.Praem. (above)
& Sr. Marie Christine, O.Praem. (below),
made their First Profession of Vows,
promising the conversion of ways and
life in community, especially in poverty,
chastity and obedience, for three years,
and received the black veil.





— Days of Solemnity —

THE CELEBRATION OF THE PASCHAL MYSTERY AT THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY

"Christian liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us but actualizes them, makes them present.

In each celebration there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes the unique mystery present."

— Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1104

The most sacred and solemn week of the year begins on Palm Sunday, as Our Lord makes His triumphant entrance into the city of Jerusalem. Before Holy Mass, the nuns process into our garth (enclosed garden) and intone the moving chants of Passiontide, with the Priest reading the Gospel (1) and blessing the palms ~ which are carried in procession to the choir admist the chanting of the jubilant cries sung by the Hebrew children and now us: "Hosanna to the Son of David!" As Holy Mass progresses through the opening readings to the Gospel, the whole Passion narrative is chanted, the nuns holding palm branches, a symbolic gesture that, despite the horrors and insults heaped upon the man, Jesus Christ, we know that He is Our God.

On Holy Thursday, we wake at the darkest time of the night for the holy Office of Tenebrae (2), which will be repeated on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, an Office unique to these three days of the Triduum, but each day with a different focus. On Holy

Thursday, the focus is on the Sacrifice that will soon be offered: the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, Who will give of Himself not only for us through His death, but also to us in the Holy Eucharist. Late Thursday morning, the nuns process to the Chapter Room. Today, they do not kneel before the Mother Prioress to confess their faults, but, in accord with ancient monastic custom, she kneels before them and washes the feet of the twelve youngest members, kissing their feet and drying them with a towel.

In the evening, the community and laity gather for the Holy Mass of the Lord's Supper, which officially begins the Holy Triduum, at which time all bells are silenced. After Holy Communion, the Blessed Sacrament is taken in solemn procession to an altar of repose, leaving our chapel empty of God's Eucharistic presence, and the altar is stripped of all linens (3), reminding us how Christ was stripped and how completely He emptied Himself for us.



Good Friday begins as the Office of Tenebrae is again sung. The chant is heart-wrenching and sorrowful, connoting at times the sinister tortures Christ is undergoing, and at other times the sorrowful tenderness of the God Who is undergoing them, as He turns and looks at His wayward children, seeking to bring them back: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God."

The atmosphere of this Friday always seems different — there is a heaviness and a poignancy which the earth seems to reflect. In the afternoon, the nuns process silently into the choir, where the Priest, dressed in red vestments, silently enters and immediately prostrates before the empty tabernacle and the stripped altar. The Good Friday Service continues with the chanted Passion narrative according to St. John; the prayers for the needs of the whole world, chanted and punctuated by multiple genuflections; and the unveiling and veneration of the Holy Cross (4), during which all present remove their shoes—they are standing on hallowed ground. In silence, the Blessed Sacrament is brought from the altar of repose, and in silence He is received.

Once more, the Office of Tenebrae begins the last day of the Triduum, Holy Saturday. But this time the tone is one of hope and peace, as we are told that "the king is sleeping." If the atmosphere of Good Friday was heavy and hard, the morning of Holy Saturday dawns with a quiet serenity: there is an expectation in the air, as if all creation is waiting...

And then, later that day, in the dark of night under the evening stars, our community convenes, a gathering outside around a small bonfire—the Paschal fire. A postulant holds the large, wax Paschal candle, which the Priest soon blesses, marks, and lights from the

Paschal fire. He then takes the candle and leads the community in procession through the almost pitch black corridors of the convent. He stops and sings: "Lumen Christi!" (The Light of Christ!), and all respond: "Deo Gratias!" (Thanks be to God!). The procession continues until he stops a second time to sing: "Lumen Christi!", and all respond: "Deo Gratias!" Mother lights her candle from the Paschal candle, the flame is shared and ignites the candle each nun is holding (5). In seconds, the once pitch black corridors are filled with light: the Light of Christ. The glorious Easter Vigil continues with readings that tell of the creation and future redemption, and then, at the Gloria, suddenly the muted bells burst into sound, brilliant lights come on, and a triple Alleluia is sung.

Christ is Risen. And the world comes to life.

The tenor set by the ancient and lyrical beauty of the Easter Vigil fills the next eight days, the Easter Octave (6). Baptismal promises are renewed, Alleluias are chanted in every conceivable tone and cadence, and the smell of Easter lilies fills the air.

Christ is risen. He is truly risen.

To every soul that has sincerely given itself to the rich liturgical celebrations that re-present this mystery during the Triduum, this fact is more than a historical statement: it is a truth that has shaped one's very being.

Christ is risen and we have been made new.

To Jesus Christ, the Pierced and Risen One, be glory and praise forever.

Amen.

Events at the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph



IN NOVEMBER

1 & 2) On the 21st, the feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, Sr. Elisabeth Marie, O.Praem. (1) and Sr. Marie Christine, O.Praem. (2) made their First Profession of Vows (see pg. 2).

3) November 27th marked the first Sunday of Advent.

IN DECEMBER

4) In early December, lambs were born, among them an orphaned ewe lamb that became very fond of the nuns.

5 & 6) This month we at last obtained all the necessary licensing and permits from the CDFA, so that we were able to make our first batch of cheese for sale, which was aged and promptly sold out in February ... with more batches gradually on the way!

7) This Christmas was particularly special in our Order as it marked the very day when, nine hundred years ago, St. Norbert and his first followers made their profession of vows in Prémontré – the 900th birthday of the Norbertine family.

IN JANUARY

On January 9th, the feast of the Lord's Baptism, the 900th Jubilee Year of our Order came to a close. Though the year is over, we pray that the blessings of a deeper *communio* among our Norbertine brothers and sisters, so touchingly manifest this past year, and the graces poured out so abundantly, will continue to bear much fruit for our Order, the Church and the world.

8) From the 24th to February 2nd, we were graced with the presence of our Norbertine conferee, The Right Rev. Hugh Allan, O.Praem., from Chelmsford, England, who gave our annual retreat on our Norbertine life viewed through the spiritual legacy of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.

9) On the 25th, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, Sr. Cathy entered our community as a postulant.

IN FEBRUARY

10) On the 2nd, the Solemnity of the Lord's Presentation, Abbot Hugh blesses the candles before our procession to Holy Mass.



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, office, maintenance, utilities, clothing, medical/health, 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 converted game room and living room of the property's original 70-year-old ranch home. The estimated construction cost of Phase II's chapel and wing, with updated figures from our original estimates of ten years ago is approximately \$19 million, based on current schematics and related plans, with about \$15 million required to take the step of commissioning a complete architectural design and blueprints. With over \$5.1 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.

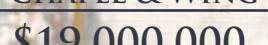
www.norbertinesisters.org



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

Monies Needed

FOR PHASE II: CHAPEL & WING

\$19.0M 

\$19,000,000

\$15.0M 

Current Goal
\$15,000,000

**Funds Raised
to Date**

\$5.1M 

\$5,100,000

R. Belcher

God Bless You!

THE NORBERTINE CANONNESSES
OF THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY OF ST. JOSEPH

17831 Water Canyon Road ♫ Tehachapi, California 93561-7686 USA

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— A Special Thank You —

To our many friends and benefactors who have helped us in a variety of ways over the years with our cheese-making efforts. After over twelve years of your generous faith-filled support, encouragement and interest, our cheese is now approved for sale by the CDFA.

Deo gratias!

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

* 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
norbetinecanonesses@gmail.com

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

— THE COMMUNITY OF THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY —
February 2022



“Give thanks to the Lord for He is good,

His mercy endures forever.”

— Psalm 136:1