

The Norbertine Canonesses of

the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

# FIRST FRUITS

Solemnity of St. Joseph, March 19, 2023 / Issue 58



"YOU HAVE GIVEN ME THE *protection of your salvation,*  
*Your right hand* HAS HELD ME UP."

— Antiphon for the Solemnity of St. Joseph





Dear Confreres, Family, and Friends of the Bethlehem Priory,

*Laudetur Jesus Christus!*

In our day and age, Christ is just as present and real as He was when he walked the earth over twenty centuries ago. He was once born in time, carried in the arms of His human foster-father, and ran with His little child's feet to meet His mother. In our days, He is still ever present among us ~ in every Tabernacle throughout the world in the Holy Eucharist, and He still makes Himself known, loved and felt through the members of His Mystical Body, the Church, in the lives of the baptized.

St. Joseph, protector of the Christ-Child, and now protector of Christ's Church, is, for all the baptized, a light and a model of how to approach and dwell with the tremendous presence of God-with-us, Emmanuel. For, with obedience and submission, with love and reverence, St. Joseph gazed upon the Word of God Himself, and in humility and love, protected the Son of God from the evils of this world.

May St. Joseph, patron of our Priory, show himself a protector for you, our dear confreres, family and friends, and all your loved ones, and may his love for the Incarnate God illumine your lives and enkindle the flame of your own love. And through his intercession, in the unity of our bond as baptized Christians, may we show the whole world the beautiful salvation held out to it through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

Prayerfully united 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

"THINK OF THE LOVE OF  
*St. Joseph,*  
who was the first man to set eyes on  
THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD...

*Let us praise and thank Christ*  
for having drawn so close to us,  
AND FOR GIVING US JOSEPH  
*as an example and model of love."*

— Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

— REQUIESCAT IN PACE —

*Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI*

APRIL 16, 1927 - DECEMBER 31, 2022

"Christ's going away [through His cross], is transformed into a coming, in the Risen Lord's universal manner of presence, in which he is there yesterday, today and forever, in which he embraces all times and all places... He comes to you and joins his life with yours, drawing you into the open fire of His love. You become one, one with Him, and thus one among yourselves. At first this can sound rather abstract and unrealistic. But the more you live the life of the baptized, the more you can experience the truth of these words.

Believers — the baptized — are never cut off from one another.

Continents, cultures, social structures or even historical distances may separate us. But when we meet, we know one another on the basis of the same Lord, the same faith, the same hope, the same love which forms us. We experience that in our inmost depths we are anchored in the same identity, on the basis of which all our outward differences, become secondary.

Believers are never totally cut off from one another.

We are in communion because of our deepest identity:  
CHRIST WITHIN US."

— Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, March 22, 2008





# As One Who Serves You in Love

## THE AUGUSTINIAN IDEAL OF MONASTIC AUTHORITY

In the Gospel there is a touching scene in which Our Lord, only a few hours before He would enter into His passion, rose from a supper, removed his outer garments, tied a towel around His waist, got down on his hands and knees, and washed the feet of his twelve apostles. Far more than just a poignant story, Our Lord intended this action to set the example for an abiding disposition in His Church:

*"Do you realize what I have done for you? If I, Master and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."*

— John 13:12-15

One of the most beautiful elements of our Catholic faith is the tangible way in which the Word of God in scripture becomes "incarnate" in our own lives. The event of the foot washing is represented here at the Priory on Holy Thursday with the ancient monastic custom of the prioress washing the feet of the twelve youngest sisters in the chapter room. This custom is a striking moment, when the humble, loving service that Our Lord showed to His disciples while on earth is again shown to His consecrated brides through the humble, loving service of the monastic superior.

In the Rule of St. Augustine — the Rule given to St. Norbert by St. Augustine himself in a vision — begins with the foundation and purpose of our communal life: *"The chief motivation for your sharing life together is to live harmoniously in the house, and to have one heart and one soul seeking God."* In such a house, the superior is to

*"regard herself fortunate as one who serves you in love, not as one who exercises authority over you. Accord her the first place of honor among you, but in fear before God she shall lie prostrate beneath your feet. Let her be a model of good deeds for everyone; she shall restrain the restless, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, with patience towards all. She shall strive to be loved by you rather than feared, mindful always that she will be accountable to God for you."* (n. VII.3)



In the mind of St. Augustine, St. Norbert, and truly all founders of monastic orders, the position of authority is not simply for the sake of efficiency or facilitation. The religious superior is not "in charge" of his or her house as a CEO is in charge of a business, but as a *father or mother* who looks after their beloved spiritual sons or daughters. Position is not a *prideful primacy, but a humble, loving service*. For, as St. Augustine says elsewhere: *"We have learned, brethren, humility from the Highest; let us, as humble, do to one another what He, the Highest, did in His humility... For when the body is bent at a brother's feet, the feeling of humility is either awakened in the heart itself, or is strengthened if already present."*

(On the Gospel of St. John, Tract. LVIII)

Christ's own love and care for His disciples ought to become visible and tangible again in the lives of all Christians, but especially in those to whom He has given special care of His disciples today. In this way, the whole world, beginning with each individual member of a community, may know and experience the tender love that Christ, our Master and Teacher, our Father and our Brother, has for each soul.





# Protector of Christ

ST. JOSEPH: MODEL OF OBEDIENT LOVE

*“Rise, take the Child and His Mother,  
flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you.”*

— Matthew 2:13

So St. Joseph was told by an angel in a dream, not long after wise men from the East had prostrated themselves before the same Child, carried by the same Mother, and did Him homage. But now the Child’s life was sought by a man who was far from wise — Herod, the King of the Jews.

*“Joseph rose and took the Child and His Mother by night  
and departed for Egypt.”*

— Matthew 2:14

Simply and without any questions, Joseph arose and immediately departed, even though this meant leaving at an unfriendly hour of night, and venturing into an uncertain future. Because he obeyed immediately, the Child and His Mother were spared. That Child would grow to manhood under the watchful protection of St. Joseph, and as a Man would later lay down His life for the salvation of the entire human race. God had given a task of astounding importance to St. Joseph, the Just Man. And by his obedience and unhesitating fidelity to the Word of God, he was able to fulfill the task of protecting the Savior of the world: Christ, the Eternal Son of the Father.

But, as tradition holds, St. Joseph would depart from this life before Christ would begin His mission of preaching; St. Joseph would not be there to witness the public miracles, the cures,

the raising from the dead. He would not be there to hear the sneers and the blasphemies of the pharisees, the “wise men” of Palestine, who should have, like him, been faithful to the Word of God that they studied with such zeal. He would not be there when Christ was betrayed, when He was taken prisoner, when He was tortured and humiliated and led out to die. For this time, God did not send His angel to intervene, and did not will St. Joseph to protect the Savior. The Son of God’s life was once again sought, and this time it would be taken. St. Joseph had fulfilled his mission in protecting the young Christ, and now Christ would fulfill His mission by allowing Himself to be totally vulnerable, and to suffer death for the sake of many.

In the days of Lent, and especially in the days preceeding Holy Week, when we remember and re-live in a dramatic way the last hours of the earthly life of Christ, the Church puts before our eyes the great New Testament Patriarch, St. Joseph. He is the man who was chosen to be the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the foster-father of Jesus Christ, as we celebrate in his Solemnity on March 19th. Before the Church delves into the sinister and disturbing events that show so clearly that “[Christ] came to what was His own, but His own people did not accept Him,” (John 1:11), the faithful ponder a man whose character was just the opposite of those who put Christ to death: Through obedience and fidelity to the Word, St. Joseph protected Christ, and through self-will and rebellion against the Word, men put Him to death.





In the providentially-placed Solemnity of St. Joseph, we find a sort of challenge: the obedience of St. Joseph is placed before us amidst the rebellion of those who put Christ to death — and each of us must choose which example we will follow. For in all of us, Christ is, again, in a sense, in danger. Each of us is capable of sin, and it was, after all, sin — which is a direct offense against God — that crucified Christ. In each of us, there is a bit of the scheming Herod, of the betraying Judas, of the sneering Pharisee. It is said that St. Philip Neri, upon rising in the morning, would kneel down and pray: “*Be wary of Philip, O Lord, for he is about to betray you.*” We must, in a sense, protect Christ from our sins.

It is, therefore, fitting that St. Joseph was chosen as the patron of our Norbertine monastery. As Norbertines, the conversion of our ways is a daily effort which we specifically vow to pursue on the day of our profession. Every day we strive to bring our lives into closer conformity with the sinless Christ, through the obedience and fidelity that our patron, St. Joseph, exemplified.

St. Norbert too, in his life, exemplified obedience to God and daily conversion of his ways, and his early followers were eager and sincere to follow in his footsteps. But St. Norbert knew that any institution needed a solid structure, and so he “*advised them about a day order, a rule, and the institutes of the Holy Fathers, without which the apostolic and evangelical way of life could not be completely observed.*” (Vita Norberti B, n. 50) Our holy founder established specific rules and customs, which were meant to give his followers the freedom and ability to reform their interior lives by conforming themselves to the external practices of holiness. “*The rule says: ‘Let God be loved first, then*

*neighbor.’ The institute alone does not bring about the reign of God, but rather truth and the observance of God’s commands. This rule clearly binds in regard to love, work, abstinence from food, fasting, ... clothing, silence, obedience, respecting one another and honoring one’s [superior]... What is there that would be of further use for any religious in order to obtain salvation?*” (Vita Norberti B, n. 52) Without the obedient and docile reception of God’s word, whether it be through an angel, a rule, the Church herself, or a religious superior or other man or woman with authority over us in some way, our weak human nature is more than prone to fall into rebellion and sin, and, ultimately, will reject God Himself. But *with* obedience, docility and daily conversion according to the precepts of our way of life, God’s grace is given to us, and salvation is held before us.

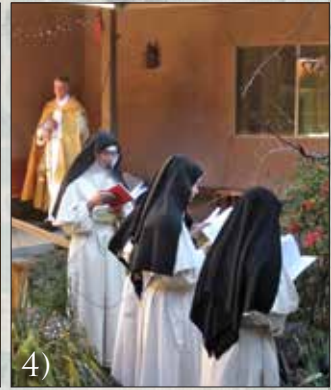
In the days of Lent, leading up to the holiest of days, the Sacred Triduum, as Christians we take a new and determined resolve to protect Christ in our own hearts: to turn away from the disobedience, rebellion, and sin that crucifies Him again and again; and, like St. Joseph and St. Norbert, to constantly wait upon the Word of God, ready and willing to obey all that we must do for His sake. In this most noble of endeavors, we know that we can find the necessary help and courage for striving — for through the rules and sanctioned practices of the Church, which communicate to us God’s grace, and with prayers of such powerful patrons as St. Joseph and St. Norbert, we can strive for and one day attain the perfection of true charity.

*To Christ  
be all glory and honor, praise and thanksgiving, forever and ever.  
Amen.*

Pictured above: 1) Praying by the statue of St. Joseph in our garth; 2) Monastic bells, referred to by St. Benedict as the “voice of God,” call us throughout the day to prayer, work or, as here, to the refectory; 3) Praying the Stations of the Cross; 4) Giving direction for a building project; 5) Reading the Rule of St. Augustine at Chapter.



# Events at the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph



## IN NOVEMBER

1) In November, a large statue of the patron of our Priory, St. Joseph with the Child Jesus, was donated to us and quickly found a home in our Chapter Room.

## IN DECEMBER

2) Beginning in November and throughout December, we assembled and mailed our Christmas gift boxes of cheese, baked treats, and apothecary items. In addition to selling over 300 of our treat and apothecary boxes, in our first year of offering cheese, we sold over 600 boxes, thanks to the generosity of friends across the country. (Pictured: A "cheese labeling party" at recreation.)

3) Christmas is always a beautiful season at the Bethlehem Priory, with our nativity scenes, Christmas trees, choir garlands (pictured), reminding us of the goodness of our Newborn God.

## IN JANUARY

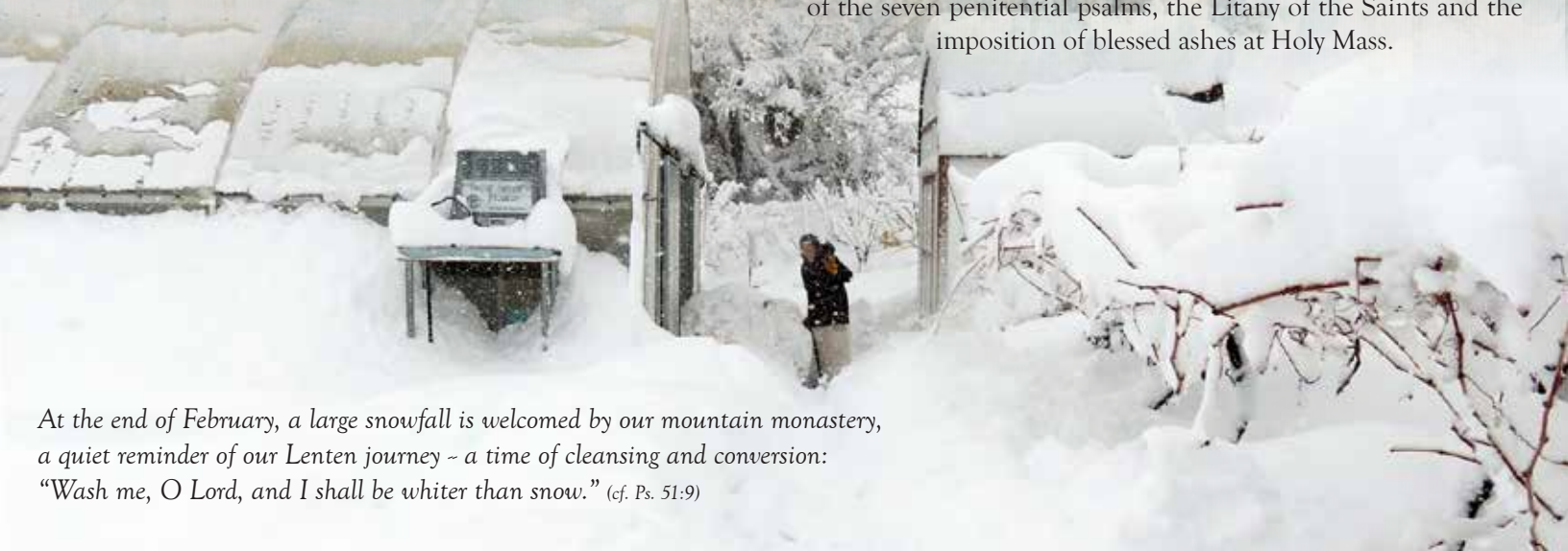
4) Our annual Epiphany house blessing was presided at by our confrere Rev. Stephen Boyle of St. Michael's Abbey, with some sisters accompanying the blessing with Christmas carols.

5) On the 25th, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, Sr. Cathy received the white habit of our Order, which, since our earliest beginnings, was known to all as a sign of conversion. She received the name, Sr. Mary Jacinta, after the youngest visionary of Fatima, St. Jacinta Marto.

## IN FEBRUARY

6) On February 2nd, the Solemnity of the Presentation, some of the nuns gave a concert to our community.

7) Ash Wednesday began on the 22nd with the solemn chanting of the seven penitential psalms, the Litany of the Saints and the imposition of blessed ashes at Holy Mass.



At the end of February, a large snowfall is welcomed by our mountain monastery, a quiet reminder of our Lenten journey ~ a time of cleansing and conversion: "Wash me, O Lord, and I shall be whiter than snow." (cf. Ps. 51:9)



# 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 Square ([www.norbertinesisters.com/donate/](http://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](mailto: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 current estimated construction cost of Phase II's chapel and wing, interior and exterior, is approximately \$23 million, based on updated schematics and related plans, with about \$18 million required to take the step of commissioning a complete architectural design and blueprints. With over \$7 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](http://www.norbertinesisters.org)

# God Bless You!



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

<i>Monies Needed</i>	
	FOR PHASE II: CHAPEL & WING
<b>\$23.0M</b>	<b>\$23,000,000</b>
<b>\$18.0M</b>	<b>Current Goal</b> <b>\$18,000,000</b>
<b>\$7.0M</b>	<b>Funds Raised</b> <b>to Date</b> <b>\$7,000,000</b>

R. Belcher



THE NORBERTINE CANONESSES  
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 Rev. Mark Maxon, former Pastor of St. Malachy Catholic Church, for his years of friendship, support of our Priory, and devoted service to the Tehachapi community; and to Rev. Gregory Beaumont, new Pastor of St. Malachy Catholic Church, already a dear friend and supporter of the Norbertine Canonesses.

*Norbertine Canonesses*

— WEBSITE —

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

[www.norbertinesisters.org](http://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](http://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](mailto:pray_req@cybersurfers.net) or  
[MotherMaryA@aol.com](mailto:MotherMaryA@aol.com)

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



*“If we walk with Jesus,  
we ascend that height to which man is destined –  
FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD HIMSELF.”*

— Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI