

The Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

# FIRST FRUITS

*Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, December 8, 2023 / Issue 60*



*"Hail full of grace —*  
**THE LORD IS WITH YOU."**

— Luke 1:28





“*Ave Virgo,*  
*quae*

SPIRITU SANCTO  
PRÆSERVANTE,

*de tanto primi parentis peccato*

*triumphasti innoxia.”*

— Antiphon traditionally attributed  
to St. Norbert

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

*Laudetur Jesus Christus!* As the summer and fall months come to a close and the days grow shorter, we enter into the sacred time of Advent. God, the Creator and Designer of all things, has so ordered even the seasons and times of the earth to coincide with the mysteries of His life, and to lead us closer to Him.

“*When the designated time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman...*” (Galatians 4:4) In the winter of the world, when darkness was at its peak, God sent His Son to be born of an Immaculate Mother. His Mother knew, and knows, that the Son born of her was, and is, the True Light that enlightens man, the Light that shines in the darkness, the Light which darkness can never overcome. In her humility, she knows that this Light, while born of her, is not from her — He is the Daystar from on high, from His light does she receive her own.

This is the source of the power that Mary, the Mother of God, possesses: she, in her humility, allows God's light to shine in her and through her. She simply speaks, throughout all ages, the “*fiat*” that brought God from heaven to her womb, and mediates God's grace to earth still.

And so, as we see and feel tangibly that darkness growing greater — not only in the skies, but also in the current events of our times — may we always remember that God alone is the Light that shines in the darkness, and His Light can powerfully blaze forth through the lives of all who speak a sincere “*fiat*” to His Holy Will.

With prayers for you and your loved ones, this Christmas and always ...

In the coming Christ-Child through His Blessed Mother,

*Mother Mary Augustine, O. Praem.*

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

## WHO ARE YOU *O Immaculata?*

“Of herself, Mary is nothing, even as all other creatures are; but by God's gift, she is the most perfect of creatures, the most perfect image of God's divine being in a purely human creature.

The Immaculata never knew the slightest stain; in other words, her love was always full, without flaw. She loved God with all her being, and from the first instant of her existence, her love united her with God so perfectly, that on the day of the Annunciation, the Angel could say to her, 'Full of grace! the Lord is with thee!' (Cf. Luke 1:28) She is, then, God's creature, God's image, God's child.

She is God's instrument. With full consciousness and total willingness she allows God to govern her: she consents to His will, desires only what He desires, and acts according to His will in the most perfect manner, without failing, without ever turning aside from His will. This love of God reaches such a peak that it bears divine fruits proper to God's own love. Her love for God brings her to such a level of union with Him that she becomes the Mother of God. The Father confides to her His Son; the Son descends into her womb; and the Holy Spirit fashions out of her perfectly pure body the very Body of Jesus.”

— St. Maximilian Kolbe



## *That His Light May Shine Forth*

“Events daily show those who, after leaving everything and after making profession, depart to diverse nations to take their position in the line of battle.

*The trumpet sounds from sea to sea and their voice is heard in which the works of God are made manifest.”*

— From the Life of Our Holy Father St. Norbert, *Vita Norberti* B Ch 27, n. 58

The Premonstratensian or Norbertine Order, while not the largest religious Order in the Church, is spread throughout the world, often with many miles between monasteries. And yet, a strong union and familial bond exists in our ancient Order, quietly shining with His Light after nine hundred years, amidst differences in language and culture.

Such was our experience this summer, when a meeting for the formators of our Norbertine Order, held at St. Michael's Abbey, brought Norbertine confreres and sisters from all over the world to California. After the meeting, we were blessed to receive a visit from some of these confreres and sisters, who celebrated the liturgy with us, and, at recreational events, shared many heart-warming, humorous, and edifying stories about and from their own monasteries.

The external apostolates of our Norbertine houses may vary, but the lives of canons, canonesses and active sisters are

beautifully complementary to each other. And while there are differences, the essential elements of our lives as Norbertines are very much the same: we all ~ like St. Norbert, typically depicted holding high the Blessed Sacrament — seek to let God's light (and, please Lord, not our own human ego) shine forth through our lives and from our monasteries. For, while a young man or woman may enter the Norbertine Order for various reasons, the only one which will enable him or her to persevere, to be a *true* Norbertine, is to have such a deep relationship with Christ that one's whole life is transformed and consumed by Him.

We therefore pray in union with our Order around the world, that all Norbertines may follow in the footsteps of our illustrious founder, St. Norbert, and that many young men and women may embrace this life lived for God alone, taking their position in this line of battle, in which so many brave and holy men and women already stand.



Rev. Ambrose Criste, O.Praem., of St. Michael's Abbey (now residing at their Corpus Christi Priory, Illinois), elevates the Sacred Host during Holy Mass at our Priory.





# The Light Shines in the Darkness

## THE EFFICACY OF CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM

*"In these latter times, a policy has been followed which has resulted in a sort of wall being raised between the Church and civil society. This policy almost tends to the removal of the Christian faith from our midst, and, if that were possible, of the banishment of God Himself from the earth. The abundance of evils which have now settled upon the world call upon us to seek help from Him by Whose strength alone they can be driven away."*

— Pope St. Leo XIII, On the Consecration of Mankind to the Sacred Heart, 1899

Once, in a garden, a serpent tempted a woman: he told her that she would be "like God" if she ate from the tree — she was deceived, enticed, and she ate, as did the man, her husband, and through their disobedience sin and death entered the world (cf. Genesis 1:2). But God foretold the advent of a new couple, a Man and a Woman, who one day would crush the head of the serpent, the one who was a liar from the beginning (cf. John 8:44). A truly God-like Life — redemption — would be given to all mankind from a new tree, the Cross, in the form of the Crucified Son of God. The tree of death would be forever transformed by the Tree of Life. And standing beneath that new Tree was the Woman, sharing in the martyrdom of the blessed Fruit of her womb. Our Lord Jesus Christ, exemplar of all martyrs, laid down His life in obedience to the Father, for the life of the world. His Blessed Mother, the Immaculate Conception, was so intimately united to Him, that the Church calls her Queen of Martyrs.

All down the centuries, Christians have followed Christ and His Mother in their martyrdoms. It is not by accident that the day after Christmas, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of St. Stephen, the Church's proto-martyr. Christ is the light of the world, He is the Prince of Peace ~ but he was born at the darkest time of night and into a world that "received Him not." (John 1:6) The festive and heart-warming celebration of Christmas must not allow us to forget that this Baby is the Lamb of God, the

Messiah Who was born to die, the Son of God Who came to earth "to give His life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

The annals of Church history contain an almost endless supply of the lives and adventures of courageous and loyal followers of Christ, who understood ~ literally ~ what St. Peter (a martyr himself) wrote: "For to this you have been called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His footsteps." (1 Peter 2:21) From the brutal games in the Colosseum at the dawn of the Church, to death at the hands of invading pagans, from missionaries who traveled to and offered their lives in far-off lands, to lay men and women who suffered for maintaining fidelity to the Church — every century has been illuminated by the Light coming from the Crucified Christ, suffering and dying again through His faithful followers.

However, martyrdom is not about violence and blood and frightful pains — it is about love and witnessing to the truth, and giving one's life for life of the other. And for this reason it is efficacious. For this reason it gives life to the world.

As St. Thomas Aquinas says, "It is due to charity that martyrdom is meritorious, like any other virtue: and for this reason it avails not without charity. Now of all virtuous acts martyrdom is the greatest proof of the perfection of charity, according to John 15:3: 'Greater love that this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'" (St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II 124:2-3)



In the lives and deaths of the martyrs, we see the victory of Calvary again and again: the Innocent One, offering His life in total submission to the will of the Father and out of love for the brethren is, like the grain of wheat, cast to the ground and dies. But in that death is contained the destruction of the lies, the malice and the grip of evil. And because Christ rose from the dead, and death no longer has a power over the Christian, the death of the martyr is the seed of new life.

And standing by the cross of the red martyrs, there is always found the Sorrowful Mother, along with those who, like her, may not suffer physical martyrdom, but whose love and immolation of self is intimately united to the sacrifice of those who give their lives for Christ, and thus united in bringing His Light to the world.

It is said that monastic life came about after persecutions and physical martyrdoms had greatly decreased in the early 4th century with the Edict of Milan, signed in 313 AD, thus ending the age of the martyrs. Though it may seem strange to modern ears, the fervent early Christians were dismayed that things had become easier, that life was comfortable, that Christians were now respected. While these things in themselves were not bad, they feared the laxity and loss of ardor that could be engendered in their souls, so they set out to live as hermits and monks, a life of heroic virtue — a living martyrdom.

*"Surge you therefore brethren, by the mercy of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship."*  
(Romans 12:1-2)

If there have always been men and women who are "red martyrs," i.e., those who have laid down their lives *physically*

for the faith, there have always been, and will also always be, "white martyrs," men and women who do the same *spiritually*, day after day — not in one moment, but throughout a lifetime. On the day of profession, when a nun signs her vows on the altar, she, in a sense, places herself as a living sacrifice upon that altar, to be daily martyred by love, a love that manifests itself in total submission to God, in imitation of Christ.

Our own days are not far removed from the days of the martyrs of old: In fact, it has been said that, in our days, there is a greater number of martyrs than ever before. The 20th century, completed just two decades ago, was called by Pope St. John Paul II the "century of martyrs," and this 21st century has not broken that trend. There are indeed today many men and women throughout the world, laying down their lives not for a system of beliefs or a way of living, but for a Person: the Man Jesus Christ, Who came into our dark world as Light and Life, and Who brings Light and Life still to our human hearts.

And throughout the world, united in prayer, faith and love for Christ, there are monasteries of monks and nuns, striving to live that white martyrdom, as did Our Blessed Mother. Like cities set atop hills, their lights shine forth in the darkness of our world. They may not confront the darkness in a direct way as do their brothers and sisters on the front lines, but the life-blood of prayer and sacrifice which they offer in the name of Christ and His Church sustains and augments those who do.

May we all, as Christians, strive to follow the example of Him who was born and died for us, looking to the martyrs who have gone before us, so that we may, like them, bring Christ's Light and Life to an aching and broken age. Thus, by His strength, and our co-operation in His loving plan, may the evils which have descended upon our world be quickly driven away.



# Events at the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph



1)



2)



3)



4)



5)



6)



7)



8)



9)

## IN JULY

1) Following the Magistri Meeting for formators of our Order, held at St. Michael's Abbey, we were blessed with a visit from several Norbertine confreres and sisters from around the globe. (See pg. 2)

## IN AUGUST

2) In mid-August we received a visit from our friend, Fr. Idahosa Amadasu from the Archdiocese of Benin City, Nigeria, who also spoke to us about a modern Nigerian virgin-martyr, Vivian Ogu.

3 & 4) A few months after their priestly Ordination, our confreres from St. Michael's Abbey, Rev. Lazarus McDonald, O. Praem., and Rev. Alcuin Friesen, O. Praem., offered their first Masses at our Priory and gave their first priestly blessing to all the nuns. (Pictured in 4: Fr. Alcuin gives his first blessing to his sister, Sr. Mary Bernadette)

5) On the 24th, the feast of St. Bartholomew the Apostle, our postulant received the white habit and the religious name Sr. Marie Bronislava, after the much-beloved Blessed Bronislava, a holy Polish nun of our Order from the 13th century.

## IN SEPTEMBER

6) In early September, Rev. Joseph Fessio, S.J., founder of Ignatius Press and special friend of our community, visited our Priory, giving us talks on his experiences with notable Catholic figures, including his dear friend, Pope Benedict XVI, as well as on the founding of Ignatius Press.

7) On the feast of the Holy Archangels, the 29th, in anticipation of coming winds and rain, all the sisters joined together to harvest and shuck our corn.

## IN OCTOBER

8) We gratefully received a visit from our confrere, Rev. Pius Collins, O. Praem., from Peckham, England, who celebrated the Sacred Liturgy, and gave us a week of classes on Canon Law.

9) Our dear community friend, Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P, visited our Priory during the last week of the month, and gave us classes on Fatima and Sacred Scripture.

This summer and fall, God blessed us with an abundance of fruits and vegetables such as apples, plums, squash, corn, grapes, and more.



# A Blessed Update

WITH A VERY SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR FAITH-FILLED FRIEND  
who blessed us in November with a significant gift  
for our Future Chapel Fund,  
BRINGING US TO OVER \$10 MILLION FOR PHASE II OF OUR MONASTERY EXPANSION

## Monastery Expansion & Our Current Needs

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

We rejoice with you in the quiet whisperings of the Holy Spirit, whisperings that touched the heart of our dear friend, and inspired him to give so generously, and to do so at this time. Our friend in turn shared with us his hopes that the Holy Spirit will now likewise inspire many other hearts to also give generously to our Phase II Monastery Expansion Project, and that his own gift will help to impel many others to consider similar significant gifts, so that we may reach our goal speedily and build our Future Chapel, all for God's honor and glory and the salvation of souls. We offer our heartfelt gratitude and prayers to our special friend and all of you, who have contributed in so many ways to our Future Chapel and Monastery Expansion Project. May the Holy Spirit guide and inspire us all!

### 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 now over \$10 million raised for Phase II, thanks to the recent gift of our special friend and the continuing generosity of so many other dear friends like you, we continue to place all in God's loving providence, trusting that the Holy Spirit will inspire many hearts, and our chapel will be raised up in His perfect timing, according to His holy will.

[www.norbertinesisters.org](http://www.norbertinesisters.org)

## Monies Needed

	FOR PHASE II: CHAPEL & WING
\$23.0M	\$23,000,000
\$18.0M	Current Goal \$18,000,000
\$10.0M	Funds Raised to Date \$10,000,000

R. Belcher

God Bless You!



THE NORBERTINE CANONESSES  
OF THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY OF ST. JOSEPH

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— *A Special Thank You* —

To all of our friends who have generously given of their time, talents and resources in various areas to help us become more self-sustaining, a long-standing tradition within our Norbertine Order.

*Pictured: Our community harvests corn from our first larger-scale corn field.*

*Norbertine Canonesses*

— WEBSITE —

♣ Online Monastery Gift Shop

♣ 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

♣ FOR GIFT SHOP PURCHASES:  
Please visit our website at  
[www.shop.norbertinesisters.org](http://www.shop.norbertinesisters.org)

♣ FOR CHEESE PURCHASES:

Please visit: [www.cheese.norbertinecanonesses.org](http://www.cheese.norbertinecanonesses.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  
[norbertinecanonesses@gmail.com](mailto:norbertinecanonesses@gmail.com)

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



*"O great throng, before you goes that blooming Rose, the one outstanding Rose,  
NOR IS THERE ANY SUCH WHO CAN EQUAL HER,  
that noblest of Mothers who bore heaven's Lord."*

— St. Herman Joseph, Premonstratensian Canon, d. 1241