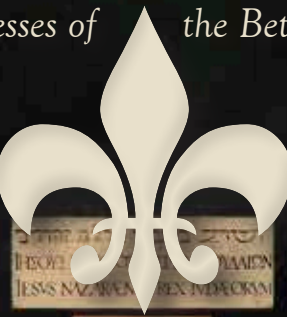


The Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

FIRST FRUITS



The Holy Season of Lent, March 2024 / Issue 61



"Son though He was, He learned obedience from what He suffered,
AND HE BECAME THE SOURCE OF SALVATION FOR ALL WHO OBEY HIM."

Hebrews 5:8-9



*"Have this mind among yourselves
which was in Christ Jesus,
Who, though He was in the form of God
did not count equality with God
a thing to be grasped,
but emptied Himself...
And being found in human form
He humbled Himself
and became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.
Therefore, God has
highly exalted Him."*

Philippians 2:5-9

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

Laudetur Jesus Christus! In this holy and penitential season of Lent, we turn our gaze toward the great humility and self-sacrifice of Christ, Who, for the sake of His Bride, the Church, offered Himself up for Her so that she might be holy, spotless and full of splendor (cf. Ephesians 5:25-27). In this He has left us an example, that we might follow His blood-stained footprints on the "via crucis" of our own lives (cf. 1 Peter 2:21), with whatever sufferings we are called to bear, and so lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We bring to you, in this issue of *FirstFruits*, events from our Priory which have been, for us, beautiful reminders of this Christian truth. The selfless outpouring of our founding Mother, the call to sacrificial service of a new Prioress, the beginning of a canonical life of prayer and penance inaugurated at solemn profession – all these are so many ways in which Christ, Who perpetuates His sacrifice on Calvary daily in the Holy Mass, also makes His salvific sacrifice present through human lives.

Striving to allow Him to increase in us, and allowing our own egos to decrease, may we always live out that humility that was perfected not only in Christ, the Son of God, but also in His Blessed Mother. For true humility does not take away any of our dignity, but rather raises us to a greater glory than we could ever imagine: the glory of a soul, a bride of Christ, washed clean by the blood of His sacrifice, and full of the splendor, not of self, but of God.

We assure you of our prayers for you and your loved ones, as we approach the Solemnity of Christ's victory over sin and death this Easter.

In Christ our Savior through His Blessed Mother,

Mother Mary Oda, O. Praem.

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

The Litany of Humility

O Jesus! Meek and humble of heart, hear me.
From the desire of being esteemed, **deliver me, Jesus.*
From the desire of being loved, ***
From the desire of being extolled, ***
From the desire of being honored, ***
From the desire of being praised, ***
From the desire of being preferred to others, ***
From the desire of being consulted, ***
From the desire of being approved, ***
From the fear of being humiliated, ***
From the fear of being despised, ***
From the fear of suffering rebukes, ***
From the fear of being calumniated, ***
From the fear of being forgotten, ***
From the fear of being ridiculed, ***
From the fear of being wronged, ***
From the fear of being suspected, *deliver me, Jesus.*

That others may be loved more than I,
**Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.*
That others may be esteemed
more than I, ***
That, in the opinion of the world,
others may increase
and I may decrease, ***
That others may be chosen
and I set aside, ***
That others may be praised
and I unnoticed, ***
That other may be preferred
to me in everything, ***
That others become holier
than I, provided that I may
become as holy as I should,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.



Election of a Prioress

— DECEMBER 5, 2023 —

On December 5th, 2023 in the presence of the Abbot General of the Norbertine Order, Jos Wouters, O. Praem., and Sr. Augustina Vrzalova, O. Praem., Prioress of Doksany and Federation President of the Canonesses of Prémontré, our community elected Mother Mary Oda to succeed Mother Mary Augustine as Prioress of our community.

Mother Mary Augustine, foundress of our community, first served as Superior from our inception in 1997, and then as the Prioress of our community, after the erection of our canonry and the first solemn professions in 2011. We give thanks to God for the firm foundation that she has laid through her teachings and her faithful, selfless, and loving service nurturing our community from its foundation to an established flourishing canonry of Canonesses at the service of our Order of Prémontré, of our Diocese of Fresno, and of the whole Church.

The election, which was conducted by the Solemnly Professed sisters, was immediately followed by ringing of bells, summoning the whole community to the Chapter Room, where the Abbot General announced the name of the new Prioress. The community then processed to the Choir, while chanting the Te Deum, a traditional hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God. Mother Mary Oda then made a profession of faith and promise of fidelity to the Gospel and Constitutions (1). All of the nuns under vows (simple or solemn) promised obedience to the new superior (2), and exchanged with her the kiss of peace (top). That evening at recreation, much joy was had by all, as we shared stories with our guests (below) and looked toward the future with hope and trust, praising God for the solid foundation laid by our founding Mother and sisters.

Mother Mary Oda graduated from St. Thomas Aquinas college in 2002 and entered the Monastery that same year. Since then, Mother Mary Oda has held various offices in the community, including serving on the Prioress' Council since 2011 and being the Sub-prioress for the six years leading up to the election. We ask prayers for Mother Mary Augustine, Mother Mary Oda and our community as we strive to, each and every day, live our "Fiat" in all things – for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.



With Gratitude for Mother Mary Augustine

"Just let God do."

These words are dear and familiar to the spiritual daughters of a Norbertine Prioress who truly lived what she spoke. When she was born in 1939 on the tropical island of New Caledonia, growing up in an atmosphere that was by no means religious, who would have thought that this little girl, would one day found the first monastery of Premonstratensian Canonesses in North America, governing that contemplative community for over twenty-six years...

She certainly did not. But, following her conversion at the age of 42, Monique Petit, following hours of prayer and meditation, one day said to God with all her heart, *"Thy will be done."* She never took it back, even though the Lord began to ask greater and greater sacrifices of His daughter, who, though young in faith, was wise with His own wisdom.

One day she was asked by a canon of St. Michael's Abbey, if she would found a community of contemplative nuns, and, praise God, she responded, "If you think I am able, then I am free to do so." The early years the community's existence saw her acting

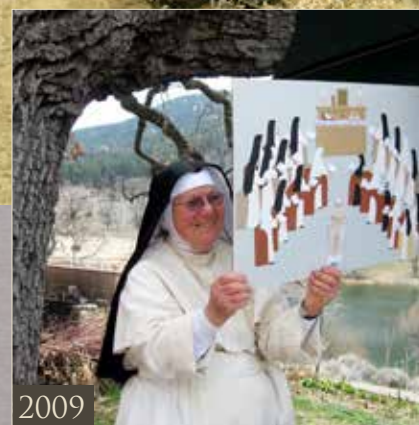
as superior, novice mistress, cook, seamstress, gardener, guest mistress, construction director... among other things. But above all she was *Mother*, teaching her daughters many life lessons, practical and spiritual.

In the liturgy there is an antiphon that says, *"Surrender to God, and He will do everything for you."* This prayer is really at the heart of all that Mother Mary Augustine taught us, day in and day out, and is the foundation upon which our community has been built. As Mother taught us, by surrendering to God one will have to suffer, as Christ suffered, and one will have to constantly choose the narrow gate. But it does not matter. What really matters is the end: that one's whole life gives glory to God and assists in the salvation of souls. The work we do here below is nothing compared to the joy that will be ours in eternity, knowing that we have been faithful to Christ and remained always at His side.

We are blessed by the twenty-six years that we enjoyed under the leadership of our founding Prioress, and we pray that God will reward her abundantly, here and hereafter, for all she has done for us.



1998



2009



2011



2023

Pictured Left to Right: 1998: Monique Petit, just prior to the vestition of the first five nuns, puts items in storage for the future convent. 2009: Mother holds up a large card made by the sisters for her 70th birthday. 2011: The first nine solemnly professed nuns, on the day of their solemn profession and the erection of our canonry. 2023: Mother promises obedience in the hands of the new Prioress, Mother Mary Oda.



1



2



3



4



5

Profession of Solemn Vows

— DECEMBER 8, 2023 —

On December 8th, 2023, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, at Holy Mass celebrated by the Abbot General of our Order, The Most Rev. Jos Wouters (1), Sr. Mary Emmanuelle made her solemn profession at our Monastery. Due to the limited space of our chapel, the profession was attended by only a few family members and nearby friends of our community. It was, nonetheless, a beautiful and very blessed occasion, and was obvious that the Lord, in His loving providence, had specially ordained events to unfold this way.

Our Lady, under the title of the Immaculate Conception, is the patroness of our community, a fitting patroness for those who strive to give their lives totally to God. For she, from the very moment of her existence, gave herself exclusively to Him, being free as she was from any stain of sin and any lesser loves. And, as she was dedicated totally to God and to His Son, Jesus Christ, she completely surrendered her life to Him, even when this meant to accompany her Son Jesus to His passion and death on the cross, and from there to become the Mother of the Church.

Similarly, as a canoness-to-be prostrates before God (*top*) she, like Our Lady, seeks to give herself totally to Him. As she signs her name on the altar in the same place where Jesus Christ, the Son of Mary, is sacrificed every day in Holy Mass (2) she surrenders her life to the Sacred Victim, herself now a victim with Him. Externally symbolized by the ring which she now wears (3), this union with Christ is not for herself alone, but places her at the foot of the Cross with His Mother, there to become a mother of souls. She has been inserted in a special way into the mystery of the Church, and into this particular church, receiving the canonical rochet as a sign of this (4). All this is ratified in the Eucharist, where Christ is present among us as Spouse and Victim, and unites Himself with us in a pure and total way (5).

May Mary, the Immaculate One, draw all souls to her Son, to Whom they are espoused at baptism, so that, though called to many different vocations, all souls may belong entirely to Him.

Events at the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph



IN NOVEMBER

1) From late November until early December, we were blessed with a visit from our Abbot General, Jos Wouters, as well as Sr. Augustina, the Prioress of Doksany and President of the Federation of Norbertine Canonesses. We were able to share many memorable experiences with them, including their first American Thanksgiving in the USA (pictured).

IN DECEMBER

2) On December 5th, Mother Mary Oda was elected as the second Prioress of our community, succeeding Mother Mary Augustine. She is the first American-born Norbertine Prioress in our 900-year-old order. (Photo from our Archives: In 2002 Mother Mary Augustine welcomes a new postulant, who would one day become Mother Mary Oda.) (See page 2.)

3) On the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8th, Sr. Mary Emmanuelle made her solemn profession at our Priory. (See page 4.)

4) We celebrated with great joy the holy Christmastide, a season very dear to our Norbertine Order. (Pictured: Singing Christmas carols at recreation)

IN JANUARY

5) On January 6th, we had our annual Epiphany house blessing, celebrated by Rev. Curtis Hecker from the Diocese of Wichita, KS. (Pictured: Father blesses a statue in the Novitiate.)

6) Our Order, though spread throughout the world, nonetheless rejoices in the close bonds between our houses – in January, we gratefully welcomed the Rt. Rev. François Marie Humann, O.Praem, Abbot of Mondaye Abbey in France, and Very Rev. Brad Vanden Branden, O.Praem, Prior of St. Norbert's Abbey in De Pere Wisconsin.

IN FEBRUARY

7) Our annual retreat, held from February 2nd-9th, was preached by Rev. Donald Haggerty from the Archdiocese of New York, who gave edifying conferences about the need for a deep, self-sacrificial offering to God for souls.

8) Ash Wednesday fell on February 14th, and we began the holy season of Lent with the chanting of the seven penitential psalms, and the reception of ashes at Holy Mass (pictured).

9-11) Our life includes both "ora et labora"... in February, work included: a broken underground water pipe (9), a substantial snow fall (10), and the birth of calves and lambs (11).



Monastery Expansion & Our Current Needs

We invite you to help with Phase II of our Monastery Expansion Project and our other 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/), 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 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 \$10 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

	FOR PHASE II: CHAPEL & WING
\$23.0M	\$23,000,000
\$18.0M	Current Goal \$18,000,000
\$10.2M	Funds Raised to Date \$10,200,000

R. Belcher

God Bless You!

Above: Our community gathers with the presiding priest for the annual blessing of liturgical candles and procession on February 2nd, the Solemnity of the Presentation of the Lord and the World Day of Consecrated Life. (Photo from our Archives)

— A Special Thank You —

To our dear friends at HP Communications Incorporated, who very generously donated a new pick-up truck to our community — essential for our many farm tasks — to replace our well-used farm truck, which had reached the end of its life. May God reward you!

THE NORBERTINE CANONESSES
OF THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY OF ST. JOSEPH

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

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Norbertine Canonesses

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- ♣ 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:
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- ♣ FOR CHEESE PURCHASES:
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- ♣ WE ARE HERE TO OFFER PRAYERS
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*"The spirit of Christianity and the real spirit of our own religious life
can be summed up best in the words of St. John the Baptist:*

'HE MUST INCREASE, I MUST DECREASE.'



...This is really our whole goal in life; it is the message of every day of our life."

Servant of God Rev. Walter Ciszek, S.J.

On the Cover: *The Crucifixion*, by Diego Velasquez, c. 1632.

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