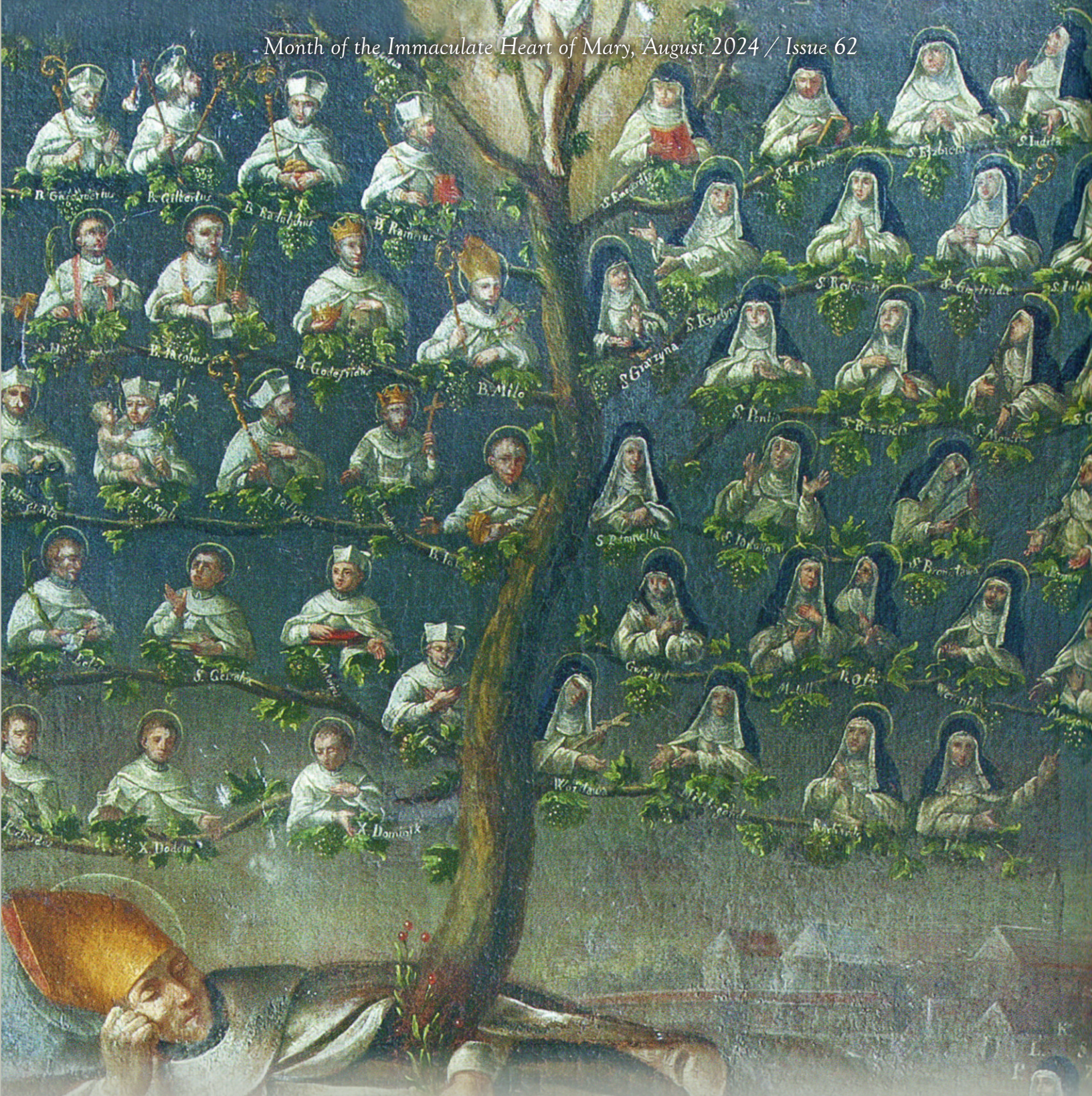


FIRST FRUITS

Month of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, August 2024 / Issue 62



"[There are] Sisters who, because of the work of our brother Norbert, have acceded to the service of God the Almighty and offered themselves to the Lord."

— Pope Innocent II to Bl. Hugh of Fosses, 1138



"From the very beginning of the Church,

men and women have set about

*FOLLOWING CHRIST
WITH GREATER FREEDOM
AND IMITATING HIM MORE CLOSELY*

*through the practice of the
evangelical counsels.*

*The renewal of the religious life
includes both*

THE CONSTANT RETURN TO THE SOURCES

*of all Christian life and to the
original spirit of the institutes*

AND THEIR ADAPTATION

to the changed conditions of our time."

— Perfectae caritatis, 1965

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

Laudetur Jesus Christus!

In this issue of *FirstFruits*, we share with you the joyful and hidden life of a community of Norbertine canonesses today, even as we also cast a glance to the past, to the example of earlier Norbertine canonesses throughout the centuries. For over 900 years, Norbertine canonesses have sought to give their lives to God and neighbor in prayer, penance, and – following the Rule of St. Augustine – in community, with love for God in the brethren and the brethren in God.

The women who have gone before us and paved the way for the life we now lead, themselves looked to the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, seeking to imitate her whole-hearted love for God and hidden life of charity.

Today, as the first foundation of Norbertine Canonesses in the United States, we strive to bring into our own time the traditional canonical life and ancient monastic customs that St. Norbert loved so dearly and jointly embraced. Through the solemn and reverential celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, and the observances of silence, *lectio divina*, study and manual labor, we endeavor to bring a deeper sense of the sacred into the hearts of modern men and women – beginning with our own. The Immaculate Virgin Mary stands as the primary model and example for us today, as she did for our predecessors: a living model, who, without fail, brings us closer to God and, therefore, closer to one another.

We thank all of you, our dear confreres and consoeurs, family and friends, for all the support you have shown us as we strive to live our vocation faithfully.

In Christ and His Immaculate Mother,

Mother Mary Oda, O.Praem.

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

*"Blessed are those who hear
THE WORD OF GOD
and observe it."*

— Luke 11:27-28

Once a woman raised her voice in a crowd and praised the physical closeness of Our Lord's Mother to her Son. "Rather, blessed are those..." His rejoinder did not denigrate the importance and blessedness of His Mother, but rather praised what was higher in her than physical nearness: her total submission to the Word of God.

For centuries, monks and nuns, canons and canonesses have been following in the footsteps of this most illustrious disciple of Christ, His Mother, by taking into their hearts His Word in the Sacred Scriptures, through many hours of praying with the Sacred Text in the Liturgy and in *lectio divina*. Far from being a mere religious observance, this chanting, reading, and listening to the Word of God was, and remains, a profound way in which one opens oneself to the power of the Word, and, in faith, embraces Him with total submission.



The Solemn Profession of a Norbertine Canoness

"Father, we earnestly pray You:

send the fire of the Holy Spirit into the heart of your daughter..."

So prays the celebrant at the Solemn Profession Mass of a Canoness of Prémontré (above), and so it was providential that, on the Vigil of Pentecost, May 18th, 2024, Sr. Mary Dismas made her Solemn Profession at the local parish of St. Malachy's, being totally consecrated to God and sealed with the Holy Spirit.

The presence of the Holy Spirit was manifest, for, as the Spirit of unity, He binds all believers together, and on this occasion, we were visibly reminded of the deep spiritual bond between our community, our confreres, and our family and friends, many of whom blessed us with their presence at St. Malachy's.

For Sr. Mary Dismas, this day marked a new beginning in her life, a life that will be lived in and for the Church. She alone can offer her own life to God, but in this, she will never be without help and support. Around her, as around every Norbertine canon or canoness, and indeed every Christian, stands "so great a cloud of witnesses:" the Church militant and triumphant (*Hebrews 12:1*).

We wish to express our deep gratitude to Rev. Gregory Beaumont, Pastor, and the community of St. Malachy Catholic Church for extending such a generous welcome to our community. We also extend our profound thanks to our confreres of St. Michael's Abbey, especially our *Pater Abbas*, the Rt. Rev. Eugene Hayes, O.Praem., and Rev. Gabriel Stack, O.Praem., who presided as main celebrant on the Abbot's behalf; Rev. Peregrine Fletcher, O.Praem., and Rev. Lazarus McDonald, O.Praem., Masters of Ceremonies; and the second-year novices, who served around the altar and as photographers. May God reward you all abundantly, and pour His Spirit upon you without measure. And may this Holy Spirit strengthen the fraternal unity between us all, as He continues to shine in hearts given over to Him.



1



2



3



4

Top) The prayer of consecration over the newly-professed canoness; 1) Sr. Mary Dismas signs her profession formula on the altar; 2) The elevation of the Most Sacred Host during the consecration at Holy Mass; 3) St. Michael's Abbey novices processing; 4) Sr. Mary Dismas speaks to her father after her Solemn Profession.



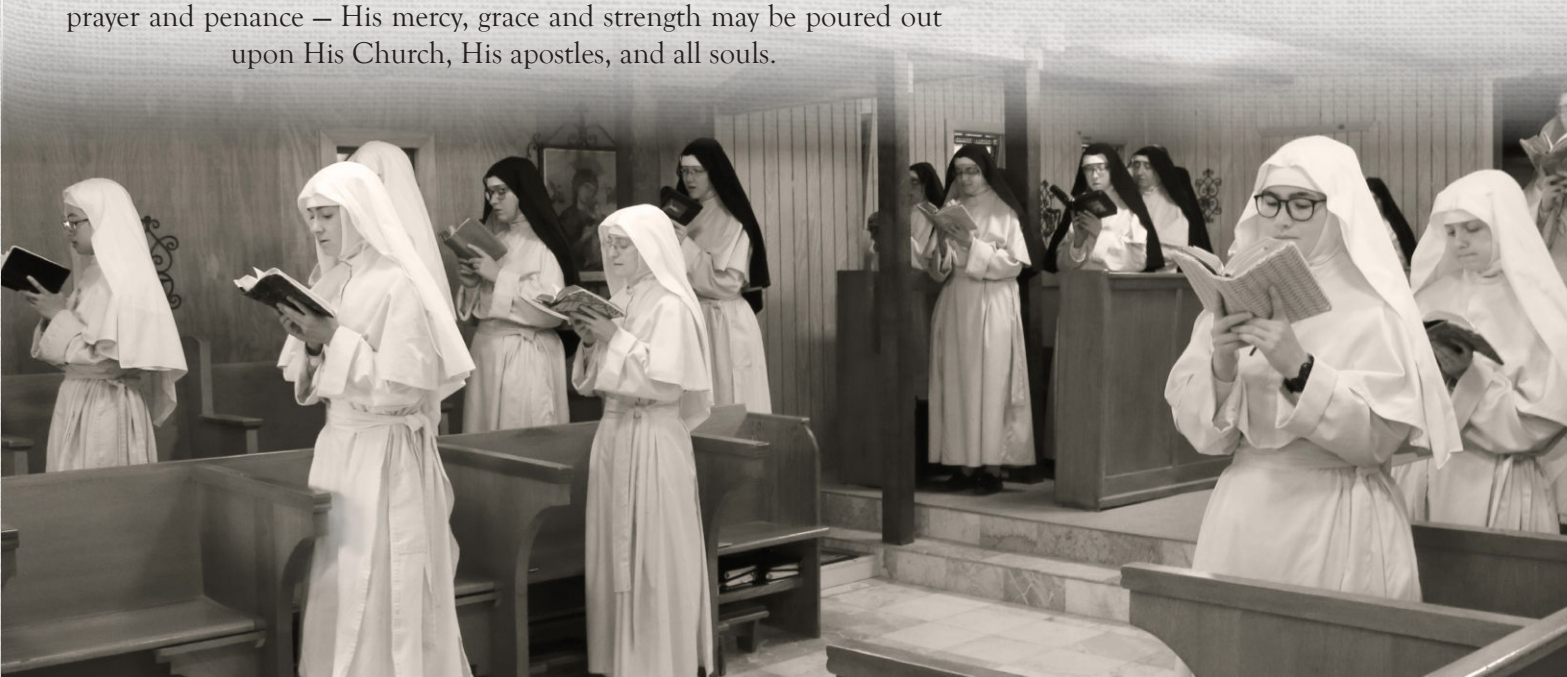
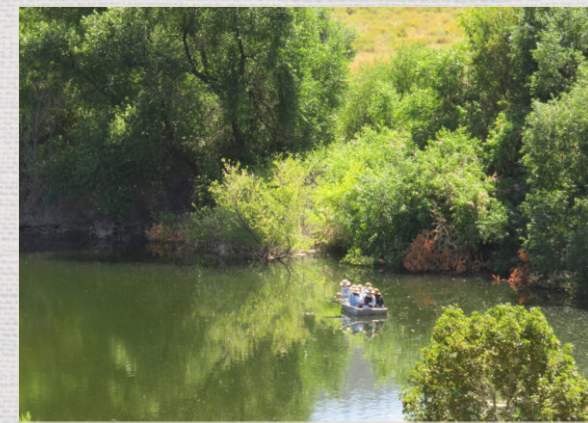
This way of life, handed down to us from the early Premonstratensian women, has never been one of comfort, convenience, or recognition, but one of penance, self-sacrificing love, and hidden heroism. They observed a strict cloister, nor did others enter in; they never ate meat; they sang the midnight and other offices, and were occupied in diligent work when not at prayer. "Although they are known to be enclosed with such strictness and lowliness, including silence, nevertheless the power of Christ is working in an extraordinary way." (Miracles of St. Mary of Laon, 12th century)

"Norbertine nuns, like the first Norbertine nun, Blessed Ricvère de Clastres, follow the example of St. Norbert. As consecrated virgins and spouses of Christ, they find their joy in intimacy with the Savior. Their contemplative life makes them special intermediaries in obtaining the graces necessary for the life of the whole Order. Through their contemplative life, they share in the direct apostolate of the priests and make it fruitful by their prayer."

— The Very Rev. Bernard Ardura, O.Praem.

Today, after a 900-year history of heroic, courageous, and largely unknown Norbertine canonesses, Christ still inspires women to imitate His Mother's role as the praying heart of the Church by devoting themselves to prayer and penance, especially at the service of His apostles, the priests. While, as modern people, we are far removed from our medieval forebears by time and circumstance, it is possible, nevertheless, to maintain and keep alive the monastic culture and spirit of self-sacrifice they lived. It is possible to seek and to serve God with all the fervor and passion of earlier saints. The seemingly severe and strict rules they practiced were not then, nor are they now, observed for the sake of austerity in itself, but to free the soul so that it may take flight to God, and draw many souls with it. As Our Lord said to a Norbertine mystic, Christina of Christ: "O brilliant soul of Mine, free as an eagle may you fly into the highest height and into the gracious face of the eternal Godhead, while your soul's clear eyes are strengthened in the reflection of the eternal divine sun." (From the Life of Christina of Hane, 13th century)

While this flight toward God is an invitation extended to all, both persons in the world and consecrated souls, there is today, as in the time of the apostles and the medievals, the need for a strong, intense, praying heart in the Church. For 900 years and continuing, Norbertine canonesses have been striving to respond to this invitation to love God in the brethren and the brethren in God, so that — through their lives of prayer and penance — His mercy, grace and strength may be poured out upon His Church, His apostles, and all souls.



For the Church of Christ and His Apostles

THE ROLE OF NORBERTINE CANONESSES

In 1121, a charismatic, young noble-cleric-turned-itinerant-preacher settled down with a large group of disciples in a valley in France, called Prémontré, seeking to follow the Sacred Scriptures, with Christ as their leader. St. Norbert, once given over to the spirit of the world and now wholly given over to the Holy Spirit, sought to restore the Church's youth by returning to the Church's youth: the *vita apostolica*.

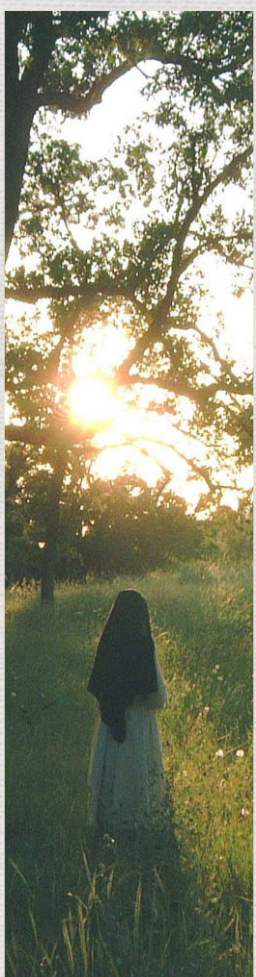
"The apostles devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus."
— Acts 1:14

In accordance with this apostolic ideal — a community of believers gathered around the apostles and Our Lady, in prayer — St. Norbert welcomed women into his nascent Order. In reality, he did not see this movement as his "Order," but rather as a path of conversion and fidelity to the Gospel. All peoples could and should follow this; and so, a community of women soon gathered around St. Norbert and his clerics.

While our Order preserves the memory of many holy Norbertine women, including St. Norbert's first spiritual daughter, Ricvera of Clastres (traditionally referred to as Blessed), it is providential that, in this month of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Norbertines celebrate the only two canonesses in our Order who have been raised to the Church's altar, Bl. Gertrude (August 13), and Bl. Bronislava (August 30). For, in the youth of the Church, the Blessed Virgin Mary was the praying heart around whom the apostles and Christian community gathered. So also, the praying heart of the Church is made manifest in the vocation of the Norbertine canonesses, above all in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. As cloistered nuns devoted more especially to the contemplative duty of the canonical vocation (Const. n. 20), we seek in both roles to glorify God and serve the Church, aiding the apostolate of Norbertine priests through prayer and penance.

"Norbert saw that the holy women in the Gospel remained somewhat in the background, helping Christ and the apostles. Then in Jerusalem there was Mary, silent and in prayer, even though she exercised a considerable influence as the Mother of Jesus and a living image of the virtues of Christ. It mattered little to Norbert and to these women that they were not the Church's head or arms; it was enough that by their love, contemplation and devotion, they were its heart."

— The Very Rev. Bernard Ardura, O.Praem., *The Order of Prémontré: History and Spirituality*, p. 35



Top) A line of continuity: Our Lady; Bl. Gertrude, a medieval Norbertine canoness; and a Norbertine canoness today.



1) De-cobbing corn at recreation; 2) Bringing in the cows; 3) Decorating Easter eggs; 4) Reading during Grand Silence; 5) Practicing for a vestition; 6) Recreating on the Solemnity of our Holy Father St. Norbert; 7) Going for a hike in our cloister; 8) Work in our greenhouse; 9) A father-son crew fixing a leaking pipe on our property.

✠ IN MARCH

- 1) During Lent, we were blessed with a joint visit from His Excellency, Bishop Matthew Elshoff, OFM Cap., and Rev. David Beaumont, OFM Cap., brother of Rev. Gregory Beaumont, pastor of St. Malachy's. Fr. David, who has served as a Capuchin missionary in Mexico for over 30 years, spoke to us about his experiences in his ministry among the indigenous peoples.
- 2) From the 9th-16th, Rev. James Dominic Brent, O.P., gave conferences to the nuns on the healing and elevation of the human heart by grace, drawing from the Fathers of the Church as well as monastic authors of the Eastern and Western traditions.
- 3) On the 23rd, we received a visit from our confrere Br. Mark Charlesworth, O.Praem., from St. Michael's Abbey, who, along with other confreres and friends, gave much of his time and talents to make our Tehachapi property suitable for living, enabling us to move here in May of 2000.
- 4) In union with the universal Church, we celebrated the Sacred Triduum and Easter Sunday, March 28-31.

✠ IN APRIL

- 5) In April, Rev. Gabriel O'Donnell, O.P., who was instrumental in the foundation of our community, offered conferences to

our community on the history of spirituality and fostering a monastic culture.

✠ IN MAY

- 6) On May 1st, the Solemnity of St. Joseph the Worker and the patronal feast day of our Canonry, our *donata* candidate made her promises and was clothed in the white habit, receiving her new name, Sr. Maria Casian.
- 7) On the 18th, the vigil of Pentecost, Sr. Mary Dismas made her Solemn Profession at our local Tehachapi parish of St. Malachy Catholic Church. (Pictured: Sister receives Holy Communion)
- 8) On the 23rd, Rev. Vianney Ceja, O. Praem., Master of Juniors at St. Michael's Abbey, and several junior professed confreres visited our community, following a visit of second-year novices the previous week.

✠ IN JUNE & JULY

- 9) In June, our confreres Rev. Gerard Juhasz, O.Praem., and Rev. Moses Blain, O.Praem., were ordained to the priesthood at St. Michael's Abbey, and in July, we received a visit from Fr. Moses who offered Mass at our Priory for the first time and gave us his first priestly blessing.

Our Upcoming Monastery Expansion

BLESSED UPDATES TO BE SHARED SOON...

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 (norbertinecanonesses1@gmail.com).

MONASTERY EXPANSION PROJECT:

We remain deeply grateful to all of you who are helping to build our future monastery and chapel, which will include living spaces and much needed utility spaces, as well as a fitting place to offer worship to God, with the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy being the main "work" of a Norbertine Canoness. With over \$11 million raised to date, thanks to the continuing generosity of our dear friends like you, we continue to place all of our needs in God's loving providence, trusting that He is blessing all of you, and will raise up our monastery and chapel in His perfect timing and according to His holy will.

www.norbertinesisters.org

— OUR HORARIUM —

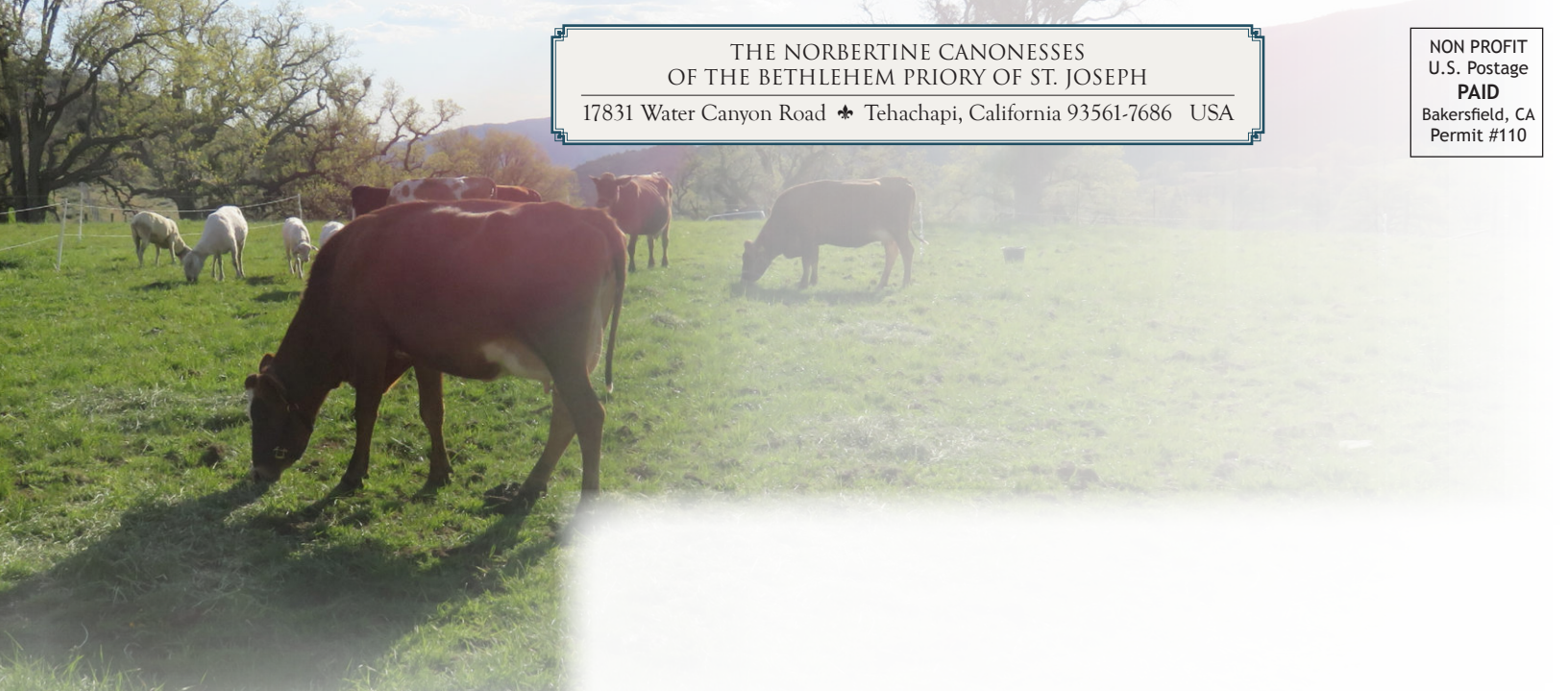
(Please call for our Friday schedule)

Midnight	Vigils – Office of Readings (Matins)
6:00 am	Morning prayer (Lauds) & Angelus
6:35 am	Lectio Divina
7:40 am	Mid-morning prayer (Terce)
8:00 am	The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
9:20 am	Chapter (Martyrology & the Rule)
10:00 am	Work, Class, or Study
11:40 am	Mid-day prayer (Sext), Angelus & Rosary
12:20 pm	Dinner
1:05 pm	Mid-afternoon prayer (None)
1:30 pm	Grand Silence – prayer, rest, exercise, etc
2:30 pm	Work, Class, or Study
5:00 pm	Evening prayer (Vespers) & Angelus
5:35 pm	Recreation
6:15 pm	Supper, followed by evening chores
7:15 pm	Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament
7:55 pm	Benediction & Night prayer (Compline)
9:00 pm	"Lights Out"

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 all of our friends who have helped with our growing farm, including donations for the purchase of animals and developing pasture land, as well as sharing your knowledge and expertise. May God reward you!

Norbertine Canonesses

— WEBSITE —

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

www.norbertinesisters.org

♣ [MONASTERY GIFT SHOP HOURS:](#)
Daily 10-11:30 am, 2:30-4:50 pm
(except Fridays, 2:30-4:15 pm)

♣ [FOR GIFT SHOP PURCHASES:](#)
Please visit our website at
shop.norbertinecanonesses.org

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Please visit: bethlehempriorydogs.com

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You are welcome to email us:
Bethlehemprioryofstjoseph@gmail.com

UNITED IN PRAYER FOR THE ONGOING EUCHARISTIC REVIVAL
Corpus Christi Procession, May 30, 2024



On the Cover: An 18th c. painting from the Norbertine convent in Zwierzyniec, Poland. The flowering tree of the Norbertine Order springs from the side of a sleeping St. Norbert.

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