

FIRST FRUITS

The Solemnity of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 25, 2024 / Issue 63



"Profound peace shall flower in the days of the Lord, and He shall rule."

— Antiphon at Matins during the Octave of Christmas



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

Laudetur Jesus Christus!

In these days leading up to the great Solemnity of the Nativity of Our Lord, we share with you, in this issue of FirstFruits, our Norbertine tradition of devotion to the mystery of Christmas.

Since the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, the Son of God, became Incarnate and was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, men and women from every walk of life have devoted their minds and hearts to this mystery. In faith they adored that which they could not comprehend; in hope they pursued that which they could not reach alone; and in love they clung to Him Who is the fulfillment of all desires.

Norbertine canons and canonesses through the centuries have joined the wise men and shepherds, the martyrs and doctors, virgins, holy women, and little children in adoration around the crib of the Christ Child. May we too join that holy gathering, as we sing this Christmas, *"Venite Adoremus."*

We wish all of you and your loved ones a very blessed Advent, and a very Merry Christmas.

In Christ,

Mother Mary Oda, O. Praem.

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

The General Chapter of the Norbertine Order

JULY 2024, STRAHOV ABBEY, CZECH REPUBLIC



Every six years, the abbots, prioresses, and delegates of all our Order's Abbeys and Priors gather in a General Chapter, which was held this year in July at the Abbey of Strahov in the Czech Republic. Mother Mary Oda and Sr. Mary Thomas served as representatives of our Priory. The Chapter was a beautiful opportunity to build the *communio* of our ancient and international Order.



Despite the ravages of history, periods of persecution and suppression, our Order has survived the test of time and lives on, continuing to branch out and grow. Above, Mother and Sister stand before the tomb of our Founder, St. Norbert, together with confreres from the houses in our community's "family tree."

Waiting as Children

THE LITURGY OF THE LAST DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

The liturgy of this present time of year is like a huge Advent calendar given to the children of holy Mother Church, as she prepares us to celebrate with the utmost joy and understanding one of the holiest of solemnities, the Nativity of the Lord.

In the slowly darkening days of winter, we stay close to Mary, each day opening up a new little door or pocket containing treasures of chants and readings. Prophecies and New Testament texts prepare us for Christmas and we constantly return to the scene of the Annunciation, when the Virgin conceives and a shoot sprouts from the stump of Jesse.

As we hover between His promise and the moment when He reveals His Sacred Face, the liturgy is filled with joyful anticipation, the excitement mounting as we enter the second part of Advent, the 16th to the 24th. At this time, combining our longing with that of all the prophets and patriarchs, we sing the great "O" Antiphons, raising our voices above the pealing of the monastery bell, which

rings through the entire "O" Antiphon and Magnificat Cantic at Solemn Vespers every evening.

Leading up to Christmas, we children, who are having a difficult time waiting, have said time and again in the liturgy, *"Come, Lord, do not delay."* Holy Mother Church replies: *"Let everything within you watch and wait, for the Lord our God draws near"* (Dec 18th). *"There is no need to be afraid,"* she says on the 21st, *"in five days our Lord will come to us."* On Christmas Eve, *"Today you will know the Lord is coming, and in the morning you will see His glory"* (Invitatory antiphon).

Finally, at the darkest time of the year and in the deepest night, the Light is born, and the voice of the Father permeates the silent night air in the great Introit for the Mass at Midnight: *"Filius meus es tu."* And we draw near, welcomed by Mary's smile, to see the glory of God radiating from the face of Jesus Christ. And just as children can hardly believe that Christmas is here, we sing the *"Hodie"* chants: Today, yes today is Christmas!





Adoration

AT THE Creche

Since the year 1121, when St. Norbert and his first followers made religious profession on Christmas Day at Prémontré, the mystery of Christmas and the adoration due to God Incarnate has been very dear to the heart of Norbertines.

♣ *"The Bridegroom's name is 'Jesus' — the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. And who understood this name more truly, loved it more sincerely, or made it known more suitably than the Virgin Mother herself, to whom the angel first announced it?"*

Philip of Harvengt

♣ *"Thanks be to You, O Lord Jesus Christ, for You deigned to become man for our sake. Through this unspeakable charity, give us a true and perfect love for You; and just as You brought Your Mother, the Rose, a most profound joy, so make us also rejoice profoundly in body and soul."*

St. Herman Joseph

♣ *"Our Lord Jesus Christ is, above all, the religious par excellence, the pure victim, the host of praise offered to God. He came into this world to repair the glory of His Father, to save what was lost; and He gave us an example in order that we may perform with the same spirit the same works as He."*

Mère Marie de la Croix

♣ *"Although the reasons why man is indebted to God are many and great, this one holds a preeminent place among the rest: that God became man for us."*

Adam of Dryburgh



Always Christmas

By the Rt. Rev. Hugh Allen, O. Praem.

C.S. Lewis wrote about the kingdom of Narnia under the rule of the wicked Queen that it was *"always winter and never Christmas."* This is never the case for us. In a Norbertine community, it is always Christmas and never winter. From the foundation of our Order on Christmas Day 900 years ago, the gift of the Incarnate Word made flesh has been at the heart of our lives. It means that throughout the difficulties and problems the Order has faced over many years, there has always been the gift of hope. This is because our hope is not in something, but in Someone, in our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is the truth that gives us the courage to keep going on our journey with the Lord.

It has been a privilege to visit the community at Tehachapi on several occasions and to witness the palpable joy at the heart of the community as it strives to go forward with the Lord. That joy is only possible because of the hope Christ brings.

The great French Catholic writer Georges Bernanos described the real nature of hope as *"despair, overcome."* We can hope because we are loved as sons and daughters by a good God who is truly present with us and deeply

engaged in our lives. That is the message of Bethlehem, of the Incarnation.

All of the great Catholic reformers in history had three essential qualities: personal humility; a passion for purifying the Church starting with themselves; and a fidelity to her teaching, all motivated by unselfish, self-sacrificing love. God calls all of us, not just to renew the face of the earth with his Spirit, but to renew the heart of the Church with our lives; to make her young and beautiful, again and again, so that she shines with His love for the world. The Canonesses of Bethlehem Priory live this truth, and so shine as a beacon of love and hope for all of us.

Let us go to the crib at Bethlehem where we find in Jesus the answer to the temptation to despair and be filled with hope. In a Norbertine community, and especially in Bethlehem Priory, it is always Christmas and never winter.

The Rt. Rev Hugh Allen, O. Praem., is the Prior de Regimine of the Norbertine Priory of Our Lady of Sorrows in Peckham, England.



1) First Profession of Sr. Maria Chiara on the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6th; 2) Mother Mary Augustine's Silver Jubilee also on August 6th, 2024 (Photo from our archives of her First Profession in 1999); 3) First Profession of Sr. Columba Marie on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14th; 4) Following the General Chapter, Mother and Sister visit the cloistered Norbertine Canonesses of Doksan, Czech Republic; 5) Visit from Mother Aurelia, Sr. Adriana, and Sr. Hermana of the Congregation of Norbertine Sisters; 6) Laying sod in our new cemetery; 7) Veiling a nun doll for our gift shop at recreation; 8) New puppies; 9) Holy Mass for All Souls.

A New Path Forward

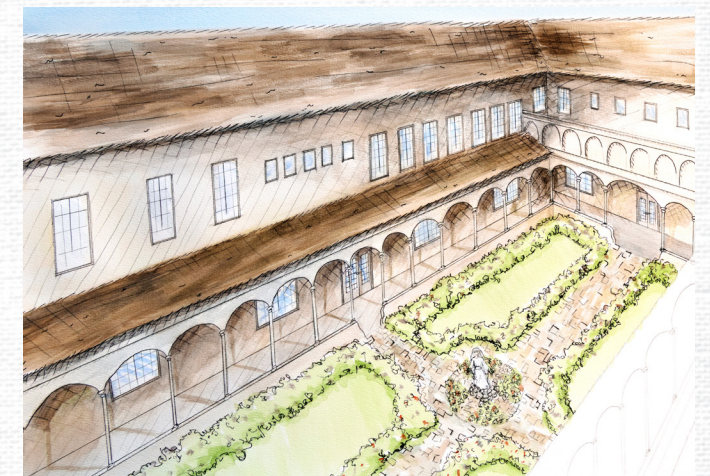
OUR MONASTERY BUILDING PROJECT

After consulting experts in the field, meeting with the bishop of our Diocese, and discussing our community's vision for our way of life, we have been advised and have decided to shift the priority of our building project to the completion of our Monastery living quarters, followed by the construction of our Chapel.

Our decision is based on a number of considerations:

- We are grateful to God for the gift of growing vocations to our Community, which has necessitated the expansion of our housing;
- By beginning with the construction of the Monastery living quarters — the lower cost phase of the project — we will be able to break ground much sooner than anticipated, while we continue to design and prepare for the construction of the Chapel, the pinnacle and crown of our Monastery construction.
- Moreover, adjustment in placement and design, including avoiding steeply sloping areas, will significantly reduce earthwork costs, and gracefully place our Monastery and Chapel on natural terrain.

**With our new path forward, God willing,
we will be able to break ground in 2026.**



Preliminary renderings by the Norbertine Canonesses

WE INVITE YOU TO HELP US

build a place for Divine Worship for generations to come.

THE NORBERTINE CANONESSES
OF THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY OF ST. JOSEPH

17831 Water Canyon Road ♣ Tehachapi, California 93561-7686

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A Special Thank You

To all of our friends who help provide the daily needs and supplies a large community requires. We are deeply grateful for all you do to make our life of prayer possible. God bless you!

✠ DAILY MASS TIMES:
8:00 am

Some Fridays: 5:00 pm

✠ MONASTERY GIFT SHOP HOURS:
Daily: 10-11:30 am, 2:30-4:50 pm
Some Fridays: 2:30-4:10 pm

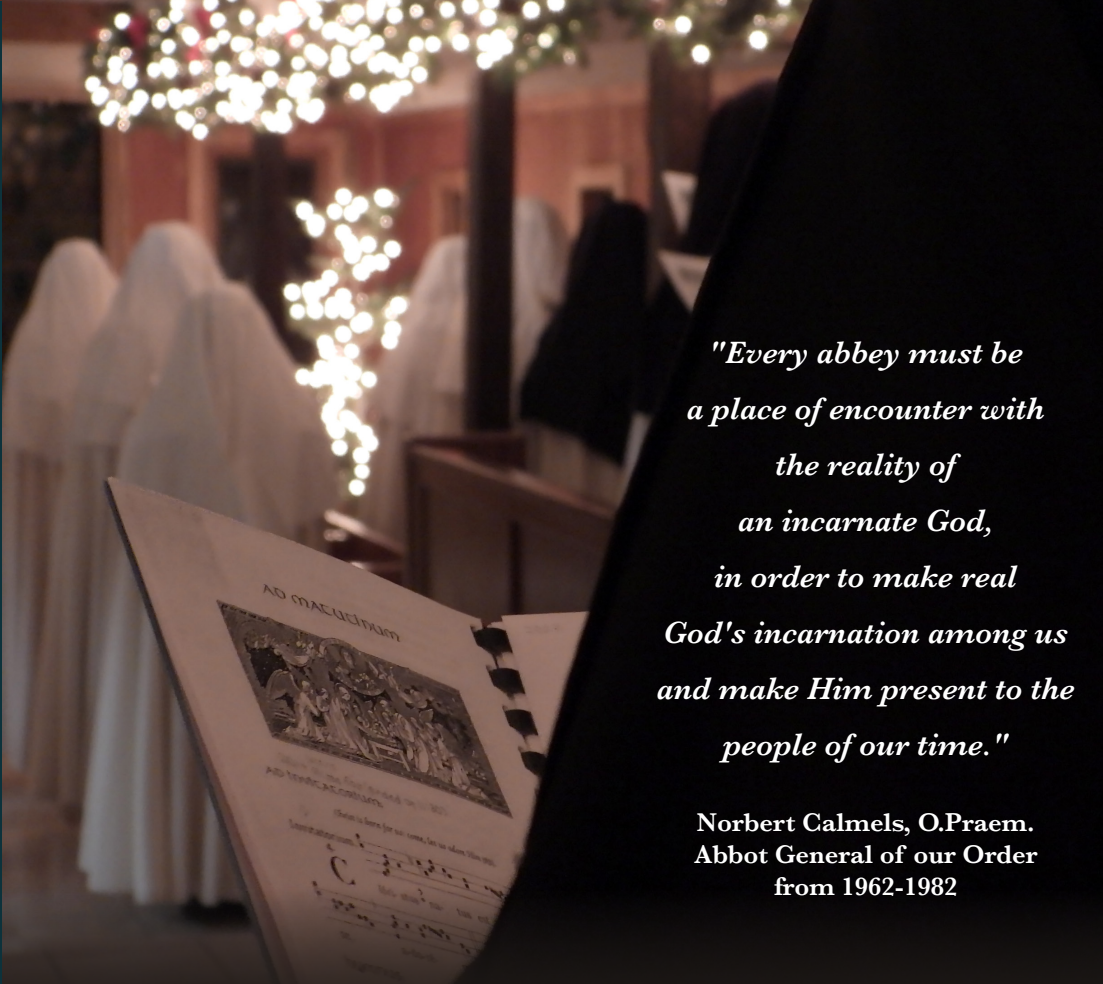
✠ FOR GIFT SHOP PURCHASES:
Please visit:
shop.norbertinecanonesses.org

For Cheese Purchases:
cheese.norbertinecanonesses.org

For Dog Program Information:
bethlehempriorydogs.com

✠ FOR PRAYERS REQUESTS:
Please email us:

Bethlehemprioryofstjoseph@gmail.com



*"Every abbey must be
a place of encounter with
the reality of
an incarnate God,
in order to make real
God's incarnation among us
and make Him present to the
people of our time."*

Norbert Calmels, O.Praem.
Abbot General of our Order
from 1962-1982

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