



# FIRST FRUITS

The Holy Lenten Season, March, 2025 / Issue 64

*"Hail, O Cross, our only hope."*

— From the Liturgy of Holy Week



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

Laudetur Jesus Christus!

*"In you, O Lord, is our hope,  
and we shall never hope in vain."*

In this season of Lent, as we "begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service," setting aside the superfluous so that we might draw closer to God, we embrace in a special way the virtue of hope.

life with Him, we know that if we cling to Him in faith and love, He, and His Blessed Mother with Him, will lead us to the glorious resurrection.

We remember in our prayers particularly all those who have been affected by the California wildfires and other disasters around the country, especially the deceased, their families, and those who have lost their homes. We pray that all may experience the mercy of Christ in a profound way this Lent, and that He grant you all abundant blessings this Easter and throughout this Jubilee Year of Hope.

In Christ,

*Mother Mary Oda, O. Praem.*

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

## *Pilgrims of Hope*

JUBILEE YEAR OF HOPE, 2025

Every twenty-five years, the Holy Father proclaims a Jubilee Year for the Church, in which are offered special indulgences, that is, the complete or partial remission of the temporal punishment due to sins already confessed, gained for oneself or the deceased.

In this Jubilee Year of Hope, the Holy Father has called all Christians to be Pilgrims of Hope to a world in need of this virtue:

*"Setting out on a journey is traditionally associated with our human quest for meaning in life... The storms that buffet us will never prevail, for we are firmly anchored in the hope born of grace, which enables us to live in Christ and to overcome sin, fear and death. This hope inspires us to keep pressing forward, never losing sight of the grandeur of the heavenly goal to which we have been called."*

— Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*

*For more information on the Jubilee Year of Hope, please visit:*

[USCCB.ORG/JUBILEE2025](http://USCCB.ORG/JUBILEE2025)

## *Under His Wings You Will Hope*

THE SEASON OF LENT: SEASON OF HOPE

*"Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil. [The devil] said to Him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written: He will command His angels concerning you, to guard you, and: With their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"*

— Luke 4:1-2, 9-12

Holy Mass for the First Sunday of the Lenten Season, from which this Gospel is taken, commences in earnest our forty day journey with Our Lord. But if the devil misused Psalm 91, "He will command His angels concerning you, to guard you," to tempt Christ to test His Father's protection, Holy Mother Church puts on the lips of her children that same Psalm as a prayer of trust and hope in God's loving providence.

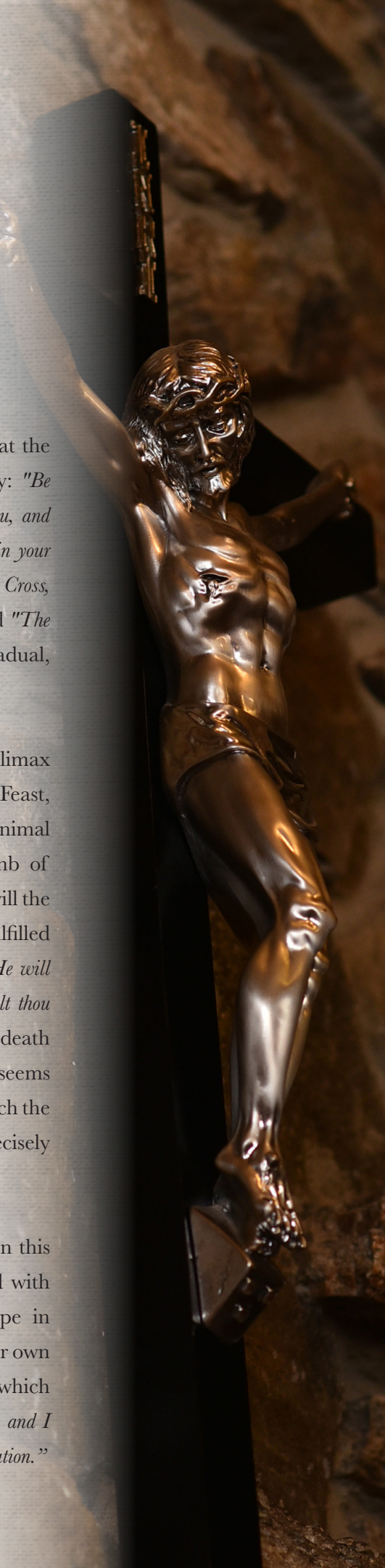
In one of the most beautiful Tracts of the liturgical year, sung immediately before the Gospel quoted above, a piercing cry of hope is placed before God: "He who dwells in the aid of the Most High; shall abide under the protection of the God of heaven. He shall say to the Lord: Thou art my protector; my God, in Him will I trust."

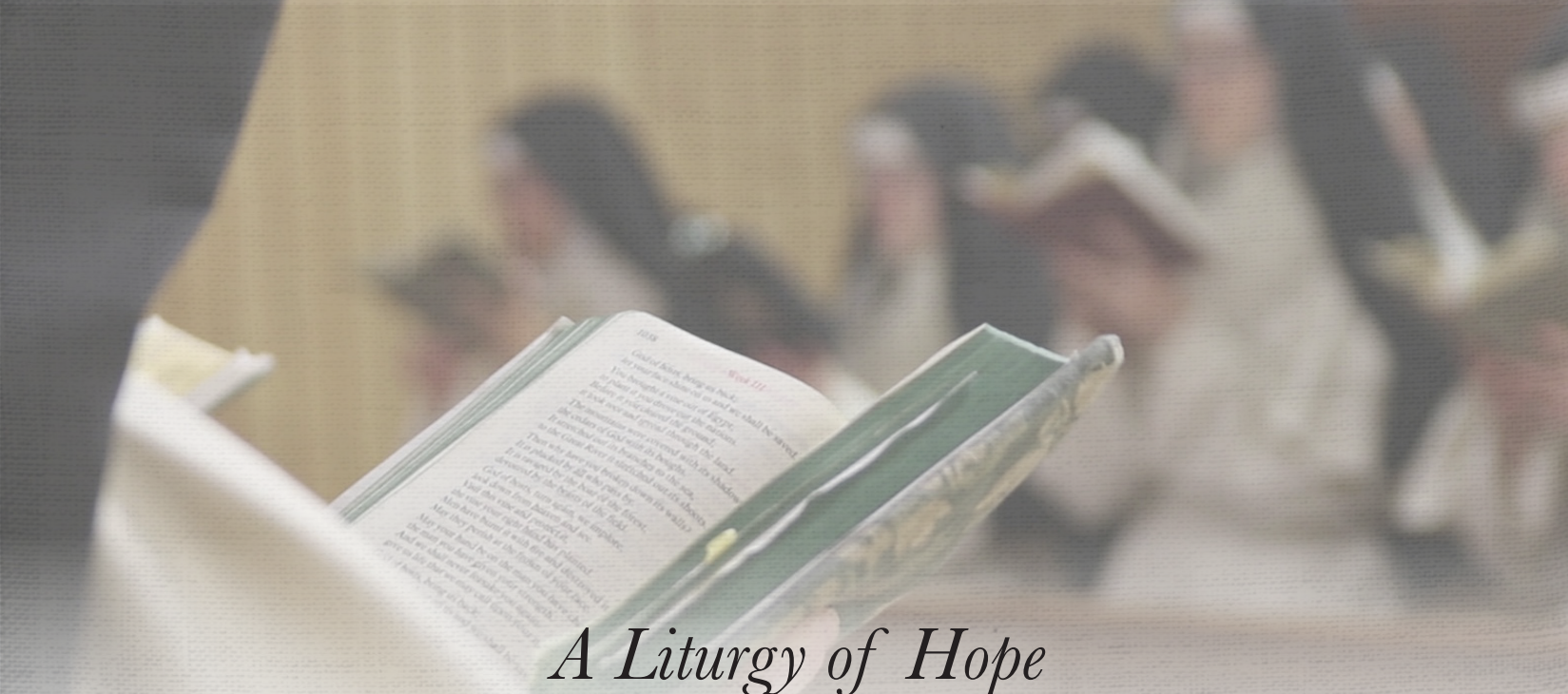
Thus the tone is set for the entirety of Lent: a tone of trust and hope. Like the Israelites who journeyed through the desert for forty days, completely dependent upon God for guidance in order to reach the Promised Land and for their sustenance on the way, the manna; so too the Church of Christ sets forth on her pilgrimage to the true Promised Land, Heaven, relying on the true manna, the Most Holy Eucharist.

The following days of Lent will repeat the same sentiments of this First Sunday: "Be near, O Lord, to those who plead before You, and look kindly on those who place their hope in your mercy" (Collect, Fifth Week), "Hail, O Cross, our only hope" (Hymn, Passiontide), and "The eyes of all hope in Thee, O Lord" (Gradual, Holy Thursday).

A crescendo will build, reaching its climax in the dramatic events of the Paschal Feast, when it is no longer an irrational animal that will be slain, but the very Lamb of God, Jesus Christ Himself. Nowhere will the message of Psalm 91 be so perfectly fulfilled as on the Cross: "With His shoulders He will overshadow thee, and under His wings shalt thou hope." Christ's victory over sin and death comes at the very moment when all seems lost, and the supernatural hope of which the psalmist chants finds its fulfillment precisely amidst the darkness of Calvary.

As we continue the journey of Lent in this Jubilee Year of Hope, let us proceed with trustful surrender and confident hope in God's loving plan, relying not upon our own strength, but upon His promise with which Psalm 91 concludes: "I will deliver him and I will glorify him... I will show him My salvation."





## *A Liturgy of Hope*

By the Most Rev. Jos Wouters, O.Praem.

Hope, together with faith and love, is a divine virtue. This means that these "big three" always go together and cannot be completely separated. The divine virtues make tangible that the soul is connected to and united with its Creator. They show the presence of God in the heart of the soul, in the center of human existence. Because, thanks to Jesus, we believe that God is our dear Father, it is also natural that our relationship with God is characterized by a deep trust, an indestructible hope. Our Creator takes our salvation to heart. He cares for every soul that He creates.

The liturgy makes us aware of the hope that lives in us. It expresses hope. It shows us "paths of hope." How precious is what we read in the rule of our Holy Father Augustine, when he urges us to let the words that we speak also live in our hearts. The essence of the psalms is hope. The deep trust that He listens. What lives in us concerns Him.

Listening and speaking are two fundamental attitudes in liturgical prayer. Listening to the sisters who pray with you has a deep spiritual meaning: praying together is a form of communication, not only because of the beautiful singing together. The praying community builds itself up in hope. The fellow sisters also express their personal hope in the sacred texts, and thus strengthen the hope of their fellow sisters.

However, singing psalms is also listening to Him who inspires scripture. In the sacred words, God whispers hope to us and renews it. He desires to be loved and trusted as our Father. As Saint John writes: We are called children of God, and we are. Therefore, we can not fundamentally despair, since we are fed by an ever-flowing stream of hope.

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*The Most Rev. Jos Wouters, O. Praem., was elected Abbot General of the Norbertine Order at the General Chapter in 2018.*

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Opposite Page, Top: Palms to be blessed on Palm Sunday and carried in procession to the choir, as we enter into the solemn celebration of Our Lord's victory over death through His Cross and Resurrection. Palms, an ancient symbol of victory, are used in the iconography of the martyrs, who were victorious over the evil in this world and won eternal life through the Cross of Christ.

Opposite Page, Bottom: A painting from the church of the Norbertine Canonesses of Imbramowice, Poland, depicting the martyrdom of the Norbertine Canonesses of Witów, Poland.



## *A Better Homeland*

THE VIRGIN-MARTYRS OF THE NORBERTINE ORDER

Trapped in an underground cellar, their monastery above them in flames, Bl. Bronislava calmly told her sisters, "Do not fear anything! The Cross will save us." She struck the stone wall of the cellar with the cross she held in her hand, a passageway opened up, and the Norbertine canonesses of Zwierzyniec fled to safety. It was Palm Sunday in the year 1241. The Tartars were ravaging Poland, and, two months earlier, their sisters at the nearby Norbertine monastery of Witów had also been saved by the Cross, but in a different way. Remaining faithful to Christ their Spouse to the end, the canonesses of Witów had been conformed to His Passion and death through their martyrdom, and received the fulfillment of their hope: the glory of eternal life in Heaven.

"Hope," the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us (n. 1817), "is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in God's promises." The virgin martyrs of Witów, like those of Żukowo before them and others after them, show, with the eloquence of their entire lives, that the kingdom of God, Heaven, is the true and better homeland for which we were created. They knew that the praises they sang in the choir of their monasteries was but a rehearsal for the heavenly liturgy we are all called to sing for eternity.

Our Lord told Bl. Bronislava, "As My Cross has been your Cross, so will My glory be your glory." Whether our share in the Cross is the ultimate sacrifice of our life, the "white martyrdom" of the religious life, or the daily crosses God sends us, may we, like the virgin martyrs, go forward in confident hope, as we await the glorious kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

## THE HOPE OF THE *Martyrs*

"By an illustrious custom, the authority of the Church has rightly maintained for a long time now that the right hands of Christ's virgin martyrs ought to be honorably adorned with well-earned palms — for they conquered this present world by despising it, and in preserving their virginity and chastity, they did not hesitate to hand over their bodies to martyrdom for love of the heavenly kingdom."

Luke of Mount Cornillon  
(Norbertine Canon, d. 1179)



# Events at the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph



1) Building a fence for our livestock, which were moved into the cloister this past year; 2) Assembling cheese gift boxes before Christmas; 3) A conference given by our friend and Norbertine scholar, Dr. Carol Neel; 4) Sisters carry homemade garlands to decorate our choir for Christmas; 5) Christmas Midnight Mass; 6) Singing Christmas carols at recreation; 7) First Profession of Sr. Mary Godfrey on January 11th, Epiphanytide; 8) First Profession of Sr. Mary Jacinta on January 25th, Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul; 9) Newborn lambs being watched over by our Anatolian shepherd dog puppies in-training



## Moving Forward OUR MONASTERY BUILDING PROJECT

IT IS A JOY TO SHARE WITH YOU SOME CONSTRUCTION UPDATES:

- **On December 12th, 2024**, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we received a letter from the Kern County Planning Department approving our initial site plan for the living quarters portion of our Monastery Building Project.
- **On March 19th, 2025**, the Solemnity of St. Joseph, we engaged the local Catholic architect Paul Dhanens for the next step in our monastery expansion: the much-needed additional monastery living spaces. We look forward to sharing the designs in the future.

We have been very blessed, and are deeply grateful to our dear benefactors who have helped to cover our preliminary expenses for this phase of our project, and who continue to support us in this endeavor. These donations will also greatly aid us to continue developing our plans for a future Chapel that is truly fitting for the glory and praise of our God in the Sacred Liturgy, the heart of our life as Norbertine Canonesses. It is our great hope that, God willing, the construction of the Chapel will follow soon after the completion of the living quarters.



With young women planning to enter as postulants this year, and many more in various stages of the discernment process, your donations are greatly appreciated. In keeping with the tradition of our Norbertine Order, we strive to do our part to be self-sustaining and to support ourselves by means of our work. Unfortunately these efforts are not enough to fully support our life, and your generous donations are truly essential for us to continue accepting vocations and live out our religious life as cloistered Norbertine Canonesses consecrated to God, dedicated to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Liturgy of Holy Mother Church, and a life of prayer and sacrifice.

*May God bless you and reward you for your generosity and sacrifices!*

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 attend Holy Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours at our Priory. As Norbertine Canonesses, our vocation is centered on the solemn and public celebration of the Liturgy. It is therefore a special joy for us to celebrate the Liturgy in union with the faithful who join us from our lay chapel.

✦ 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](http://shop.norbertinecanonesses.org)

For Cheese Purchases:

[cheese.norbertinecanonesses.org](http://cheese.norbertinecanonesses.org)


For Dog Program Information:

[bethlempriorydogs.com](http://bethlempriorydogs.com)

✦ FOR PRAYERS REQUESTS:

Please email us:

[Bethlemprioryofstjoseph@gmail.com](mailto:Bethlemprioryofstjoseph@gmail.com)



"HOPE IS LIKE A DAY,  
AND A VERY  
BRIGHT ONE INDEED:

*when it begins to dawn in us  
we see spiritually what we  
cannot see with bodily sight."*

Adam of Dryburgh  
(Norbertine Abbot, d. 1212)

On the Cover: *The Adoration of the Trinity*, by Albrecht Dürer

[NORBERTINESISTERS.ORG](http://NORBERTINESISTERS.ORG)