

CHRISTMAS LETTER 2016

GREETINGS

to all Prelates, Confreres, Sisters,
Co-workers and all Tertiaries
and Associates connected to our houses.
With these few words I wish to address
all the confreres and sisters,
and all those who live with us
and with whom we have contact
through our work and mission.



Spider miracle of St. Norbert, glass-window in the Monastery-Church of Rolduc, Belgium

2018 GENERAL CHAPTER

The Secretariate of the 2018 General Chapter, which is under the direction of Abbot Denis Hendrickx of Berne/Heeswijk, has begun its work, and preparations for this most important event in our Order are well underway. The chapter to be held from 22 July – 4 August 2018 at Rolduc/Kerkrade/South Limburg (The Netherlands) will focus on two major issues, the election of the Abbot General, and the presentation of our new Constitutions. Invitations will commence in July, 2017. Each house will be represented by the prelate and one other member delegated by the Canonry. Canonries with dependent houses having at least eight (solemnly professed) members and their own identity¹, should notify the Definitory as soon as possible in order to nominate a deputy. A quasi-canonry has the right to send the superior and one deputy.² The Secretariate requests that the names of all General Chapter participants be submitted by the end of 2017 (31 December). Every house and each member has the right to make submissions and contribute suggestions and topics which need to be submitted to the Definitory (*DefOrd I / 18*) by March, 2018 at the latest. The Definitory will decide which material shall be included. By the end of 2017 (31 December) we will expect, in English, all the reports of the Order's Commissions, as well as the International meetings of the Order; these will then be sent to the houses as the first package of "MATERIA CG

¹ See *Constitutions* Nr. 187,2 "physonomia propria".

² *Constitutions* Nr. 187,1,d

2018”, both as a text-booklet and in an e-mail version. The draft for the revised Constitutions will also be available in this form from (northern) Spring 2018 onwards. The General Chapter has as its motto “*NATIVITAS CHRISTI - NATIVITAS ORDINIS* – onwards to 900 years of the Order of Prémontré’s Presence and Canonical Service in the Church”.

NATIVITAS ORDINIS

895 years ago, on Christmas Day 1121, St. Norbert and his companions made their vows on the altar at Prémontré. This was the birth of our Order. Every year at Christmas we commemorate this origin of our Order. And in a few years time we will celebrate the great religious anniversary of the 900-year history of Prémontré. The birth of the Lord coincides with the birth of our Order. This means for us a great closeness to, and intimacy with, the Incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation, becoming flesh and human, is the fundamental mission and message for us as Premonstratensians. This moves in a two-fold direction: first of all, that we strive to become human beings and becoming human as religious people, as priests, as servants of the Lord; but also that we strive to do everything possible to help others become human beings, to promote and support their growth and development as human beings, to help them do everything they can to combat injustice and structures of injustice where people are oppressed, disabled or restricted in their development.

After my second trip to India this year, I have a better understanding of the concept of Indian pastoral care: where there is a church, there is also a school where confreres live together, and there are also social projects for people in the neighbourhood; there is provision for both pastoral care and health care, which is often offered in collaboration with communities of religious sisters. This care is seen and understood as a unity. Just as there are places in every church, which are often festively decorated, where the Sacred Book, the “living Word of God” and the Sacrament of the Altar, the “Living Bread”, are preserved, so there are places of educational instruction and upbringing that complement one another; schools and other places that offer concrete assistance to the poor and needy, such as, for example, social centres. Incarnation is a comprehensive task, it includes formation of the spirit as well as the heart, it means physical exertion and the acquisition of social competences. This also includes services for people who are ill or handicapped, aged or who have special needs. As Premonstratensians, we are not restricted to work that is one-sided, but we might describe this in the all-embracing words from the first encyclical of Pope John Paul II: “The way of the Church is man” or as it was formulated in the nineteenth century as an epitome of the Order : “*ad omne opus bonum parati*”³, “prepared for every good work”, that helps people - us and others - become human and be human.

Our communities can, and should be, places where people can develop and mature, where confreres are mutually encouraged and challenged to strive together to become fully and to become a saint along the way. It is painful when confreres leave our communities because they see no prospect of maturing and developing, because they experience too little attention and support, understanding and help. In this sense, we are not “*monachi*” (monks, from “*μόνος*” - single), we are not individualists or individual fighters, but in the Augustinian sense we are all together “*Μόνος*”, a

³ In : *Cour d'Honneur de Marie*, 13^e année (December 1876) n. 156, p. 293 : «*ad omne bonum opus parati*».

unity, one as a community of people striving for perfection in God ("*in Deum*"). When Augustine writes that we should follow the Church's original ideal by being of "one heart and one soul" on the way to God, then we need to understand this against an incarnational, Christmas background. If there is a lack of humanity, our communities become counterproductive, where there is no '*humanitas*', then our Christianity, our '*christianitas*', will not be convincing. At this point, after this special "Year of Mercy", we should again speak of mercy and compassion.

We are still looking for a catchy LOGO and an appealing motto for our own Jubilee Year. Each confrere may participate and submit proposals to the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee (Abbot General). An award will be given to the best idea.

In regard to the exhibitions planned at the three houses of Strahov, Magdeburg and Park, we will need the assistance of our Canonries as far as art treasures, pictures and testimonials of our religious history are concerned. Each house should already start considering what it would like to contribute to the Jubilee Year in the way of exhibits and works of art. The more we contribute ourselves, the easier we will be able to finance such an exhibition.

GENERALATE HOUSE

If you recently visited the Generalate and entered the chapel there, you will have experienced a completely new space and you would have been impressed by the expanse, brightness, openness and light of this House of God. As a result of a thorough restoration, not only are one's eyes drawn to the brightly gleaming marble floor, but one's vision moves unhindered to the altar, which is raised on two steps, below which is the reliquary shrine containing the relics of Blessed Hugh of Fosses. The altar is of travertine marble; the front is adorned with the above-mentioned motto "*ad omne bonum opus parati*". The original altarpiece portraying Saint Norbert and Blessed Hugh before the Cross still needs to be replaced. Many houses made contributions so that this much-needed long-term renovation could be accomplished. We express our deepest thanks to all donors. New heating, ventilation, and a completely new lighting system were installed at the same time. The organ was placed in the middle of the choir, and the choir stalls themselves were moved back against the wall. A wide, bright space can only help to expand our hearts and minds, so as to guide us towards the One who has called us "to be in your presence and minister to you".⁴ We can assume that Blessed Hugh made his profession, together with Norbert and the other companions, at Christmas. Therefore, this same Blessed Hugh, who has found a worthy place in the chapel of our Generalate, can bring us closer to the Christmas mystery. For Hugh, the answer to the Lord's Incarnation was his devotion and dedication to his life at Prémontré. This can also help deepen our own response and strengthen the life we have dedicated to God and to our particular community.

⁴ See Second Eucharistic Prayer (English Missal).



Christmas in the Generalate: the new altar in the restored church with the relics from Blessed Hugo, first abbot general of the Order.

CHRISTMAS 2016

Pope Francis has repeatedly asked religious to go out to the people, to be there for them, to bring them closer to Christ, to the Face-of-God-become-man, who draws near to us in love and mercy, and who wants us “to have life and to have it to the full” (Jn 10:10). At Christmas we celebrate God’s bursting forth to the world, this descent of God towards us humans, this KENOSIS of God, who did not cling to being “like God, but he emptied himself and became like a slave and equal to man” (Phil 2:6-7). The God who is infinitely distant comes very close to us, the God who surpasses all our conceptions makes himself known to us. He who is above-all sublime makes himself small and reveals himself as a human child. Christmas revolutionizes our image of God: the Unspeakable has a name, the Inaccessible has become a face, the Incomprehensible becomes a person, he becomes human like us. And while we can only keep silent and say nothing, he turns to us and speaks to us.

In this spirit, I wish to send you all my warmest Christmas greetings and wishes for a joyous, blessed festival in all our communities, that we may open our hearts to the crib, so that, like the shepherds and sages we may gratefully sink to our knees and contemplate this mystery of God’s love and being near to us; may we be moved by God’s tender affection for us in this human child Jesus.

PRAYER

This prayer originated while thinking forward to the 2021 Jubilee, and I recommend it to all:

God our Father,
in your eternal wisdom and unending mercy
you called Saint Norbert to be a co-operator
in reforming the Church of his time.

Inspired by the example of the first Christians,
he desired to follow the Lord in the footsteps of the Apostles
by living a life in community
and by preaching and announcing the Good News.

In 1121, Saint Norbert chose Prémontré
to be the first centre of a renewed canonical life,
and the white habit as a sign of the Resurrection.

We gratefully celebrate this 900-year Jubilee
of our presence and of our humble service in the Church.

With zeal and generous hearts,
let us build centres of your love in this world.

Let the love of your Holy Spirit pour into our communities
so that, overflowing with charity, they may embrace all men.

We ask this through Christ, our Lord.
Amen

+ Thomas Handgrätinger *OPRAEM*
Abbot General



Meeting of the General Superiors with Pope Francis, November 25, 2016