

ADVENT-CHRISTMAS 2020

OPENING OF THE CELEBRATION OF THE 900-YEARS JUBILEE

A jubilee is the commemoration of an event that took place a round number of years ago. The profession of Saint Norbert and his first followers on Christmas Day of 1121 is the beginning of a history that has continued for nine centuries. In line with the motto of our General Chapter of 2018 (*Nativitas Christi, nativitas Ordinis*) we can say that the day the Word was born among us was also the day that our Order became an institutionalized reality. Both *vitae* of Saint Norbert relate that event on Christmas Day when the first Premonstratensians made profession on the Rule of Saint Augustine.

The *vitae* recall the discussions within the community about the way of life they were to follow. “Some of those who followed Norbert believed that what they heard from him was sufficient for salvation and therefore they needed neither a rule nor structure of life.” But Saint Norbert knew, probably from experience, “that without a structure of life and without a rule and without the instructions of the Fathers, the apostolic and evangelical precepts could not be completely observed.” The *vitae* recall the different options that were available to provide structure to the life of Saint Norbert’s followers. Would they take up the way of life of the Cistercians, or form a colony of hermits? About Saint Norbert is said: “He pondered these many things in his heart but finally, lest he seem to betray the canonical profession to which he and those who wished to live with him had been dedicated since their youth, Norbert ordered that the Rule be accepted which the blessed Augustine had established for his followers.” Norbert unambiguously chose his followers to be Canons Regular, thus renewing and radicalizing an already existing way of life. The choice of the Rule of Saint Augustine is furthermore justified since Norbert believed that this Rule ordered and renewed the apostolic way of life, meaning that life which Christ himself had led with his apostles, which was continued in the primitive Church. Of importance is the concluding sentence: “He (Norbert) now hoped to live the apostolic life he had undertaken by his preaching.”

The choice of Saint Norbert and his followers to renew their canonical profession draws from the same inspiration as our motto for this Jubilee: “**With God among the people**”. I still remember the meeting at which we decided upon this motto. The original version was in fact in German: “**Mit Gott bei den Menschen**”. The English motto does not render completely the

intimacy and the nearness expressed by the German preposition “*bei*”. It could be tempting to read the motto as referring to the “*vita mixta*”, where both contemplation and action takes place. This reading would not be entirely wrong either, but would introduce a dualism or even an opposition between two ways of living. When we are with the people, we are with God at the same time. We can search and find Him anywhere. The fullness of pastoral activity would be to find God with the people as the “God with us”, the Emmanuel. From this intuition we can give meaning to the fact that the first profession of Premonstratensians was made on Christmas Day.

In the *vitae* Christmas Day appears as the date on which the followers of Saint Norbert made profession in a rather laconic sentence: “By the profession of this rule then, on Christmas Day at Prémontré, one by one his followers voluntarily enrolled themselves into that city of blessed eternity.” The celebration of Jesus’ birth almost disappears under the story about the discussions about the Rule and its interpretation. It is only later on that the special significance of Christmas as the day of the first professions at Prémontré is highlighted. In many abbeys we find paintings featuring the crib with the newborn Jesus in the center. Saint Norbert and his companions contemplate the nativity scene. Around the crib are heaped the symbols of their worldly dignity, their crowns, blazons and scepters. A beautiful example of such a painting by Antonin Stevens is reproduced on the invitation to the opening of the Jubilee on November 28 in Strahov. The humility of God and his overwhelming love invites us to disarm and to become human like him, poor and simple, in such a way that we too can really be “among the people”. This exegesis of our profession is a further development of the devotion of the first Premonstratensians who considered the life of Jesus with his apostles as a model of their own life in community and beyond as preachers and pastors. They regarded a life of simplicity as the foundation of effective pastoral action. This model of disarming simplicity is shown nowhere more eloquently than in the nativity scene.

The term “Jubilee” has profound biblical roots. In chapter 25 of Leviticus the Jubilee-year is described as a year of reparation and restoration, a period during which God’s people remember the graces bestowed upon them. May this celebration help us to discover afresh the roots of our common vocation.

God our Father,
in your eternal wisdom and unending mercy

you called Saint Norbert to cooperate
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,
living a life in community
and announcing the Good News to the people.

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

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

Let us build centers of your love in this world
with zeal and generous hearts.

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

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen

(Prayer from the Christmas Letter 2016 of Abbot General Thomas Handgrätinger)

Blessed Jubilee and Merry Christmas,

Yours,

Jos Wouters o.praem., abbot general