

Christmas Letter 2017

I All Saints

I stayed for almost three weeks at some of our American houses: St. Norbert Abbey at De Pere, WI, USA, then at the dependent Priory Moses the Black, Raymond, MS, and also at the Holy Spirit House of Studies, Chicago, IL.

It was around the time of All Saints Day, both of the Church (1 Nov.) and of our Order (13 Nov.). For me it was a special experience to see how the confreres celebrated these feasts. The refectory in the abbey was decorated with 18 statues of the blessed and saints of our Order, all recently carved from linden wood by a Bavarian wood-carver, Joseph Albi from Oberammergau. On that day, each statue was illuminated by a lighted candle; in the church, too, there were two new larger statues of St. Augustine and St. Norbert by the same artist, and these were placed beside the abbatial throne at the front of the church. In this way, the saints are present in the daily life of the confreres, and they were specially celebrated on the feast of All Saints of the Order.

The Morning Prayer for that feast started with a short reading about all our saints: “St. Norbert, reformer of the canonical order, gave to his Order the apostolic way as the norm of life. This he also lived, stimulated by a courageous faith, true penance, voluntary poverty, zealous preaching of conversion, vigilant care of the poor, and finally becoming all things to all people ... Today the Order honors all of those, named or unnamed men and women, who have zealously followed Norbert’s life and example”¹ There was also the prayer: “Eternal and merciful God, we remember the lives of all saints of the Order and we are grateful for their example of love and service. Refresh us on our journey to holiness, and guided by the holy gospel and the rule of St. Augustine, may we be filled with your Spirit until that day when, together with all peoples, we shall feast on your holy mountain.”

On the vigil of this feast all the Norbertine Associates were invited for Vespers, a social and a nice dinner, around 150 people in all.

The following day (November 14) there was the feast of Saint Siard of our Order, a Dutch abbot from the thirteenth century. He entered in Mariëngaard, probably under abbot St. Frederic, and later became the fifth abbot of Mariëngaard. He died in 1230 and was buried in the abbey church of Mariëngaard. This abbey was totally destroyed by the Geuzen in 1578; it was also the end of Norbertine life in Friesland. During this turbulent time of the Reformation, Siardus van Hensema, a zealous nobleman, brought the relics to Hildesheim in Germany with the consent of Pope Clement VIII. The veneration of Saint Siard was also supported by a letter from the archbishop of Cologne. On July 5, 1617, the relics were transferred to Belgium and arrived on July 6 in the abbey of Tongerlo. For 400 years the relics of Saint Siard have been very highly venerated and appreciated by numerous pilgrims and believers. Other parts of his

¹ Martyrology and Necrology St. Norbert Abbey De Pere, Oct - Dec.

body are in Windberg and in Leffe abbey. In his homily for this jubilee, on November 12, 2017, in Tongerlo, the preacher Subprior Fr. Gabriel said: “Saints always refer us to God himself; with their hands they were praying, acting, guiding, with their feet they were seeking God, they sometimes themselves made pilgrimages to the tombs of saints; for this their relics are precious. The bodies of the saints are temples of God – you cannot remove or abolish them.”²

This year we needed to commemorate another jubilee: it was 150 years ago on June 29, 1867, that Pope Pius IX canonized the martyrs from Gorcum. Among these nineteen martyrs, both priests and religious, who were murdered on July 9, 1572, were two confreres: Adrian Jansen (1529-1572) from Hilvarenbeek (“*Becanus*”) and James Lacoupe (1542-1572) from Oudenaarde, who were members of the abbey of Middelburg. The beatification took place under Pope Clemens X on November 24, 1675. After bad treatment, cruel tortures and innumerable blows by the Calvinist rebels, all the victims were hanged.



In the Vatican museum, before you enter the Sistine chapel, you can find a big picture by the painter Cesare Fracassini (1838-1868), which shows the scene of the execution.

These martyrs were steadfast in the Catholic faith, loyal in their love for the Church and devoted to the sacramental presence in the Eucharist.

Here we also remember the 800-year jubilee of the Blessed Hroznata, founder of the abbey of Teplá and Chotesov, who died of hunger and starvation in 1217 after being kidnapped and spending a cruel time in prison, and who is memorized in our Bohemian abbey of Teplá this year; we might state together with Walter Nigg, a Protestant theologian and hagiographer, who had once written: “If you are speaking about saints, you are not speaking

about the dead. They live. They are on the way with us and they act in our being.”³ Our saints and blessed confreres and sisters can be for us like luminous figures, who in their time have given a valid response and a convincing expression to the Lord’s call. Their striving and living is an encouraging invitation for us today to give a serious response to our vocation.

² Subprior Gabriel Goossens, homily on the feast of Saint Siard. Tongerlo 12.11.2017, Manuscript.

³ Uwe Wolf, Walter Nigg, Ein Vater der Ökumene in apokalyptischer Zeit. in: Geist und Leben, 3/2017, p. 240.

II Jubilee 2021

In our Order's history all our saints are hallmarks and fruits of a spiritual life as Canons and Canonesses. In few years, in 2021, the Order of Prémontré will celebrate its 900-Year-Jubilee. The preparation for this jubilee has started; the first proposals and plans have been communicated. In this jubilee we will not merely celebrate our great history, with all its highlights and merits, with all its great personalities and founding-figures, but we also need to ask, 'where do we stand now, what is our role in the Church and the world of today, and what will be our mission in the future? What would we be missing, were our Order to exist no longer? What can we contribute to the Church and to the world in the next centuries?'

Jubilees always have two sides, the aspect of memory, a retrospective reflection, a view to the past, what our Founder initiated and how he answered the signs of his time; how was his ideal and vision followed and developed in his current time according to his historical situation and challenges; how did our ancestors and forebears, abbots and confreres, brothers and sisters, react in times of persecution, upheaval and radical fluctuation, in times of growth and in times of decline? Our history was not always splendid, there are dark pages and great aberrations, failures and darkening of the vocation and mission, both by houses as well as by individuals; but there were also new reforms⁴ and awakenings, new beginnings and uprisings. Innumerable stories of brothers and sisters, who lived in trust and confidence, with great dedication and devotion, who strove for sanctity and justice in their time and in their circumstances, have never come to light, but, and this is our hope, were completed in God.

And there is the second aspect, the view to the future. A jubilee is not a place for nostalgia; rather, it is a critical view of everything that happened in the past.⁵ But we should open our eyes to the future and we should ask ourselves, what will we contribute to the future, to our Church and to our world? Norbert, our Founder, can help us. He had a clear vision to be part of the reformation of the Church in his time, to be concentrated on strong community life, to be able and prepared to bring the Good News to the people. The stronger the missionary impulse to go out to proclaim the Gospel, the stronger has to be the embodiment and integration within the community, in the spiritual roots of our Order.

What is the mission of your community? - was the question in a visitation report. 'Prémontré and Magdeburg' stand for **concentration and mission**; for concentration: for a radical and ascetic striving to build a dense 'lebensraum' in the Augustinian sense of one heart and one mind, centered in God and in the Word of God; but also for mission: to be part of the Lord's directive to go to the ends of the world to proclaim God's message. 'Prémontré and Magdeburg', the two main places of Norbert's activities and life, stand for **stability and ministry**; "*stabilitas*" as centration on community, prayer and internal ministry; and from there comes the élan for different kinds of external ministries according to the needs around us. 'Prémontré and Magdeburg' means a fundamental tension and tenseness, to bring both together,

⁴ f. e. the "Reform of Lorraine", conf. Bernard Ardura, Premostatensi. Nove secoli di storia e spiritualità di un grande Ordine Religioso. Bologna, 198, Cap. 4: "Il periodo delle riforme i secoli XVI e XVII". p. 171-262.

⁵ conf. Johannes Bunnenberg, Das Evangelium verkünden - seit 1216. 800 Jahre Dominikanerorden. in: Geist und Leben 3/2017, S. 260-264.

to integrate both as community and as individuals in a fruitful way without one-sidedness or neglecting one part.

We are asked to celebrate this jubilee as a present-day, contemporary Order. Every morning in the invitatory psalm we hear: “today when you hear his voice” (Ps 95). We are living and striving today, in these days, in our time. Each of us is requested to create and live a “culture of authenticity”⁶. This does not mean an “unhindered self-reference”. Moreover, whatever we want to see as our ideal and vision, must be appropriated for us in a “personal resonance” and in a communitarian reflection as well. Our Order has great resources of values, ideas, ideals and energy to set this in praxis. Our confreres are working in the foremost front line in parishes, schools, social centers and educational institutes and many other ministries; our sisters, especially our contemplative sisters, support this engagement with their tireless prayer, intercession and self-dedication. Our associates participate in our charisma and they live out our spirituality in their own way as laypeople and in their own environment. These can be seen as concentric circles radiating out from our houses, getting larger through reciprocal giving and taking, through challenging and fructifying one another.

The jubilee is also an occasion to present ourselves as a presence for today, by the way we reflect and live, both in the Church and the world, as living cells of canonical life, as biotopes of authentic striving for peace, justice and reconciliation, as centers of confreres and sisters with compassion for God, compassion for the confreres and sisters, compassion for the people.

III Christmas 2017

One of the most impressive pictures in our Order’s tradition is to see Saint Norbert and Saint Augustine and many Norbertine saints standing around the crib, together with Mary and Joseph and the little Child.

We can find this famous picture in the chapter-room at Averbode, and in the prelatore of Wilten. This picture captures the moment the saints of the Order are concentrated around Jesus like the shepherds in the stable of Bethlehem, meditating, marveling, adoring. Our Order started on Christmas Day, 1121, with the profession of Saint Norbert and his followers at Prémontré. In four years’ time we will celebrate our beginning at Prémontré on Christmas Day, December 25, 1121, and we remember our founders and institutors, our ancestors and holy confreres and sisters as well, who have lived



⁶ conf. „Authentizität“ bei Charles Taylor, Ein säkulares Zeitalter. Frankfurt a. M. 2009.

this mystery of incarnation through their own dedication and devotion. Our saints have lived in the nearness, and from out of this nearness, to the Lord.

Our contemplative sisters have meditated on the face of the Lord, full of desire and love. God comes to us, God is near to us, nearer than our own heart beat. This gives us the possibility to come nearer to him. His incarnation, to become a child, frees the way to approach him man to man, heart to heart, on our own eye-level. God becomes small and helpless like a child, so that we can lay down all our fears, pride and prepossessions. Our saints are with the Lord, they live in the Lord, they are forever in his peace, love and majesty. We are on the way, we are following his star, his promise, his call and invitation.

Come, let us wake up, let us get up, let us go together, together like the shepherds, to Bethlehem, to find him, this child, our God, our last destination, to adore him, to see his face, to meditate on his infinite love for us, incarnated in this child:

VENITE ADOREMUS, VENITE ADOREMUS, VENITE ADOREMUS

To all confreres, to all sisters in our Order, to all Associates around our houses, to all our cooperators and friends, relatives and benefactors, I wish to express my best wishes for a peaceful, blessed Christmas feast: Happy Christmas, and His peace, blessing and love for the coming New Year 2018.

+ Thomas Handgrättinger *OPRAEM*
Abbot General