Following in the Footsteps of St. Norbert of Xanten
—Third Order Norbertines—

By Anne Tschanz

In the Constitutions for the Lay Order of Prémontré, under the canonry of St. Michael’s Abbey in Silverado, CA, it states that as the spiritual arm of the Norbertine community, its members are to “seek intimate communion with God before all else and then communion with their neighbor.” These are their chief commandments, and this charism of “communio” is meant to be brought to the world in which they live and work. Pope St. John Paul II told the Norbertines that there will always be the demand “to imitate, in the spirit of your founder, the example of the early Church, by living and promoting the ideal of cor unum et anima una (‘All the believers were one in heart and mind,’ cf. Acts 4:32).”

For Saint Norbert, this charge was given to the whole Christian world—men and women, lay and religious. The First Order (priests/canons), Second Order (canonesses) and Third Order (lay and regulars, i.e., sisters) are members of a single religious family, all inspired by Saint Norbert, each in their own way according to their calling, striving for a single apostolic ideal: to show forth communio, which is the Church; to be a light to a world in darkness; and to have one mind and heart on the way to God. This is the Norbertine life, all set within the context of the core of their life—the Sacred Liturgy.

St. Norbert of Xanten was a man who was familiar with the ways of the world. He was born into a noble family in Germany around the year 1080. A gifted student and eloquent speaker, he caught the eye of the Archbishop of Cologne and eventually became chaplain to the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry V. His early biographers said that he enjoyed “the affluence and the conveniences of temporal life to his heart’s desire, living in no fear of God.”

Two events jarred him out of his complacency. First, he witnessed Henry’s mistreatment of Pope Paschal II over the practice of lay investiture, that is the appointment of bishops and abbots by lay rulers. The other momentous event happened in 1115 when Norbert was thrown from his horse by a lightning bolt. A voice rebuked him, and he asked: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” He heard a voice say: “Turn from evil and do good, seek peace and find it” (Ps 34:15). Norbert became a chastened man, intending to do good deeds and atone for his past life. After his ordination, he tried to restore the apostolic spirit amongst the secular canons. He divested himself of his wealth and offices, gave his money to the poor and received permission from the Holy Father to preach “anywhere.” Norbert called people to conversion and restored peace where there was conflict, becoming known as a reconciler of peoples.

But he was also urged to plant roots by establishing a monastery. On Christmas Day in 1121, Norbert and his companions made their profession under the Rule of St. Augustine in the secluded French valley of Prémontré, living an intense common life according to the vita apostolica, that is, in imitation of Christ and His first disciples. He
Norbert was eventually made Archbishop of Magdeburg where he died in 1134.

Norbert was noteworthy for including women (canonesses) in his apostolic mission of uniting the life of canons (priests) with the observances of monastic life. The first woman accepted into the order, by tradition, was the widow, Ricvera of Clastres (d. 1136), who worked in a hospital established by Norbert along with care for the poor.

For the Norbertines, celebrating the Holy Eucharist is their most important duty. Canonesses and canons continue this participation in the liturgy by chanting the Liturgy of the Hours throughout the day. “When the liturgy is celebrated medio populi (amid the people),” said the Norbertine Sisters of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph, “it allows Norbertines to achieve more fully the goal of Saint Norbert who, inspired by the first Jerusalem community, wished to break bread together and pray in common, to live in community and have all things in common, and to grow in one heart and mind on the way to God.”

One man who rushed to meet the charismatic Norbert was Theobald, Count of Champagne and Blois, a grandson of William the Conqueror. He had inherited vast estates and property, but this only “rendered him more humble and more charitable.” Theobald was known as “the father of the orphan, the defender of widows, the feeder of the hungry and the refuge of lepers,” and for building churches and monasteries. In his desire to serve God, he was willing to entrust to Norbert his life and his immense wealth. Norbert spent some days considering this offer, then told Theobald: “You will bear the yoke of the Lord as you have done till this day, and you will add to it that of wedlock. May God preserve us from opposing the designs of Providence in your behalf.”

Norbert drew up a rule of life for Theobald that was sufficiently austere for a layman and invested him with a little woolen white scapular in 1123. (The Norbertines wear white for by tradition it is the habit that was shown to them by the Blessed Virgin.)

Theobald asked for one thing in return—that Norbert would select the right wife for him! The rest of his life was spent in distributing alms and caring for the people in his realm, under the spiritual direction of the Norbertines. He died in 1151, with Norbert’s confreres by his side, and his name is inscribed in the Necrology of the Order.

Over the centuries, the Third Order became less visible but then revived, culminating in Pope Benedict XIV’s approval of a new Rule in 1751, with some mitigations more suited to the times (or as one biographer said—the weaknesses of the age) while preserving the spirit of mortification and self-denial. The purpose was still to imitate “the holy virtues of our holy Father Norbert.”

At their peak, the Norbertines numbered 10,000 confreres. After the destruction of the abbeys caused by the Protestant Revolt and the French Revolution, only a small remnant survived in Europe. In the late 19th century, the first Norbertine abbey in the New World was established in DePere, Wisconsin. In 1950, as the Communists moved in to seize their property, seven Norbertine priests from an abbey in Hungary fled to Austria and eventually settled in Orange County, California, where they established St. Michael’s Abbey.

From this little, faithful shoot, great branches have formed on the Norbertine family tree. St. Michael’s Abbey has grown to over 60 professed Norbertines and ground on a new abbey was broken this year. From this thriving community, there also arose in 1991 a Norbertine Third Order of lay people, who were drawn to the abbey by the beauty there were almost 50 abbeys in the British Isles alone), so did the enrollments of lay people into the registers. They were obligated to recite certain prayers throughout the day, fast over and above those days already prescribed by the Church (for example, in Advent and on Fridays), and receive Holy Communion and go to Confession at least seven times a year.

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and the reverence of the Abbey’s liturgical life. In 1995, several women of this group discerned a calling to religious life which resulted in the foundation of a community of Norbertine canoinesse in 1997—the first in the United States. The Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph in Tehachapi, California, now has 43 women and is the contemplative arm of the Norbertine family. There are also active Norbertine sisters (properly speaking Third Order Regulars) who came to America from Slovakia in 2011 to establish a new home at Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Wilmington, California where they truly live the Norbertine motto: *Ad omne opus bonus paratus* (prepared for every good work, cf. 2 Tim 2:21).

The Lay Order of Prémontré has over 300 members in two chapters in California. For candidates, there is a postulancy period during which they receive spiritual formation and an introduction to the devout life. After two years, they are vested into the Order as novices and receive a small white scapular. As novices, they live a “rule of life” suited to their state in life, patterned after the five marks of the Norbertine Order: devotion to the Holy Eucharist, prayer and celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, spirit of penance, and zeal for souls. If it is God’s will for them to proceed, novices make a profession promise and receive the large white scapular of the Norbertine Lay Order.

The Rule of Life consists of elements appropriate for the Norbertine charism of *communio* and centers around the Eucharist, with daily reception of Communion recommended, and Eucharistic Adoration. Time should be set aside for the Liturgy of the Hours as well as spiritual reading and meditation. Norbertines also look to Mary as the model and best means “of reaching communion with her Son and with one another in God.” Hence, daily recitation of the Rosary is recommended. Abstinence from meat is observed every Friday as well as other fasts and penances drawn up by one’s confessor. Fulfilling one’s duties in life is primary. The Lay Order life is missionary when there is charitable speech, modest dress, and service to others.

The Norbertine *communio* seems a perfect model for today by its integration of worship and life. It is a way of life that responds to the deep thirst of contemporary men and women for love and communion, and to serve others in the most fundamental way. God is at the center with the daily celebration of the Mass and the singing of the Divine Office. The whole community is invited to join in the prayers of the Church and in the life of the Order’s apostolate. The Norbertine Canonesses support these works by their prayers, fulfilling the contemplative dimension of the Order. The Lay Order work not only towards their own sanctification but the work of the abbey to which they are affiliated, providing material and spiritual assistance. Ideally, members of the Lay Order “in offering their day to God, constitute a community of faith and charity which is one living expression of the communion of saints” (*Constitutions*, 6).

“I have been at court, I have been in the monastery, I have enjoyed ecclesiastical preferments,” said Saint Norbert, “everywhere I have learned that nothing excels the happiness of belonging entirely to God.”

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**Norbertine Third Order**

**Founder:** St. Norbert of Xanten, c. 1123  
**Motto:** *Ad omne opus bonus paratus*  
(Prepared for Every Good Work)

**Spirituality:** To seek intimate communion with God before all else and then communion with one’s neighbor.  
**Mission:** Bringing the idea of “*communio*” into the world.  
**Formation Stages:** *Postulancy* (2 years), *Novitiate* (2 years) and *Ongoing* (lifetime after profession)

**Websites:** StMichaelsAbbey.com, Premontre.info or NorbertineSisters.org

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