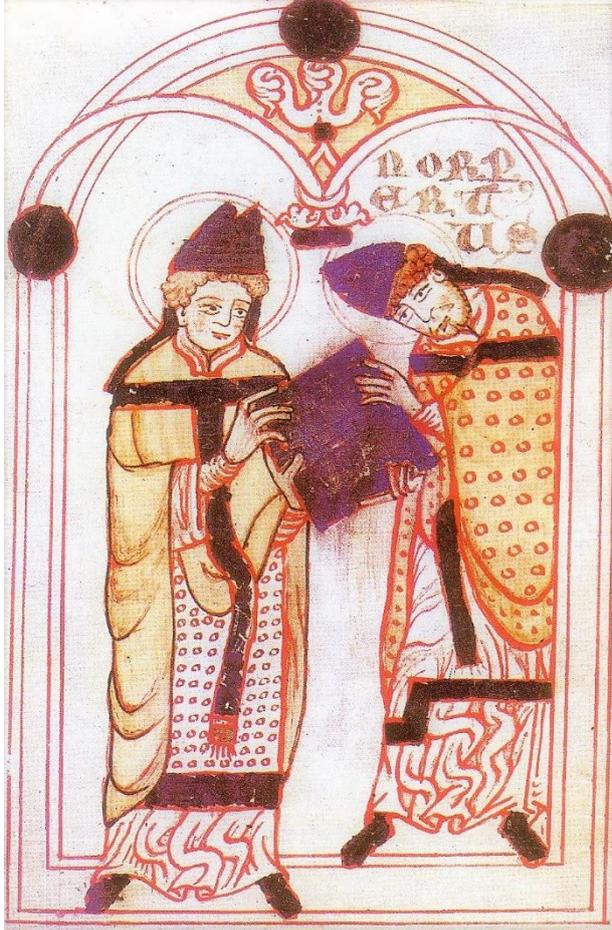


A Life of Our Holy Father Norbert

Early life and Conversion



The members of the court of Henry V would have been astonished, had it been foretold, that one from amongst them would become a great Saint. That after a conversion of an unusual nature, followed by the austere penance and constant prayer, journeys over wide stretches of country to evangelise and reform both clergy and people, he would found a religious order, which would spread over the face of the earth, exceeding all expectations. Norbert of Xanten, the gifted courtier, gave little or no indication that he ever would become an apostle of Christ. He was a son of Heribert, Count of Gennep and claimed on both his father's and his mother's side to be of royal blood. He spent several years of his youth at the court of Frederic de Carinthia, Archbishop of Cologne. He was ordained sub-deacon and appointed to a Canonry in the Collegiate Church at Xanten.

Later he left the Archbishop's court and became attached to that of the Emperor Henry V. In a short space of time he grew to be as much a favourite here as he had been at the court of the Archbishop. In appearance he was attractive; in manners charming; in conversation interesting, in disposition, kind, thoughtful, considerate towards others; and thus it came about that members of the household from the highest to the lowest felt that in Norbert they had a sympathetic friend. The attractions of the court held him captive to such a degree that he neglected the religious duties, which his appointment to the Canonry of Xanten required of him. No evidence is forthcoming by which Norbert can be convicted of having spent his youthful years in vice, the worst charge that history brings against him is, that as a Canon of Xanten and as sub-deacon he lived a pleasurable worldly life. He continued in this style presumably without qualm of conscience, until God was pleased to touch his heart in a manner closely modelled on the conversion of St. Paul.

During the spring time of 1115, a caparisoned horseman, accompanied by an attendant, was seen to ride out into the country towards Freden. The horseman was no stranger, he was Norbert, the beloved and admired courtier. He cantered along pleasantly for some distance, when dark clouds appeared on the horizon. They



spread themselves out rapidly and gradually obscured the light. With them came a wind which grew in strength and rapidity. The horse that Norbert rode was terror-stricken. The alarmed attendant could restrain himself no longer, in anguish of soul he exclaimed. "Sir Norbert, whither are you going? What are you doing? Return at once: do you not recognise that the hand of God lies heavily upon you?" Suddenly, a flash of lightning rendered the air; its brightness for the moment dispelling the darkness and, as the thunder rolled and shook both the heavens and the earth, the flash ploughed the soil under the very feet of Norbert's horse, making it bolt. The rider was thrown to the ground. Prostrate, Norbert lay unconscious for some considerable time. The storm had ceased. Immediately Norbert returned to consciousness, and, turning his thoughts to God, he recognised his unfaithfulness to grace and from the depths of his penitent soul sent forth the cry:

"Lord what wilt Thou have me to do?" The answer was given immediately, "Cease from evil and do good." Yes, that he will do, and will do from now onwards.

Assisted by his attendant, he composed himself and returned to Xanten. There he lived for a time, faithfully fulfilling his ecclesiastical duties, giving up attendance at Court and exercising himself in the practice of virtue. That he might do this more successfully, he had recourse to the saintly Benedictine Abbot Conon of Siegburg, under whose guidance he placed himself. He spent the rest of the year in the fulfilment of his canonical duties at Xanten and in learning, at the Abbey of Siegburg, the method of living the spiritual life. Towards the end of this same year he was ordained deacon and priest by the Archbishop of Cologne. When he presented himself for ordination, he clothed himself in a garment of sheepskin and encircled himself with a cord in token of repentance.

After his ordination he retired to the Abbey of Siegburg for forty days, to fervently prepare himself for the celebration of his first Mass. This Mass was celebrated in the collegiate church of Xanten, and he preached a soul-stirring sermon to those who were present. The next day, and on several later occasions, he addressed the Canons of Xanten in their chapter house. He besought them to carry out faithfully the duties of their canonical state and thereby give edification to clergy

and people alike. The older members of the chapter were greatly impressed by his exhortations, but the younger ones showed contempt. This feeling reached such a high point that one of the canons was prompted to interrupt him in his discourse, and even to spit in his face. Norbert remained calm; he modestly wiped his face and continued his exhortation. The rebellious canons became so offensive that Norbert was obliged to discontinue his efforts of reform.

During the next three years, he prepared himself by penance, prayer and study, for the work which God would be pleased to call him to undertake. Three modes of life suggested themselves: the monastic, the eremitical and the canonical. At Xanten he had for a time lived the canonical life, such as it then was, and as he had endeavoured to bring about a reform, but all in vain. He would prefer a life more austere and more laborious. He had followed the monastic life during his stay at the Abbey of Siegburg and he witnessed the eremitical life on the occasion of his several visits to a pious solitary named Ludolph. The example and the advice of this holy man strengthened Norbert's resolve to keep himself aloof from the world. He did not decide on any particular mode of life, but later when called upon to found an order, his present experiences were of great advantage to him. The new method of Norbert's life raised around him severe critics. They denounced his preaching and his severe penances. He was summoned to appear before the Papal Legate at the Council of Fritzlar, held in 1118. The very presence of the illustrious penitent in the crowded council room created a favourable impression. The simplicity and yet eloquent earnestness of his defence were of such a nature that he had no difficulty in conciliating his judges. They quickly recognised the falsity and iniquity of the accusation and consequently found no cause for condemnation, yet Norbert was not favoured with any word of approbation. The Saint now realised as much as ever he had done, how true are the words of our divine Lord, "No one is a prophet in his own country." He would be faithful to the call of God, he would be a voluntary exile. He resigned his Canonry at Xanten; distributed amongst the poor what remained of his wealth; and gave to the Abbey of Siegburg the church of Vorstberg (Xanten), which was his personal property.

Before the end of this same year 1118, Norbert arrived at St. Gilles in the south of France (Languedoc) whither Pope Gelasius II had betaken himself to escape from the insolences of the antipope who had taken the name Gregory VIII. The Pope quickly measured the value of the man God had providentially raised him up for the work of reform. He would make him one of his councillors. Norbert besought His Holiness not to insist on this and acknowledged the evil results a life at court in previous years had produced in him. The Pope did not insist. He gave him permission to preach everywhere without restriction and, on being told of the persecution to which Norbert had been subjected, promised him protection.

Missionary Life

Now that he had obtained the approval and blessing of the Holy Father, Norbert was all on fire to begin the mission that so strongly appealed to him, the life he had contemplated during the three years of his retirement. He would preach by the ever-effective method of good example, and also by word of mouth, not only to the people in general, but also to the clergy both secular and regular. He journeyed through the northern part of France, barefooted and clothed in a modest woollen garment. Accompanied by three companions, he arrived at Valenciennes 22nd March 1119.



The next day was Palm Sunday. The people of the town flocked to the church where he was, hoping to hear him preach. St. Norbert mounted the pulpit and gave an excellent discourse on the Redemption of Man. Certain writers have written that God renewed in his favour the prodigy that took place at Jerusalem on the first Pentecost, for though Norbert undoubtedly preached to the people in German, they, whose language was Romance, understood him. Whatever may have been the exact truth of the case, the fact remains that the good results of the Saint's preaching were wonderful. About this time Burchard, Bishop of Cambrai, came to Valenciennes. He and Norbert were old friends, and the Bishop knew that his nomination to the bishopric was due to Norbert's refusal of the offer of that See.

Their meeting was most cordial. The bishop expressed his admiration at the Saint's untiring zeal and his satisfaction at the good done in his diocese. Bishop Burchard had brought with him his devoted chaplain, Hugh of Fosses. Hugh at once took a great liking to Norbert. He listened attentively to what the bishop and others said, and also made enquiries about him. His observations coincided with all he heard, the result was that he wished to become one of Norbert's disciples. The bishop, though loath to part with his chaplain, would not place any obstacles in the way, if Norbert wished to accept him. An agreement was made that Hugh should leave the bishop and become Norbert's associate.

In June 1119, Norbert recommenced his missionary journeys with Hugh as his sole companion, for the three former associates had died at Valenciennes. In imitation of the disciples whom Our Lord had sent out to evangelize, they travelled barefooted, without change of dress, without money. Each carried a staff with which to lighten his steps. They burdened themselves only with their books of prayer, a copy of the Gospels and the requisites for the celebration of Holy Mass. In course of time they became owners of an ass, which carried their meagre luggage and of which one or the other made use when overcome by fatigue. They declined remuneration for their ministry, but accepted offerings given for the celebration of the Holy

Sacrifice. These offerings they distributed amongst the poor. They observed a daily fast, except on Sundays and feast days. Salt was the only condiment with which they seasoned their food and water was their only beverage. For preference they took their meals seated on the ground. They departed from these practices only when circumstances compelled them, as when they were received in monasteries, or dined with priests or others who invited them to their table.

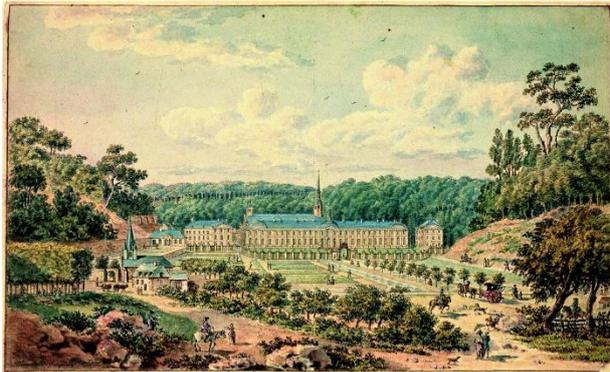
The companionship of Hugh was of great utility to Norbert: he was enabled to acquire a better knowledge of the language of the country and Hugh acted as guide through the northern part of France and what is now called Belgium. Norbert constantly gave his disciple spiritual advice and led him far along the path of perfection. The missionaries passed through the greater part of the diocese of Cambrai and the extensive diocese of Liege. They everywhere gave great edification, brought back to God many souls that had gone astray, and were frequently successful in reconciling those who had been at variance with the truth. In fact, this happened so often that Norbert was popularly styled, "The Apostle of Peace."

The Foundation of the Order

After one year's pontificate, Pope Gelasius, Norbert's protector, died at Cluny, on 29th January 1119. His successor was Guy, Archbishop of Vienne in Dauphine, who took the name of Calixtus II. As soon as Norbert heard that the Pope had summoned a council to be held at Rheims, he decided to suspend his missionary labours, to take himself to Rheims, offer his services to the Holy Father and ask approbation of and blessing on his apostolic life. He arrived there in October, little expecting the disappointment that awaited him. Louis le Gros, King of France, archbishops, bishops, abbots, numerous dignitaries of Church and state from the various courts of Europe had responded to the call of the Pope. Amongst these dignitaries, their secretaries and attendants, occupied as they were with the necessary preparations for the council which was shortly to be opened, Norbert moved about unnoticed, and his repeated request for an interview with the Pope was quite unheeded. Recognising the uselessness of his efforts, Norbert and his companions left the city. They had travelled some distance, and overcome by fatigue, were seated by the roadside. As they looked along the way they intended to travel, they noticed the dust rising in clouds, and distinctly heard the sound of approaching horses galloping along the road. Then came in view a cavalcade of men at arms and ecclesiastics. One of these, a man of distinction and high rank, commanded a halt. He enquired who these would-be pilgrims might be and whither they were travelling. Norbert explained briefly who they were and what was his dilemma. So impressed was the ecclesiastic who was no other than Bartholomew de Vir, bishop of Laon and cousin of the Pope, that he made immediate arrangements to enable Norbert and his companions to return to Rheims in his company. The Council was opened on 20th October, the day after his arrival. At its conclusion, Norbert through the intermediary of Bishop de Vir was summoned to the presence of the Pope. To him Norbert opened his mind and heart, and asked for the renewal of the favours granted him by Pope Gelasius. The Holy Father, only too pleased to meet with one so full of zeal, did not hesitate to confirm what his predecessor had granted and encouraged the Saint to pursue energetically his apostolic career. He wished to converse longer, but with so

much business on hand he could not spare the time, he therefore expressed the hope that they would meet later on at Bishop de Vir's palace, where he intended to go when matters relating to the council were fully settled. Norbert accompanied the Bishop to Laon and there awaited the arrival of the Pope. In the meantime, Hugh of Fosses went off to his native place to dispose of his temporal affairs and another companion withdrew for the time being. In due course the Holy Father arrived. The bishop was most anxious that Norbert should remain in his diocese and in this he was upheld by the persuasions of the Pope.

The Valley of Prémontré



The Holy Father recognised that Norbert could do much good by his itinerant preaching, but he considered that greater good would be done by his founding a religious order, the members of which would inherit his apostolic spirit and zeal. In this order, the active and contemplative life could be merged, and considerable assistance given to the secular clergy in carrying out the reform insisted on by recent councils. Time would be necessary to come to a decision and if an order was to be founded a suitable place would have to be acquired and the necessary aspirants to the Order gathered together. Until a final decision could be adopted, Norbert, at the request of the pope as much as that of the bishop, became superior of the Canons of the Collegiate Church of St. Martin. They needed reform. They strongly resented any interference on the part of St. Norbert to change the comfortable mode of life they had adopted, so that finding his endeavours towards reform to be of no avail, the Saint asked to be relieved of the task. The bishop reluctantly yielded to his request and invited him to return to his house. Together they visited several places in the diocese for the purpose of selecting suitable ground on which to erect a monastery. None of them had any attraction for Norbert, till they arrived at the valley of Prémontré, situated in the forest of Voois near to Coucy. In an open space stood a chapel dedicated to St. John the Baptist where on certain days Holy Mass was said for the charcoal burners. Norbert expressed a wish to spend the night there in prayer. The bishop left him. When they met the following morning, Norbert stated that not only was it the place of God's choice, but that in a vision, he had seen a body of men clothed in white. They carried a silver cross, candlesticks and thuribles, singing whilst they walked round the valley. The bishop was greatly surprised at Norbert's choice. Prémontré was anything but a desirable spot in which to live, however he was quite prepared to assist Norbert in every possible way.

Both men returned to Laon where, in the course of an address to the students of the local college, Norbert spoke of his designs regarding Prémontré, with the result that seven of the students offered themselves as disciples. As soon as the necessary arrangements could be carried out, Norbert and his disciples received from the hands of the bishop the white habit which tradition states was indicated to St. Norbert in a

vision by our Lady. This reception of the habit took place in the early part of 1120. Adjacent to the walls of the chapel, dwellings of quite a simple form in which to house the newly clothed religious had been erected. Prayer, the chanting of the psalms in common, and manual labour constituted their daily occupation. Wishing to increase the number of his disciples, Norbert resumed his apostolic life with renewed ardour. Wherever he preached, crowds flocked to hear his words. He and St. Bernard of Clairvaux achieved similar triumphs, for as each in his own sphere passed from place to place preaching the word of God, both created a spiritual enthusiasm which achieved salutary results.

The holy and austere life of Norbert, the persuasiveness of his discourses, the deeds of wonder popularly attributed to him, aroused an ever-increasing admiration. His progress was fertile in conversions, and those who presented themselves for acceptance as disciples were many. In the course of a short time his family at Prémontré had considerably increased. About this time, Hugh of Fosses returned. Together they made for Cologne, arriving there in October. In former days, Cologne had admired and honoured the brilliant young son of the count of Gennep; after his conversion, though, the inhabitants laughed at him and treated him with contempt. Now, though, impressed by what they were told, they recognised him as a heaven-sent preacher and hurried to listen to his words. He proposed to build at Prémontré a church, a worthy house of God, and as he knew Cologne Cathedral to be rich in relics, he hoped to obtain some of these precious treasures. He was not disappointed. He obtained relics of St. Gereon, of the two Saints Ewald, and of Saint Ursula. With these sacred remains in his possession, he set out on his return to Prémontré. He was accompanied by Hugh and several newly recruited disciples. On his way, he met with Count Godfrey and his wife Ermensinde, who made him a present of their house at Floreffe, close to Namur. This was the first graft on the flower of Prémontré. They were by now in the month of December; the number of clerics was about forty, with an additional number of lay disciples. Constitutions were drawn up for the canonical organisation of this newly created family and religious profession took place on Christmas Day, 1121.



The nature of the Order of Prémontré



The object St. Norbert had in view in instituting his order was to unite to the practices of piety and penance, the duties of the care of the souls. Of both forms of life, the active and the contemplative, the holy founder was an exemplary model. He spent hours in prayer and a considerable time in contemplation. His practice of penance was severe. To these acts of personal sanctification, he joined the work of an apostolic life. St. Norbert favoured the contemplative life joined to the active. His mode of life at Prémontré gave the impression that he was less the founder of an order than one wishing to reform the canonical order of life back to its primitive fervour. He urged that the shepherds of souls should labour at their personal sanctification, as well as fulfil the duties of their sacred ministry; he advocated that ministers of the altar should by exemplary lives secure for themselves the esteem so necessary for the success of their labours. The Rule of St.

Augustine, emphasized by the addition of observances Cistercian in their nature, answered admirably to the requirements of the Saint. Divine approbation favoured the choice, according to a statement of St. Norbert himself, handed down by chroniclers. He stated, "I know a brother of our community who diligently sought a rule of life suitable to follow. In answer to the prayers of his brethren and not through any personal merits, St. Augustine appeared to him. Extending his right hand, he offered a copy of his rule and said, 'I am Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, this is the rule I have written. If your brethren my children fight the good fight under its guidance, they will at the last day, stand at the tribunal of divine justice without fear.' Those who have handed down the statement declare that he said this in all humility, as though the words were addressed to someone other than himself, but unquestionably he and no other was favoured with this revelation."

The one important occupation at Prémontré was the daily recitation of the divine office. At midnight the repose of sleep was halted, for the recitation of matins, and each day the office was chanted and a solemn Mass celebrated. The order has always esteemed the chanting of the divine office a duty of first importance and, for this reason, a first condition for the foundation of a new community, as stated in ancient statutes, was the possession of liturgical books and the necessary books of

chant. Manual labour, especially land tillage, was introduced in the early days and proved to be of untold benefit to the locality in which houses were established. Manuscript writing and the study of ecclesiastical subjects were also encouraged, and during these occupations, silence was rigidly observed. The canonical members of the order wore a white habit consisting of a cassock, scapular, cincture and cloak with hood. In choir they wore the surplice. The lay brothers who worked on the farm or in the workshops attached to the monastery wore a greyish habit, of which the tunic and scapular differed in shape from that of the Canons. Our saint according to records is the one who it seems first devised a Third Order. The circumstance of the foundation was this: Count Theobald of Champagne, a wealthy and well-known noble in France, approached Norbert, with a view to becoming one of his disciples. After some consideration, the Saint decided that the vocation of Theobald was to live a saintly life in the world. He drew up for him a rule of life, and made him a partaker of the good works and merits of the order. Theobald's example was followed by others and at one time the members of this third order became most numerous.

Apostle of the Blessed Sacrament

From the time he celebrated his first Mass, Norbert entertained a constant devotion towards the Holy Eucharist and exercised zeal in propagating the devotion. He has merited to be usually depicted holding the monstrance in his hand and, in the chronological order of the saints, he heads the list of those who are known as Eucharistic Saints. His contemporaries write eulogistically of Norbert's faith and devotedness to the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. He was accustomed to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice more than once a day, for in those days this practice was allowed. At the altar, in presence of and by the power of his Eucharistic Lord, he performed the greater number of his miraculous deeds. The curing of the sick, the blind and the lame, the deliverance of those possessed by evil spirits, conversions of sinners and reconciliations of enemies, as stated in his life, took place for the most part during the celebration of Holy Mass. The following is an incident from the life, given by chroniclers of the twelfth century. The miracle happened at Floreffe in



Belgium. Norbert was celebrating the Holy Mass, when shortly before the communion he saw in the centre of the paten a large drop of the blood of our Lord. He drew the attention of Brother Rodolph, the sacristan, who was his deacon, and said, "Do you see what I see?" "Yes, I do," was the reply, and Norbert overcome by pious emotion, wept. The drop of blood was removed, and the paten washed. This gave rise to a practice at one time observed in the order.

The zeal exercised by Norbert in defending and strengthening the doctrine of the Real Presence, was strenuously tested in north Belgium about the year 1124. The heretic Tanchelm had caused spiritual desolation in Antwerp and the neighbourhood, by his denunciation of the Church, the priesthood and the sacraments. Though he had died a tragic death, his false doctrines still lived and continued to exude their deadly poison. Bishop Burchard of Cambrai had employed various means to overcome the heresy, but so his many attempts had not been successful. In his perplexity, he remembered Norbert, appealed to him and the Saint promptly accepted the invitation. He carefully selected from amongst the brethren those distinguished by their piety, zeal, and erudition, and set out for Antwerp. They speedily gained the admiration of the people. The frequent sermons and instructions were attentively listened to and the people of Antwerp soon realised that they had been deceived. The heretical doctrines of Tanchelm were repudiated and the people returned to the practice of their ancient faith. In recognition of the service he had rendered, Norbert was acclaimed by the people "Apostle of Antwerp." From the Canons of St. Michael, he received the gift of their church. In time, an abbey was built around it and from here were founded the famous abbeys of Averbode, Middlebourg and Tongerlo. This chapter would be incomplete if no allusion were made to the devotion of the order towards the Blessed Mother of God. St. Norbert himself inculcated the devotion on his disciples and, amongst other things, wished them to consider the colour of their habit an external mark of their internal piety. The Roman Martyrology commemorates on 8th August the apparition of the Blessed Virgin to St. Norbert in the chapel of St. John the Baptist at Prémontré, when she indicated to him the white habit he was to wear. The tradition is handed down that St. Norbert, and consequently his disciples, always favoured the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Progress of the Order at Prémontré

The ever-increasing number of disciples called urgently for greater accommodation, and time could not be lost in providing it. As the building of the church was of equal importance, a site for it should be decided upon quickly, and the new buildings raised adjacent to it. The choice of a site was somewhat of a puzzle owing to the irregular formation of the land. The community had recourse to prayer and were favoured with a speedy reply. One of their number whilst at prayer saw a figure of our Lord crucified on the spot where the church now stands. Seven rays of light shone forth from the figure and lit up the country round. From four opposite sides, pilgrims arrived bearing their purses and staves, approaching the crucifix. Here they prostrated themselves, kissed the feet of the figure and rising, departed along the same roads by which they came, as though to bear to the four quarters of the world the blessings of redemption. Norbert decided that this should be the place

on which to erect the church, and the work was begun forthwith. Bishop Bartholomew of Laon with numerous attendants, in presence of Bishop Lysiard of Soissons, blessed the foundations. As soon as the building was completed, Norbert invited the same two bishops to perform the dedication. This solemn dedication was magnificently carried out on 4th May 1122. Historians of the twelfth century tell of extraordinary happenings whilst the church and abbey were being built. The devil, evidently enraged at the proceedings, openly manifested his rage. His spiteful acts availed him nothing, but gave to Norbert and Hugh opportunities of exercising the power over evil spirits that God gives to His saints. Chroniclers likewise tell of the heavenlike peace that marked Prémontré, and so far reaching was this peace, that even the wild animals of the forest came under its influence.

One of their stories is well worth the telling. A brother had gone out with the cattle of the monastery to keep them from straying. During the morning, a wolf sauntered up to him in quite a friendly manner, and kept him company all day. He helped drive the cattle and when evening had come, helped to take the cattle back to their sheds. The doors were fastened for the night and the brother went to his own quarters in the monastery without further thought of the wolf. Later, Norbert heard a constant thumping on one of the doors, and thinking that a poor traveller was seeking hospitality, enquired why the door was not opened. The reply was that no traveller sought admittance, but that outside was a wolf which had come up from the fields with the cattle. The brother narrated his experience and Norbert, recognising that the wolf was hungry, ordered that food should be given to it for, he added, a labourer is worthy of his hire. The wolf was in his own way asking for food and as soon as his hunger was satisfied, he made off to the woods. He frequently returned in the same friendly way and became so tame that he took food from the brother's hand.

Pope Honorius II succeeded Pope Calixtus II in 1124. As soon as Norbert was able to absent himself from Prémontré he set out to visit the Holy Father, and received a cordial reception. On 6th February 1126, Pope Honorius issued a bull of approbation of the order. St. Norbert returned at once to Prémontré and announced to his disciples the good news. This papal approbation gave Norbert's foundation a new standing altogether. Little or no difficulty was experienced in securing new sites or in providing the buildings, so great was the interest created of



the Order by the Pope's approbation. During the journey to Rome and back, Norbert and his companions were one evening, according to their custom at prayer, when suddenly the silence was broken by a voice which indicated that shortly, Norbert

would be raised to the episcopacy. Whatever each one may have thought, nothing was said till after their arrival back at Prémontré.

Norbert, Archbishop of Magdeburg

A gathering of importance known as the “Diet” took place at Spires in July of the same year. Norbert was there and, at the request of the Emperor Lothair and the clergy, he preached at the Cathedral. Among those present were delegates from the town of Magdeburg, an episcopal city which for two years had been without a bishop. These delegates were greatly impressed by Norbert’s preaching and general comportment. The sentiment that he undoubtedly was a desirable candidate for the vacant See was unanimously entertained. Norbert strongly opposed the suggestion. He alleged his unworthiness, the necessity of his presence at Prémontré, and the fact that he had refused the bishopric of Cambrai. The authority of the Papal Legate and of the Emperor at length prevailed and he submitted to their wish as the choice of God.

Strange and unforeseen events happen in the course of one’s life. Norbert reviewed in spirit the days of his youth, spent as a courtier in the land of his birth, his startling conversion, his retreat into France, the founding of his order. He now found himself called back to the land of his birth, to take up the duties of a shepherd of Christ’s flock. On the one hand, sorrow seized his heart, on the other, the ever-present disposition to do in all things the Holy Will of God. This enabled him to bow his head, without murmur, to the divine decree. A messenger set out for Prémontré to convey the news of the election of Norbert. Sorrow and fear filled the hearts of all; sorrow at the loss of so elevated a spiritual father, fear lest his new apostolate might endanger their very existence.



Norbert’s entry into Magdeburg took place on 18th July 1126. The event was marked with great enthusiasm. The renown of his sanctity, his eloquence, and his miracles had reached Magdeburg, so that he was highly esteemed by the people. They vied with each other in giving a full-hearted gladsome welcome. A procession was formed at the entrance of the city, of all the dignitaries both ecclesiastical and civil, which wended its way towards the episcopal palace. Norbert’s garments were not in keeping with those of the dignitaries who formed the procession, so that on arrival at the palace, so history relates, the hall porter attempted to withdraw him from the procession with the rebuke that he had no right to place himself amongst the notables of the town. A chorus of voices exclaimed that he was the newly elected archbishop, whereupon the dismayed porter turned to seek safety in flight, but Norbert called him back and said in his usually affable way, “Do

not be afraid and do not run away; you see more clearly than others; you know me better than they who have brought me to this sumptuous palace, which I, being poor and insignificant, ought not to accept.”

Eight days later, on 25th July, the feast of St. James the Apostle, Norbert was consecrated Archbishop of Magdeburg by Udo, Bishop of Naumburg. Knowledge of the state of affairs in the diocese of Magdeburg caused the new bishop grave anxiety. For some considerable time, abuses had existed in the diocese. Norbert was not the man to look on in silence at such unjust acts as the sequestration, by lords of the land, of property given for the bishop’s maintenance; nor to pass over unheedingly the remissness of the clergy. Little accustomed to correction, the guilty clergy and nobles, at first expressed surprise, they then rose in revolt, yet Norbert remained firm. More than once, an attempt was made on his life, but thanks to divine protection these proved fruitless. Neither threats nor inducements could cause him to alter his determination to redress these evils. At all times most considerate towards repentant sinners, he was inflexibly severe towards the wilfully sinful.

The revolt of the discontented clergy and nobles, small in its inception, grew to greater dimensions and became such a menace to the safety of the archbishop, that he was constrained to exile himself for a time from the city. His flight produced the happiest result. The rebels, conscience stricken, listened to the voice of sane reason, recognised their guilt, and disposed themselves to make amends. A deputation waited on Norbert, expressed deep regret for what had happened, asked for forgiveness, promised obedience, and beseeched him to return without delay. The Saint assured of their sincerity, acceded to their request to return. His re-entry to the city was a veritable triumph. His former opponents were amongst the foremost to welcome him and the people manifested, in every possible way, their unfeigned delight. From that day forward, peace reigned in the city and Norbert was able to carry out without obstruction his episcopal duties. He recognised the power for good of all religious orders, took in them a particular interest, which guaranteed the unflagging flame of religious fervour, and the strict observance of religious discipline. In his own order he took the deepest interest. He kept himself well informed also of what was taking place at Prémontré and was fully satisfied with the admirable government of the Abbey by Blessed Hugh, his successor. No founder of a religious family could have expected in so short a time such progress as that with which this order met.

The Last Years of St. Norbert

Eight years had passed since Norbert was raised to the Archiepiscopal See of Magdeburg, and during these years, a fruitful harvest had been reaped. Ardour tempered by prudence had characterised his zeal. The diocese had been spiritually revolutionised; the light of faith extended to all its pans; fervour and piety had replaced desolation and indifference; religious communities had increased in numbers and in the practice of exemplary discipline. The clergy had become ideal, and in every state of life, abuses had given place to right and justice. Undoubtedly the energy with which the archbishop carried on his apostolic labours, considerably shortened his life.

On 14th February 1130 Pope Honorius II died and on the following day, Cardinal Gregory of St. Angelo was canonically elected and chose the name Innocent II. However, the ambitious Cardinal Peter de Leone aided and abetted by two other Cardinals secured an uncanonical election as Anacletus II. Pope Innocent II held a council at Liege on 22nd March 1131, at which certain steps were determined upon, in order to suppress the schism. Norbert strongly upheld the rights of the legitimate Pope and gave his support to the acts of the Council of Liege. In so doing, he was summoned to appear before the antipope. Needless to say, St. Norbert ignored the summons. The antipope issued against him a bull of excommunication, in which injurious epithets and cutting remarks were hurled at him. Far from his good reputation being injured, the language of the



antipope stands forth as a lasting proof of Norbert's devotedness to the true heir of St. Peter. During these troublesome times, Norbert acted as Councillor to the Emperor Lothair. Acting on the Norbert's advice, he espoused the cause of the rightful Pope and undertook an expedition into Italy. The reign of Anacletus came to an end; Pope Innocent II entered Rome in triumph and the schism crumbled away. The Pope addressed to St. Norbert a letter in which he expressed his admiration for, and his gratitude towards, both the him and St. Bernard who, he considered, had been instruments of God, to bring about his return to Rome.

This last undertaking, so full of anxiety and fatigue, undermined Norbert's health. Though comparatively in the prime of life, he was scarcely 54 years of age, he felt that he had well-nigh run his allotted course. He fell ill. Holy Thursday was near at hand. The wonderful energy that throughout life had been the secret of so much success was revived within him, he rose from his sick bed and consecrated the Holy Oils. In a similar way, he rose on Easter Sunday to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice. When the Mass was ended, he took himself again to bed and there for seven weeks remained in constant union with God. His patience and resignation edified those who visited him, and they treasured up his words of advice and encouragement. He lived till the Wednesday of Whit-week. He was fully conscious to the end and gave evidence of the divine love that had burned unremittingly within him since the day of

his conversion. His last act was to bless those assembled round his bed and then to remit his soul into the hands of God. He died in the night between 5th and 6th of June 1134, in the fifth year of the Pontificate of Pope Innocent II, the ninth of the reign of Emperor Lothair and the eighth of his own episcopacy.

Though the course of St. Norbert's life was short, it was full of fruitful works, so full, indeed, that no one person can possibly do justice to an account of all the good he did. The funeral of the archbishop took place on 11th June. The Emperor decided that he should be buried in the church of St. Mary, attached to the Premonstratensian monastery at Magdeburg. The decision put an end to the dispute as to place of burial between the religious of St. Mary's and the Canons of the Cathedral.

Strahov



After his death, he was esteemed with pious veneration and his tomb became renowned for the miracles wrought there. The veneration in which he was held was singularly illustrated in the 16th century by the fact that the Lutherans pretended they were the heirs of the great reformer Norbert. They made themselves master of the church of St. Mary and of his relics, on the possession of which they prided themselves. St. Norbert's disciples left

no stone unturned in their efforts to rescue the remains of their spiritual father. They had many difficulties to overcome. Undaunted, they persevered and finally, by the good services of Abbot Gaspard de Questenberg, they succeeded. On 2nd May 1627, his relics were solemnly transferred from St. Mary's of Magdeburg to the Abbey church of Strahov, Prague. In the chancery of Prague were kept the abjurations of 600 Lutheran Protestants, who either on that day or during the Octave of the translation were reconciled with the Church. On that occasion the Archbishop of Prague, at the request of the Ecclesiastical and Civil authorities, proclaimed St. Norbert the Patron and Protector of Bohemia. On 27th July 1582, Pope Gregory XIII by the Bull "*Immensae Divinae Sapientiae altitudo*" confirmed the cultus and authorised a feast with octave in honour of St. Norbert to be celebrated in all the churches and houses of the order. Pope Clement X on 7th September 1672, extended the feast to the whole Church. The same Pope, by the Bull "*Celestium munerum thesaurus*" granted a plenary indulgence, to be gained in any church of the order either on the feast itself or on the Sunday within the octave on the usual conditions. Annually on 6th June is celebrated in Norbertine houses with manifestations of love and veneration the solemn feast of this founder of a great religious order, of the never forgotten Apostle of Antwerp, of the admirable Apostle of the Eucharistic Lord of All.

St. Norbert of Xanten, pray for us