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On June 16 we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the dedication of the St. Norbert Abbey church and of the Abbey itself. While a milestone for our community, whose first members arrived in 1893 from Berne Abbey in Holland, 50 years is not a long period of time when you consider that our Mother Abbey at Berne — founded in 1134, the year that St. Norbert died — celebrates 875 years of existence this year. Nonetheless, construction of our current Abbey was a step important for the growth of this community and its ministries. The Abbey would finally have space to expand and house all its members.

On the occasion of the dedication of the Abbey church, Bishop John Grellinger, auxiliary bishop of Green Bay, began his homily with these words:

“The event in which we are participating has several roots and lends itself to many considerations. Its main root goes down to the Heart of Christ, that source of vitality and fecundity by which the Church gives witness of the abiding divine presence within her. Indeed, this occasion is a striking commentary on those words of the third session of the Vatican Council:

‘The Church itself, because of its marvelous propagation, its exalted sanctity, and its inexhaustible fruitfulness in all that is good, because of its Catholic unity and its unshaken stability, is a great and perpetual motive of credibility and an irrefutable proof of its own divine mission... What a striking commentary we are! Gathered as we are from the four winds around an altar which is central to our lives, speaking each his own tongue, working on different continents, living under different social, economic, political conditions, each having his own loyalties besides the ones we have in common, here we are an all-embracing oneness through the fervent profession of the same faith.’”

A lot has changed in these 50 years, and the purposes and ministries of the Order of St. Norbert and St. Norbert Abbey continue to grow and evolve as well. The Abbey has been such an important gift to us that we want to share it with others — with you.

As such, our prayer times and liturgy are open to the public. Lay men and women associate themselves with the community in order to share in the Order’s charism and spiritual heritage. The Norbertine Center for Spirituality offers the larger community opportunities for spiritual enrichment, including retreats, conferences, spiritual direction, and time and space for quiet reflection.

And now, with the genesis of The Abbey magazine, we intend to reach out to the larger community — to you — twice a year with news and views from the Abbey, inviting you to come to know us and to share in our almost 900-year history.

Bishop Grellinger concluded his homily with words that support and encourage our hospitality as Norbertines:

“...like an outpost of the City of God, the Abbey will stand as a perpetual challenge to the secular spirit which prevails so mightily around us. In these surroundings so conducive to prayer, in Norbertine pattern of life which makes room for contemplation, we shall find hearts raised in prayer to support us amidst the distractions of our days. Here too, we may come from time to time to regain the perspective which prevents the dissipation of a life in trivialities. And all this comes to us because of a felix culpa of the long ago: ‘Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are His judgments and how unsearchable His ways!’”
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“The Shack”
What makes St. Norbert Abbey holy? As we mark its 50th anniversary, one Norbertine reflects on the source of the space’s sacred feel.

By Fr. John Bostwick, O.Praem.
Translated by Fr. John Tourangeau, O.Praem.

When someone enters the Abbey for the first time, more often than not his or her initial response is some variation of “Awesome!” The beauty of the place does inspire a sense of awe. Yet the real beauty, the authentic sense of presence, is not about aesthetics or stone or marble or glass, but about God.

“How awesome is this place.” (Genesis 28:17) This passage is used in the Mass for the dedication of a church. Yet what we forget too easily is that in uttering this line, Jacob is not referring to a building, but to a place of encounter.

Jacob set up a memorial because he had met God there. “Truly the Lord was in this place and I did not know it.” (Genesis 28:16) The Abbey is “holy” because people meet God within it.

If these walls could talk they would speak the praise of God, echo the words of the psalms and the liturgy that permeate the very stones. The ceaseless round of public and private prayer fills the space and glorifies God.

Such prayer — and such a space — also sustains the “life with God” that is a Norbertine vocation. The gift of self to the Church in the profession of vows as priests or brothers is an outward expression of an inward confrontation with God. Hidden within each individual are the struggle of discernment and the joy of discovering a sense of call and mission. This, in part, is the Abbey’s sacred purpose: to create a home with God for those who commit themselves to Him both publicly and privately.

People come to the Abbey for retreat, for quiet days, for learning, because this is a place where they meet God. In the church, in the spiritual direction rooms, in the confessional, on the labyrinth, in the quiet of the nooks, crannies and gardens where folks find a moment of prayer, of hope, of struggle and joy — God acts in peoples’ lives. This is the holiness of the Abbey.

By Fr. John Bostwick, O.Praem.
Translated by Fr. John Tourangeau, O.Praem.

¿Qué hace la abadía de San Norberto santa? Mientras que marcamos el aniversario de 50 años, un Norbertino refleja sobre la fuente del sagrado sentido del espacio.

Por Padre John Bostwick, O.Praem.
Traducido por Padre John Tourangeau, O.Praem.

Cuándo alguien entra en la abadía por primera vez, su respuesta inicial es una variación de “¡Qué impresionante!” La belleza del lugar inspira un sentido de admiración. La belleza verdadera, el sentido auténtico de presencia, no se trata de la estética ni la piedra ni el mármol ni el vidrio, sino Dios.

“¡Qué impresionante es este lugar” (Génesis 28:17). Esta declaración forma parte de la Misa para la dedicación de una iglesia. Lo que a veces olvidamos fácilmente es que en proclamar esta declaración, Jacob no se refiere a un edificio, sino a un lugar de encuentro.

Jacob establece un monumento porque él había encontrado a Dios allí. “Yavé está realmente en este lugar y yo no lo sabía.” (Génesis 28:16). La abadía es “santa” porque se encuentra a Dios dentro de ella.

Si las paredes de la abadía pudieran hablar, ellas hablarían de la alabanza de Dios, resonando las palabras de los salmistas y la liturgia que penetran hasta las piedras. El incesante redondo de la oración pública y privada llena el lugar y glorifica a Dios.

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Tal oración — y tal espacio — también sostiene “la vida con Dios” que es una vocación de la comunidad norbertina. El regalo de sí mismo a la iglesia en la profesión de votos como sacerdotes o hermanos es una expresión exterior de un encuentro interior con Dios. Ocultado dentro de cada individuo son la lucha de discernimiento y la alegría de descubrir un sentido de llamamiento y misión. Esto, en parte, es el propósito sagrado de la abadía: crear una casa con Dios por los que se comprometen a sí mismos a Él públicamente y en privado.

Muchas personas vienen a la abadía en búsqueda de tiempo para hacer un retiro, por días de silencio, y para estudiar, porque esto es un lugar donde ellos encuentran a Dios. En la iglesia, en las oficinas de dirección espiritual, en el confesionario, por el laberinto, por la calma de los rincones y los jardines donde se encuentran un momento de oración, de esperanza, de lucha y de alegría—Dios actúa en sus vidas. Esto es la santidad de la abadía.
The Abbey
by DESIGN

As St. Norbert Abbey marks the 50th anniversary of its dedication and consecration, Fr. Stephen Rossey, O.Praem., director of environment at the Abbey, details its design and construction.

Designed by the Green Bay firm Berners, Schober and Kilp, the “new” St. Norbert Abbey, on which ground was broken June 6, 1956, is constructed of limestone quarried in Fond du Lac, Wis. Its stone trim is Indiana limestone, and the slate for its roof came from Pennsylvania and Vermont. Like its exterior, the Abbey’s interior consists of permanent materials so as to last hundreds of years, as have Norbertine abbeys in Europe.

The Abbey is designed so that its “spine,” stretching from west to east, clearly signifies what the Order’s life and mission is all about; it is the center of Norbertine common life.

The great doors of the westwork lead into the Abbey church, which is the most impressive and important part of the Abbey complex.

Beyond the church is the chapter room, the Order’s meeting space. It also functions as the daily Mass chapel during the liturgical cycle’s Ordinary Time.

Beyond the chapter room is the refectory, or dining room, and kitchen.

Confreres’ private rooms, recreation rooms and offices are housed in L-shaped wings joined to the “spine” by cloister walks. Bounded by these wings are landscaped gardens and pools intended for reflection and meditation.

Because the Abbey is also a center of learning, classrooms, studios and a library are housed on the second floor of the central spine.
Led Into the Desert

Driven by the needs they encountered, Wisconsin-based Norbertines moved into New Mexico — and kept on growing. Here, they share their story — past, present and future.

By Br. Dennis Butler, O.Praem.

In the late 1960s — the years after Vatican II — there grew among the men at St. Norbert Abbey in Wisconsin a conviction that the Norbertines should strive to serve the increasing number of Hispanic Catholics in the United States. In 1983, the Norbertines’ focus centered on the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, where many Hispanic families have lived for four centuries. The next year, two priests from the Abbey arrived in Albuquerque to seek an appropriate setting for a Norbertine community.

In early 1985, the Archbishop of Santa Fe offered the Norbertines pastoral responsibility for Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Parish in Albuquerque’s mostly Hispanic, working-class West Mesa. The parish included a former convent that could house a small Norbertine community.

The Abbey accepted the archbishop’s offer and assigned five Norbertines to Albuquerque. On Sept. 8, 1985, St. Norbert Abbey created a “permanent foundation” in New Mexico, naming it Santa Maria de la Vid (Our Lady of the Vine) Priory in memory of the first Norbertine abbey in Spain. (This namesake, founded just after the time of St. Norbert, lasted more than 700 years until it was suppressed in 1835 by an anti-clerical government.)

Following the centuries-old Norbertine practice of establishing new abbeys, the Abbey expects the New Mexico priory to someday become an independent Norbertine community. As expected, growth at the Priory continually has carried it in that direction.

GROWING MINISTRIES, GROWING FACILITIES

In August 1995, the Priory moved to a 70-acre site featuring a former retreat complex in Albuquerque’s South Valley. Located on a western mesa, it overlooks the city of Albuquerque and the Sandia and Manzano Mountains.

Plans began almost immediately to build a small church at the Priory as the center of our spiritual life. With the generous support of friends, the Church of Santa Maria de la Vid was dedicated in September 1998.

In 2005, we embarked on the next step in our three-phase building process: our St. Norbert Cloister, a new residence and living center, and the Norbertine Library, a resource repository and spiritual learning center. These were completed in 2006.

With our church, we were given a place for liturgy. With our library, we have a place for study. With our new residence, we have a place to rest and renew ourselves for our ministries.

SERVING AS NEEDS SUGGEST

The Priory’s ministries largely have been determined by the needs of the dioceses we serve. Our primary service is to the 2,600-family parish of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary, where we initiated the renovation of the Family Center in 1988 and guided the building of a new church in 1992. The liturgical design of the latter has received national recognition.
A Missionary Spirit

In a state where Catholics are scarce, a Norbertine priory serves needs both spiritual and social.

By Fr. Jeremy Tobin, O.Praem.

Given its demographics, some would argue that Mississippi is an unlikely place for a community of Catholics from the North to build a ministry. After all, fewer than 3 percent of the state’s population is Catholic, and many of its 82 counties have no Catholic churches at all.

Others — like the Norbertines in De Pere, Wis., who conceived such a ministry — see those figures from a different, missionary perspective. In the late 1980s, the Norbertines came to Mississippi’s Diocese of Jackson — the largest in land mass east of the Mississippi River — at the invitation of Bishop William Houck. There, the community sought to further race reconciliation and promote unity by reaching out to both African Americans and European Americans.

To begin their work, they were given the rectory of St. Mary Church in West Jackson. In September 1990, De Pere’s Abbot Benjamin Mackin, O.Praem, and Bishop Houck dedicated the rectory as the first Priory of St. Moses the Black.

A PATRON FOR PEACE

The Priory’s patron, Moses the Black, a fourth-century Ethiopian monk, was chosen because he was a martyr for peace. Refusing to fight marauding bandits, he and his community died as witnesses to peace. St. Norbert, the Order’s founder, also was famous as a peacemaker between warring factions.

Indeed, the vision of the Priory was and is one of peace — to foster reconciliation between races and to be a catalyst for dialogue and understanding. The increasing number of Hispanic immigrants has broadened this vision to include working for reconciliation between immigrant and native-born communities. The Priory’s ministries are multicultural and multiracial.

A NEW PRIORY

Under Abbot E. Thomas De Wane, O.Praem, the decision was made to build a free-standing priory on 106 acres of land just southwest of Jackson. Bishop Joseph Latino, Jackson’s current bishop, and Abbot Gary Neville, O.Praem, blessed and dedicated the new Priory of St. Moses the Black in November 2004.

Since relocating, the community’s influence has broadened in both geography and scope. The Priory engages in outreach from Yazoo City to Carthage, from Canton to McComb, and beyond, providing pastoral ministry in churches without resident priests. Parishes served include Raymond, Gluckstadt, Canton and Port Gibson. The Norbertines’ pastoral ministry also extends to prisons, hospitals and nursing homes, and Jackson’s Carmelite nuns.

The Priory is fast becoming a place of support for the priests and religious of this huge diocese. Many come by themselves or in small groups to rest a while and talk to God in a place of stability, peace and renewal.

Another ministry focus is social justice and advocacy. Norbertines collaborate with many organizations in continuing the struggle for human rights in Mississippi.

Furthering its mission of reconciliation, the priory hosts gatherings both Catholic and ecumenical. The coming together of groups at the Priory for meetings and retreat helps individuals relate in new ways conducive to relationship building.

The Priory’s outreach also touches the academic community. A Norbertine presence in the psychology department of Jackson State University continues as it has almost from the Priory’s beginning.

In addition, each day the Priory celebrates Mass and prays the Hours — a scheduled communal prayer practice — welcoming others to join them.

A VISION OF UNITY

When five Norbertines from Berne Abbey came to Wisconsin, Fr. Bernard Pennings, O.Praem, who would become the community’s abbot, had a vision that stamped their Abbey. They were called “The American Mission.”

The Priory in Mississippi continues in Pennings’ missionary spirit. Its residents further “The American Mission” throughout this missionary diocese, working multiculturally, multiracially and multilingually to bring people together. This is the spirit of St. Norbert, of Moses the Black and of Abbot Pennings. To paraphrase the 80th Psalm, the Lord took a tender vine and planted it. The Priory works to ensure that its roots reach from the great river on the west to the border of Alabama on the east, and that its branches spread to provide a haven of peace and reconciliation to all who come to this holy place.
The Abbey in Springtime

As the "new" St. Norbert Abbey celebrates its 50th anniversary, we look back at how this welcoming place apart came to be.

By Lisa Strandberg

The winter of 1959 was a white one, recalls Fr. Bill Ribbens, O.Praem. But it wasn't the record-setting February and March snowfalls that made the season most memorable for him and the other residents of St. Norbert Abbey in De Pere.

Instead, it was coming home that fixed that particular winter in the minds and hearts of Ribbens and 74 of his fellow Norbertines. For on Feb. 2, the men left behind what had been St. Norbert Abbey to occupy a newly constructed facility that would be the Norbertines' main residential and spiritual seat.

After growing over the course of 60 years from a handful of European Norbertine priests who arrived in Northeast Wisconsin more than a century ago to a body of some 100 men, the Norbertines found themselves in need of a sacred space to call their own. Here, the story of the birth of a community — and of an abbey.

A Growing Community

When the Diocese of Green Bay needed stronger communication with several rural, Dutch- and Flemish-speaking parishes under its purview in the early 1890s, it called on the Norbertines at Berne Abbey in Holland to help bridge the gap. Five of them, led by Fr. Bernard H. Pennings, O.Praem, arrived in 1893 and went to work.

Five years later while serving St. Joseph Church in De Pere, Pennings observed a lack of local education for young men interested in the priesthood. Living the Norbertine principle of addressing the needs one encounters in the wider community, he taught his first Latin class on Sept. 10, 1898, in the rectory kitchen — and thus arose St. Norbert College, the world's only Norbertine institution of higher learning.

Integral as administrators and professors at the college, a growing group of Norbertines had established their original abbey on campus. It was to that abbey that Ribbens moved after completing his study at the Norbertines' Madison novitiate — a place of training for men in their first year with the Order.

Ribbens describes the first abbey as "a two-story wooden building between St. Joseph Church and the priory building that was there." Additionally, some of the men lived in a house across the street obtained when the Abbey more or less spilled over.

"My recollections of it was we were really cramped together," Ribbens says. Shared rooms and bunk beds were the norm, and the noisy, crowded rec room practically overflowed with men in the evenings.

"We kind of lived cheek to jowl," agrees Fr. Jerome Tremel, O.Praem., who joined the order in 1947 and served as De Pere's abbot from 1970 to 1982.

Such conditions caused concerns beyond those of simple creature comforts. For one, the Norbertines traditionally observe a separation between seminarians — those studying for the priesthood — and those already ordained, an aim difficult to achieve given space limitations.

Furthermore, the "life in common" that the Norbertines honor and celebrate proved a real challenge to manage — a point not lost on the Order's highest authority, Abbot General Hubert A. Noots, O.Praem., whom Tremel says "complained always that we didn't have a proper abbey."

"Once the church was completed and dedicated, everything took place in there. You didn't have to divide and subdivide. … All that really enhanced the experience for me."

Fr. Bill Ribbens, O.Praem., one of the first Norbertines to move into the new Abbey

Central to that complaint was the lack of an Abbey church. Says Ribbens, "St. Joseph Church was a parish church, and it also served (St. Norbert High School), and it also served the college, and it also served the Norbertine community."

The church's multifaceted nature caused considerable scheduling issues. These the Norbertines solved by holding their various daily communal prayer times in whatever facility was available, often packed shoulder to shoulder into a room intended for something else entirely.

But there was one problem they couldn't solve with logistical creativity. The size of Old St. Joe's, as the church became known, simply couldn't accommodate the Norbertine liturgy. According to the Order's tradition, saying a proper Mass requires 13 priests — and 13 priests and their associated crosiers, miters and the like take up a lot more square footage than the modest church had to offer.

All of the spatial and logistical challenges the Norbertines faced pointed to one solution: construction of a new Abbey.
Creating Sacred Space

Discussion of that solution began in earnest after Pennings’ death in 1955. He had led the Norbertines in De Pere for nearly 60 years, and a change of leadership brought a change of perspective on the subject.

Under the direction of Abbot Sylvester Killeen, O.Praem., plans for the new Abbey took shape. Its design fell to Berners, Schober, and Kilp, a Green Bay architectural firm “well known for its modernist, spare style,” according to Fr. Stephen Rossey, O.Praem., director of environment for the Abbey. The firm’s charge: to create a building ancient in feel but new in functionality that would, like its European counterparts, last for centuries.

Furthering the cause, Victor McCormick, an area attorney and alumnus of St. Norbert College, gifted the Norbertines with 87 acres of land at the northern limits of the city of De Pere — at the time the largest single donation received by the Norbertine Order in the U.S. McCormick’s gift, enhanced by the purchase of 40 adjoining acres, provided a site intentionally set apart from the hustle and bustle.

“There was a whole thing about not being involved in the world,” says Tremel of the Norbertines’ orientation as contemplatives in action. In fact, vidi mundi — Latin for “I saw the world” — at one time was a confessable fault for novices in the Order.

While that’s no longer so, building the spacious new Abbey in such a serene setting did do wonders for the Norbertines, both in terms of their common spiritual life and their numbers.

Ribbens recalls occasionally stopping by the Abbey church, completed between the February move-in and the June dedication, to check on the workers’ progress. In particular, he remembers watching the marble go up on the walls.

“One the church was completed and dedicated, everything took place in there. You didn’t have to divide and subdivide,” he says. “You had nice acoustics and there was a nice organ playing, and all that really enhanced the experience for me.”

Building on a New Foundation

The new home must have enhanced communal life for others as well. Within just a few years of the Abbey’s construction, a rising number of new initiates to the Order called for additions to the building.

“The group expanded so the back wing (where the Center for Norbertine Studies currently is housed) was built for novices. And at the time there were 102 seminarians,” Tremel says.

The Order kept growing from there, he adds. “When I took office (as abbot) in 1970, I think there were 186 (seminarians).”

In the meantime during the mid 1960s, about 40 Norbertines had left De Pere to establish a priory in Daylesford, Penn., which eventually became its own abbey. Later on, smaller groups still tied to the Abbey set up priories in New Mexico and Mississippi with ministries that continue to expand today (associated stories on pages 3 - 4).

In many ways, the new Abbey, first occupied in the dead of winter in 1959, carried the De Pere Norbertines into an exceptional kind of spring — a time of renewal and radical growth for the community. From this fresh, sacred space, an increasing number of contemplatives were launched into action — and to it they were welcomed home to prepare for their good works in the world.

Dedication Day

Like a graduation or a wedding day, the official opening of a new abbey is a major affair. Without a doubt, June 16, 1959 — the day 50 years ago that De Pere’s St. Norbert Abbey was dedicated — loomed large on the calendars of Norbertines the world over.

“It was a long ceremony with lots of people — abbots from Europe, dignitaries. It was a big event ... It was very ceremonious,” says Fr. Bill Ribbens, O.Praem. Among the first seminarians to move into the Abbey, Ribbens served as a sacristan for its dedication, preparing vestments and making accommodations for visitors from around the globe.

Those visitors had traveled far and thus spent as much as a week at the Abbey. “The dining room was full. People were eating all over the place,” Ribbens recalls. “They were busy days.”

The excitement didn’t end with that week’s festivities, either. For Abbot Sylvester Killeen, O.Praem., under whose leadership the new Abbey came to be, Ribbens says, “Everything was a historic event because it was the first time we did it there.”
Making Community
His Mission


"I hardly knew what it was like to attend Mass in the pew," Tremel says of his boyhood.

Still, his vocation did not become clear until his last year at Catholic Central High School, one of several Green Bay secondary schools owned and operated by Norbertines in the 1940s, when Tremel came of age. His teachers there — all Norbertines themselves — and especially the relationships they shared piqued his interest in religious life.

"I saw a group of priests that were friendly with each other," he says. "It wasn't that it was anything exclusive, it was just that the whole bunch seemed to get along well."

A road trip in the spring of 1947 to the Norbertines' Madison, Wis., novitiate — a place of training for men in their first year with the Order — convinced him to join, and Tremel became a Norbertine that August. He was ordained in 1954.

In 1951, prior to his ordination, he entered the pool of teachers that had drawn him to the Order. He taught math and physics at Green Bay's Catholic high schools and later, after earning master's and doctorate degrees, became a St. Norbert College math professor. (Tremel also served the college as a 16-year trustee, chairing the board for four years.)

While education has figured prominently in his ministry and his life, Tremel considers his efforts as abbot to build collegiality among Norbertines — and to flatten the Order's traditional hierarchy — his major achievement. A sense of community first brought him into the Order, and Tremel's life's work has centered on broadening and deepening it.

Says Tremel of the mission of those in the Order, "We have to do something. We have to work, but our primary apostolate basically is community."

On his call into priesthood:

Tremel describes his call as internal — and subtle. "There's something inside, I think ... It's not like a dove coming down and sitting on your shoulder."

On a mother's influence:

"I think there were people whose vocations were in their mothers," Tremel says. "Wouldn't it be nice to have a priest in the family? — that kind of thing."

But that wasn't Tremel's mother. Though a devout woman, she tried to talk him out of becoming a priest. "She didn't think I was serious about it," Tremel says. "I think she figured I was trying to get out of ROTC."

(Perhaps she was right, at least in part. As a high school faculty member in the '60s, Tremel successfully campaigned to change ROTC from compulsory to elective.)

On his pivotal moments as a priest:

"I never had very much inclination or talent, I figured, for pastoral ministry. I couldn't see myself in a parish," Tremel says. "I think most of (my) pivotal moments were as a Norbertine ... getting excited, for instance, about the possibility for community life."
A Student’s View

As a campus tour guide at St. Norbert College — the world’s only Norbertine institution of higher learning — junior Josh Jones ’10 answers plenty of questions from prospective students, their parents and other visitors. Here, he reflects on one query that he hears frequently — and how he might respond to it differently.

When I’m leading a tour around the St. Norbert College campus and describing the three core traditions that form the foundation of St. Norbert College — the Catholic intellectual, liberal arts and Norbertine traditions — I’m often asked “What is a Norbertine?” or “Who are the Norbertines?”

When the question arises, I am quick to revert to my tour guide script to say that the Norbertines are the religious order that the college’s founder, Bernard Pennings, belonged to. Tour participants seem satisfied by that, and we continue on with the tour.

While this short answer is enough to quell curiosity, it doesn’t say anything about what the Norbertines have come to mean to me. The Norbertines are much more than the religious order to which Bernard Pennings belonged, or the order whose mission and heritage the college strives to advance. They are confidants, trusted advisers and, most importantly, close friends. They are a group of extraordinary men that over the course of three years I have come to know, cherish and love.

What I once viewed as a religious order has morphed into an extremely diverse group of men, each one possessing a unique set of personal characteristics that, when combined, allow them to respond to the needs of the community here in De Pere and wherever it is that they minister. Through my interactions with them I have come to truly understand what is meant by communio, the guiding Norbertine principle about which I first learned in a college classroom.

The next time someone asks “Who are the Norbertines?” they can expect more than the scripted, tour-guide response.


The world, our Church and every local community needs men and women with intelligence, excellent interpersonal skills and a deep desire to grow in their faith. The Norbertine community of St. Norbert Abbey offers men a communal life in which together they seek to meet those needs through prayer, ministry and shared living.

Whether you are in college, recently graduated or already gaining experience in a career, we are open to discerning with you. We will help you choose the Norbertine way of life with great respect for you and the community.

Men with the desire and the will to live, to sacrifice, to love and to work together in spreading the good News of Jesus Christ will consider the questions at right as they make the choice to pursue a religious vocation with the Norbertines.

- Do I have the desire to live in community with its demands of sharing and collaboration?
- Do I want to foster a discipline of communal, liturgical prayer?
- Am I willing to sacrifice some of my personal wants for the sake of a communal purpose?
- Do I have the skills to live a simple and chaste life in dialogue with community leadership?
- How am I prepared to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ministry among the faithful?
- What are my interests and gifts and how might I share them with God’s people?

For more information on a Norbertine vocation, call 920-337-4333, e-mail vocations@norbertines.org, or visit www.norbertines.org/vocation.

THE MEN OF THE ABBEY CHURCH
By Bishop Robert Morneau
Summer 1993

Watch the windows for the story.
To the west in stained glass dwells the Trinity and the noble Norbert. High on the south wall is told the Eucharist in nine chapters, and to the north the divine office, the community at prayer.

But the story is larger than glass and to find it one must go to classrooms, the slums of Lima, the parishes of Green Bay, Jackson, Albuquerque. There the people are in search of God and joining them the men in white.

‘Tis in song that the story is loudest “Vivat in aeternum, in aeternum vivat!”

Time meshes with eternity — fulfilling the Norbertine mission.
For 30 Years,
the Norbertine Center for Spirituality
has served as an ecumenical haven for those seeking the sacred.
By Judy Turba

Imagine a gathering of Norbertines who were dreamers of possibilities; a determined, visionary chairperson; a supportive abbot; and an empty wing of a magnificent abbey. Imagine.

In 1978, such a group, led by Fr. Joel Garner, O.Praem., and encouraged by Abbot Jerome Tremel, O.Praem., began discussing the use of a portion of St. Norbert Abbey vacated by the move of theological training to Chicago. After one year of collective imagining, the group agreed that this wonderful space could and should be used for the spiritual growth and development of lay women and men, as well as religious persons. Their dream: that this empty wing of the Abbey would be opened to the public so that all might have an opportunity to experience this holy space, this sacred ground.

This dream was affirmed by Bishop Robert Morneau, who had lived at the Abbey in the early 1980s and said, “I wonder if there isn’t a need for some type of spirituality center in our diocese (offering) programs, retreats, workshops, ‘desert days’ and a place of solitude and rest.”

Not only was space available, but numerous Norbertines also offered their involvement in this new initiative. Thus, in 1979, the Norbertine Center for Spirituality (formerly known as the Ministry and Life Center) was founded.

“The underlying purpose of the Center has always been the belief that Norbertines, as they work with and for those who seek spiritual growth and development, themselves grow and develop spiritually,” says Garner, who was named the founding director. “We felt the Abbey was a gift to us from the people and that, in turn, it should be used by everyone.”

One of Garner’s first decisions was to name Dr. Anne Egan, “who brought a unique and valuable perspective to the Center’s development,” co-director of the facility. Egan’s appointment affirmed the Norbertine principle of complementarity — that men and women, lay and religious, young and old, all enrich each other’s lives.

Together, Garner and Egan developed innovative seminars, days of reflection and spiritual programming and directed retreats. The Norbertine Center also hosted various events, including Marriage and Engaged Encounters, addiction recovery retreats and religious retreats for both the diocese and other denominations.

“Being immersed in the religious tradition of the Norbertines was very formative for me, a blessing in my life,” says Egan, who in 1983 was named director of the Center, one of the country’s first lay women to lead a spirituality retreat center at an abbey.

Five subsequent directors brought their own special gifts and ministries to the Center. (See sidebar for a chronology.) Under its various leaders, the Norbertine Center came to offer a ministry for the deaf, scripture studies, sessions in male spirituality as well as personality and prayer, and a labyrinth.

“It’s wonderful having so near at hand an oasis of tranquility where communing with one’s inner being becomes a possibility. Add to this lovely park-like grounds complete with labyrinth, warm and inviting meeting rooms in the exquisite Abbey, a wide variety of thought-provoking programs, and gracious Norbertine hospitality, and you have the surefire formula for a spirit-enriching and mind-expanding sojourn.

We are grateful for the Center for Spirituality and hope that many others will experience the goodness of this remarkable resource.”

— Ken and Marijean Zahorski
Not only have its directors brought their expertise to the Center, but devoted and gifted staff members also have contributed to its success, popularity and nourishing environment. Spiritual directors, program and group facilitators, retreat directors, office managers and housekeepers all have played their part.

Given the Center’s rich past, it is worth noting that jubilee years like this one — 2009 marks the 50th anniversary of the Abbey and the 30th anniversary of the Center — are really about the future. While it is important to honor the past, it is imperative to look to the future, too, and the Center’s future is certainly full of promise and possibilities.

Under the guidance of current director Fr. Conrad J. Kratz, O.Praem., and in continued collaboration with the women and men, lay and religious, on staff, the Center has offered an increased quantity and variety of programs, which have been attended by record numbers of participants. Every program renews bodies, minds and souls, be it a series on St. Paul or Vatican II, a book discussion or a session focused on dreams, prayer or the spirituality of change.

“We continue to see a great number of people from all faiths growing in their relationship with God because of the Center’s programs, its welcoming hospitality and its sacred environment,” says Kratz. “We are also very conscious of those impacted by the economy, war and violence in our society, and commit ourselves to being a healing agent in their spiritual lives as well.”

“So many people find peace here,” says Bonnie Simonar, administrative assistant at the Center for more than 16 years. “They are able to let go of past hurts, fears, anger, sadness. They are able to think more clearly in this calm, serene setting.”

Sr. Donna Koch, OSF, who has served at the Center for more than 10 years, agrees. “This is a place of peace for so many people. They feel safe here and find the Abbey environment perfect for reflection and prayer.”

Because of the popularity and success of the Abbey’s spirituality center, the other Norbertine foundations in Jackson, Miss., and Albuquerque, N.M., also have developed spirituality centers and retreat houses. The Thea Bowman Spirituality Center, located within Mississippi’s St. Moses the Black Priory, serves the specific needs of Catholics in local parishes by providing spiritual renewal, including days of reflection and retreats.

At Santa Maria de La Vid Priory, Albuquerque, the Hermitage Retreat offers opportunities for quiet retreat, reflection and prayer. In celebration of its recently dedicated Norbertine Library, renowned authors and spiritual masters have spoken to those who seek a deeper and more authentic response to God in their lives.

Many souls seem weary these days, and in our weariness, faith often becomes even more important in our lives. The Norbertine Center for Spirituality continues to offer people of all faiths a reflective, sacred space and opportunities for spiritual growth and renewal within a warm and welcoming environment. It is indeed the Abbey’s gift to the people — one given to all.

“The underlying purpose of the Center has always been the belief that Norbertines, as they work with and for those who seek spiritual growth and development, themselves grow and develop spiritually.”

– Fr. Joel Garner, O.Praem.

NORBERTINE CENTER FOR SPIRITUALITY DIRECTORS
Fr. Joel Garner, O.Praem.
Anne Egan, D.Min.
Tony Wieczorek
Fr. Allen Scheible, O.Praem.
Fr. John Bostwick, O.Praem.
Fr. Xavier Colavechio, O.Praem.
Fr. Conrad J. Kratz, O.Praem.
Finding God in the Strangest Places

A Norbertine perspective on William P. Young’s “The Shack”

Most any individual of faith has longed for a personal encounter with a higher power. This universal desire has driven popular — and even secular — interest in William P. Young’s novel “The Shack” (Windblown Media, 2008), which chronicles a grieving father’s visitation from God. Here, theologian Fr. Roman Vanasse, O.Praem., shares a few thoughts on the book.

In “The Shack,” Young attempts to get us to look beyond our preconceptions and stereotypes, in no small part with one major device: He portrays the Trinity as two women and one man, none of whom are white. It’s an unorthodox concept, but God is a Spirit, after all, and can appear to us in any form, despite our own preconceived notions of him.

Jesus was constantly plagued by the preconceptions of the people of his day, who were expecting a political Messiah rather than a spiritual one. Jesus’ life, like Young’s book, offers a valuable lesson: We must accept God on his terms, not on ours.

Young makes some other important points in his book:
• God has a great respect and even reverence for the free will that he has given us and will never violate that free will. Without free will, there can be no real love.
• God loves us and is present within us, even and especially in our greatest suffering — and even when our pain prevents our awareness of that presence.
• Evil flows from a false sense of our independence from God.
• We must give up our desire to be independent and learn to live in total dependence on God, just as Jesus did.

The weak points in Young’s book are mostly omissions. For example, the author does not recognize the existence of a primal evil or the need for prayer. Likewise, Young does not acknowledge our need for hierarchy and institutions. Such organizations may be flawed but still are necessary to keep us on the right path. It is too easy for us to deceive ourselves; we need the help of others traveling the same road.

Still, we must accept the book for what it is, valuing it for the deep spiritual truths it explains in such a clear and moving way. It is not a substitute for Scripture and is not intended to be. Rather, we must read and treasure it for what it is, just as God treasures us for what we are.

Fr. Vanasse, O.Praem., has a doctorate in theology from the Gregorian University in Rome and has done extensive reading and teaching in the field of spirituality and mystical prayer.

Read more of Fr. Vanasse’s reflections on “The Shack” at: www.norbertines.org/recent_presentations.html or on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEfT8T5zHw

The Abbey Labyrinth

Walking this sacred path teaches spiritual seekers exactly what they need to learn — even if they don’t know what it is.

By Sr. Donna Koch, OSF

Many people speak of their spirituality as a journey, walking a spiritual path. Some are expanding their spiritual horizons by literally walking a spiritual path, the labyrinth — a prayer tool for all people seeking the divine, regardless of religious tradition.

While the labyrinth is laden with symbolism, there is no right or wrong way to walk it. Walkers find their own pace, and the labyrinth leads the way and offers its own lessons.

Whoever enters the labyrinth with expectations rather than openness will exit disappointed. Rather, by following the labyrinth’s path, you can still your mind and silence your expectations, finding illumination and peace.

The labyrinth, though not holy itself, can take us to the holy. For people tired of words, it can help us focus in the quiet, find a pattern in the chaos and make sense of life. At times throughout the journey, we may feel lost, but trusting the path, we invariably find the center — as well as energy, vision and courage to meet the demands of our lives.

The St. Norbert Abbey labyrinth, located directly north of the Abbey and west of the Norbertine Center parking lot, is open for walking from dawn to dusk. For more information, or to attend Sr. Donna Koch’s “Walking A Sacred Path: The Prayer Labyrinth” presentation at 6 p.m. on May 21, contact the Center at 920-337-4315.
THE NORBERTINE VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY, a new St. Norbert Abbey initiative coordinated by ELLEN MOMMAERTS, will begin its work in the fall. The program provides volunteers the opportunity to live communally while sharing their talents and experience in serving the diverse population in the Olde North Neighborhood of Green Bay. A home has been purchased to serve as the volunteers’ residence, and the volunteer selection process has begun. Additional information can be found online at www.norbertines.org.

FR. KEEN DE GROOT, O.PRAEM., recently spoke at the Leadership Green Bay conference regarding the Hispanic population in our area and the challenges its members face. De Groot also serves on the St. Vincent Hospital Advisory Council.

In Memoriam

FR. DONALD CLAUDE NOEL, O.PRAEM., age 78, a member of the Norbertine community of St. Norbert Abbey, passed into God’s eternal kingdom on Nov. 21, 2008. Noel was born on Aug. 2, 1930, in Blue Island, Ill. He attended Quigley Minor Seminary in Chicago and St. Mary of the Lakes Major Seminary at Mundelein, Ill., and was vested as a novice at St. Norbert Abbey on Aug. 28, 1954. He professed Simple Vows on Aug. 28, 1956, Solemn Vows on Aug. 28, 1959, and was ordained on Sept. 2, 1959.

With a bachelor’s in philosophy and master’s degrees in library science and sculpture, Noel worked as librarian and media director at several Norbertine high schools, the University of Notre Dame and Northwestern Michigan College. He also served as associate pastor at St. Willibrord Parish, Chicago, and as an art teacher at the parish’s high school.

To read more about Fr. Noel’s life, including his creation of an authentic bust of St. Norbert of Xanten, the Norbertine Order’s founder, visit www.norbertines.org/whats_new_in_memoriam.html.

St. Norbert Abbey is happy to honor requests for prayer for yourself or a loved one.

To submit such a request, please visit www.norbertines.org/office_prayers_gifts_request.html or call Fr. David McElroy, O.Praem., at 920-337-4307.
2009 Spring Calendar for St. Norbert Abbey

MAY
17 – Taizé Prayer, Abbey Church, 7 p.m.
20 – Wednesdays for Women Series (Srs. Judy Miller and Shawn Madigan):
Mary in Scripture and Tradition, 9:30–10:30 a.m.; Mary and the Prayer Life of the Church, 6:30–7:30 p.m.
21 – Coffee and Conversation with the Norbertines: Abbot Gary Neville, 10 a.m.
21 – Walking a Sacred Path: The Prayer Labyrinth (Sr. Donna Koch), 6–7:30 p.m.
24 – Abbey tour (Fr. Stephen Rossey), following coffee and rolls after 10 a.m. Mass
27 – Wednesdays for Women Series (Srs. Judy Miller and Shawn Madigan):
Mary and the Prayer Life of the Church, 9:30–10:30 a.m.; Mary in Scripture and Tradition, 6:30–7:30 p.m.
31 – Abbey tour (Fr. Stephen Rossey), following coffee and rolls after 10 a.m. Mass

JUNE
7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 – Being at home in your soul’s dwelling place: A retreat in meditative writing (Fr. Fran Dorff)
21 – Taizé Prayer, Abbey Church, 7 p.m.
28 – Abbey tour (Fr. Stephen Rossey), following coffee and rolls after 10 a.m. Mass

JULY
19 – Taizé Prayer, Abbey Church, 7 p.m.
Private retreats offered

AUGUST
16 – Taizé Prayer, Abbey Church, 7 p.m.
Private retreats offered

SEPTEMBER
2, 9, 16, 23 – Soup and the Soul Luncheon Series (Fr. Conrad Kratz):
Saintly and Savory People of the Old Testament, 11:45 a.m.–12:45 p.m.
8 – Ten Prayers to which God Always Answers Yes (Fr. Alfred McBride), 6:30–8 p.m.
15 – Centering Exercises (Eric Peters), 6:30–8 p.m.
17 – Informed Conscience Series (Dr. Paul Wadell), 6:30–8 p.m.
20 – Taizé Prayer, Abbey Church, 7 p.m.
29 – Acupressure (Eric Peters), 6:30–8 p.m.

OCTOBER
7, 14, 21, 28 – Wednesdays for Women Series (Srs. Judy Miller and Shawn Madigan):
Women’s Biography as Theology/Spirituality Guide, 10–11:50 a.m. or 6:30–8 p.m.
15 – Informed Conscience Series (Dr. Paul Wadell), 6:30–8 p.m.
17 – Canon John Bruce Concert Series: organist Mike Stefanek, Abbey Church, 2 p.m.
19 – Taizé Prayer, Abbey Church, 7 p.m.
20 – Rare Beasts and Unique Adventures: A Woman’s Journey to Zambia (Judy Turba), 6:30–8 p.m.
21 – Just Faith: Crossing Borders (Br. Steve Herro), 6:30–9 p.m.

The Norbertine Center for Spirituality fall brochure will be available in August, with a complete list of programs/retreats. The fall listings will also be available online at www.norbertines.org/programs.html.

Printed on recycled paper.