

# CANONS REGULAR OF PRÉMONTRÉ

Our Lady of England Priory - Storrington - UK



Do you want to serve God  
as a Norbertine Priest or Brother?

## The History and Charism of the Order of Prémontré

The Priests and Brothers of the order of Prémontré have over 870 years of experience and tradition behind them. The Canonry of Our Lady of England (Canonry is our word used to describe an independent abbey or priory), is part of an Order that is among the oldest in the Catholic Church. The Order of Prémontré was founded 1121 by Saint Norbert of Xanten (Germany). Saint Norbert, a friend of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, is known both as the Apostle of the Blessed Sacrament and of Peace. Saint Norbert founded his order in the valley of Prémontré about 11 miles south-west of Laon. The site was a desolate wilderness, but the name of Prémontré was soon to become well known and famous throughout Christendom.

This accounts for the various names by which the Order is known: Norbertine Canons after the Order's founder; Premonstratensian after the place where the Order was founded; and the Canons Regular after the legal title given to those religious who celebrate the Divine Office in common and who have adopted the religious life as a means of perfection in their priestly life and ministry.

The Canons of Prémontré came to England in 1143 and, at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in England by Henry VIII, had 33 abbeys and 2 nunneries. The last house, the Abbey of Eggleston, in North Yorkshire closed in 1539.

After an absence of 333 years, the order came back to England. The first foundation was made at Crowle in Lincolnshire in 1872 by Father (later Abbot) Martin Francis Geudens, who came to England from the Abbey of Tongerlo in Belgium.

Norbertines are religious priests who follow the Rule of Saint Augustine and their own Constitutions, and take the three vows of Poverty, Celibacy and life in common under Obedience.

## Ministry and Service

As Canons Regular, wherever we are, we try to build up an authentic Christian community. We emphasize three things in our way of life:

**Community:** Where we work as a team with the support of those who are "of one mind and heart in God". (from the Rule of Saint Augustine)

**Liturgy:** Our daily life is centred on the celebration of Mass and revolves around our daily Conventual Mass and the Divine Office which, joined to private prayer and meditation, forms the essence of the contemplative aspect of our way of life.

**Apostolic Work:** Our contemplative religious life is shared with our sisters and brothers, the people of God, in all forms of pastoral work but, in obedience to the Holy Father and under the pastoral guidance of our bishops, we give preference to the more pressing needs of our Church in the modern world. We are, as our Order's motto declares: "Prepared to do any good work". The missionary spirit of Saint Norbert has been a marked feature of our Order since the very beginning in 1121.

**Present work:** As a community we serve the pastoral needs of the parish of Our Lady of England, Storrington. We offer Days of Reflection for groups from our diocese and beyond. One of the members of our community serves as a prison

chaplain and we have in the past fulfilled similar ministries in hospitals, schools etc. In addition to this we have a considerable amount of land which we have planted up as vineyard and woodland. We direct a large group of volunteers (friends, parishioners) in the ongoing tasks of maintaining these initiatives. Those interested in our way of life would be expected to join in this work at some level.

## **Formation Programme**

In Our Lady of England Canonry, Storrington, the formation process distinguishes four stages:

- The Postulancy, during which the aspirant gets to know us, our charisms, our work and where we actually work, and we also get to know them. We accept candidates who are of normal intelligence and good health. We judge each application on its merits but, as a rule, only accept candidates who have completed their secondary education and are aged 21-45 years. If the Prelate's Council approve of the aspirants application he will then proceed to the next stage - the Noviciate. (The title of Prelate is given to all Governing Superiors, either Abbots or Priors de Regime).
- This begins with the reception of the White Habit of the Order usually around the 8<sup>th</sup> September, the Feast of the Birthday Our Lady. During the one year noviciate (which can be prolonged for another year), the novice is incorporated and integrated into the life of the community. He has formal classes from the Novice Director and learns about religious life by actually living it.

- During the third period, and if judged suitable, the candidate will make a temporary commitment by making vows for three years. He then commences studies for the priesthood at some centre of theological formation. Our non-priest-brother candidates may also pursue a similar course of studies or further training in some trade or profession. This third stage concludes with Solemn Profession for life after which the newly professed Canon passes onto stage four:
- In which he prepares for his future ministry which is presupposed by his act of affiliation and incorporation into the life and apostolic pastoral ministry of his chosen canonry. In consultation with the Prelate and those responsible for his training, he prepares himself for a life of ministry which, for the clerical candidate, finds its completion in ordination as priest.

## Norbertine Experience

Almost 900 years have built up a Norbertine tradition. This is based on five main principles:

**The Principle of Common Prayer.** This is especially true in our liturgical Prayer of the Church (the Divine Office) and the Eucharist. St Norbert is "The Apostle of the Blessed Sacrament", and Norbertines witness to the reality of the presence of Christ among us in prayer and the Mass.

**The principle of self-emptying service.** Norbertines are willing to give up personal advantage for the good of the community. We work together and seek to build up not only the Church, the Body of Christ, but also the community with whom we live.

**The principle of collegiality.** By this we have a firm commitment to government by consultation to interdependence in decision making.

**The principle of subsidiarity.** Decisions which can be made by a local community are done so. Each canonry is independent and lives and works in its own local area under the guidance of its own superior. The work done in Britain, the USA or the Third World is consequently different but all of us are at the service of the Universal Church.

**The principle of complementarity.** All Norbertine priests, brothers, sisters and associates work together and share their talents in order to enrich the whole Christian community. All of us, together, share with others the Good News of Jesus Christ.

## St Norbert

Norbert was born around the year 1080 in Xanten near Cologne. He was the son of minor nobility and by his birth was entitled to a series of Church benefices, including one as a Canon of the Cathedral of Xanten. As he grew into adulthood he began a career at the Court of the Emperor Henry V. Any idea of a religious vocation was far from his mind until a dramatic conversion experience, likened to that of St Paul on the road to Damascus, turned Norbert into an ardent reformer on the 12th century Church.

From being a cleric in 'name' only, Norbert was ordained a priest in 1115 and began a process of trying to tighten the discipline and zeal of his fellow Canons of Xanten. Norbert was setting a comparatively high standard for his time, and to begin with he met only indifferent success. He resigned his Canonry, sold his possessions, gave the proceeds to the poor and began to live according to the Christian Gospel. Wishing to meet Pope Gelasius II he travelled to St Gilles in France where the Pope was currently staying. The Holy Father gave him a mission to preach the Gospel anywhere he wanted. His reputation as a preacher grew, especially on the French/German borders, and soon attracted a like-minded cleric, Hugh of Fosses, who joined him as a fellow preacher.

St Norbert was invited to reform the lifestyle of the Cathedral Canons of Laon and the diocesan bishop, Bartholomew, gave Norbert and Hugh a piece of land in a remote area called Prémontré, and here they settled with eleven others in 1121. A new Religious Order was being born - the Canons Regular of Prémontré, or the Norbertine Canons. On Christmas Day in 1121, they celebrated by dedicating themselves to a life of prayer, meditation and apostolic work in the Church, following the Rule of St Augustine. 885 years later, the Order is now a worldwide presence in the Church, '*Prepared for all good works*' as St Norbert intended.

St Norbert was primarily a preacher and a reformer in a Church which had become complacent, lax and open to the influences of the secular Rulers of the age, who tried to subvert the Church to their own purposes. The Church and State both had their rights and it was important not to blur the differences. Norbert was the obvious choice for the Archdiocese of Magdeburg and both Emperor and Pope approved of his appointment to the Archdiocese in 1126. Hugh of Fosses was left in charge of the monastery of Prémontré as its first abbot.

Prémontré had become a thriving community of priests, brothers, nuns and lay associates and from there the Order spread throughout Europe, reaching England in 1143. Meanwhile, Norbert exercised great pastoral care in Magdeburg, encouraging and

teaching orthodox Catholic doctrine in the face of local heresies and misunderstandings. His defence of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist after his preaching in Antwerp in 1124, and his success in resolving conflicts, earned him the titles 'Apostle of the Blessed Sacrament' and 'Peacemaker'.

At a time of disputed Papal election and Imperial interference, St Norbert was a loyal defender of the legitimate Pope, a true man of peace and one who sought justice when it was in danger of being overlooked. The Emperor Lothar II made St Norbert Chancellor of the German Empire in 1133. His loyalty to both his ecclesiastical and civil responsibilities, his fidelity to the reforms of the Church, and his inspiration in founding a new Religious Order of Canons Regular have made St Norbert one of the most influential churchmen of his time. He died on 6 June 1134 in Magdeburg.

In our annual Novena in his honour, which begins on 6 June, we can draw on his life to help us focus on the needs of a Church free from political interference, the need for justice and peace in a broken world, and an increase of lay communities working alongside the priests, brothers and sisters in their commitment to a life of prayer and apostolic works.

**If you would like to know more, please contact:**

**The Prior,  
Our Lady of England Priory, School Lane, Storrington,  
West Sussex RH20 4LN, UK**

***Telephone +44 (0)1903 742150***

***Fax: +44 (0)1903 740821***

**Email: [whitecanons.storrington@btinternet.com](mailto:whitecanons.storrington@btinternet.com)**

**Website: [www.norbertines.co.uk](http://www.norbertines.co.uk)**