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Pontifical Letter to the Abbot General of the Canons Regular of Prémontré (Premonstratensians) on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the Abbey of Prémontré

The following is the Pontifical Letter sent by Pope Francis to the Reverend Fr. Jozef Wouters, abbot general of the Premonstratensian Canons Regular, on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the Abbey of Prémontré:

Letter of the Holy Father

To the Most Reverend Father Jozef Wouters
Abbot General of the Premonstratensian Canons Regular

I have learned the good news that you have announced a Jubilee to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the foundation of the Abbey of Prémontré by Saint Norbert, and the birth of the first community from which the Order of Premonstratensian Canons Regular originated.

Saint Norbert is justly considered one of the most zealous architects of the Gregorian reform. Born around 1075, he became a canon of the chapter of Xanten after his ecclesiastical studies and, through the then bishop of Cologne, Frederick, he was introduced to the court of Emperor Henry V. Thus, Norbert quickly became involved in the events that marked the beginnings of the twelfth century. While the Emperor and lords claimed a right to intervene personally in the appointment of bishops and abbots by favoring people whom they liked, a new sensitivity to the demands of the Gospel and of the mission proper to the clergy grew within the Church. A number of men and women, inspired by God, began to question the attachment of ministers of the Church with merely worldly interests. Norbert was one of these.

When, in 1115, at the height of the Investiture Controversy, he had to choose a position between the Pope and the Emperor, he followed Bishop Frederick of Cologne and began a spiritual journey that was to lead him to an authentic conversion after a long process of discernment. Norbert renounced his life at the court and decided to live *solo Christo duce*, a lifestyle inspired by the Apostles. Ordained a deacon and a priest on the same day, he abandoned the refined apparel of the courtier in favour of the habit of a penitent. He tried, first of all, to convince

his brothers from the chapter of Xanten to embrace a new way of life, closer to the demands of the Gospel, but in vain. Norbert therefore decided to consult with various spiritual advisors: the Benedictine abbot Cono of Siegburg and the hermit Ludolph, and in Rolduc he became acquainted with a community of reformed canons regular who based their life on the Rule of Saint Augustine. Thus, he too began to preach penance and conversion and to lead a life of prayer and mortification; and – not a common practice at that time – he often, if not daily, celebrated the Eucharist.

The communities of your Order have accepted this inheritance and, for nine centuries, have carried out their mission in the spirit of the Rule of Saint Augustine, faithful to the meditation and preaching of the Gospel, drawing on the Eucharistic Mystery, source and summit of the life of the Church.

This way of life led Norbert to be increasingly criticized: he lived as an ascetic hermit, but still received the income he was entitled to as a canon; he preached, but with what mandate? Induced by these pressures, Norbert opted for an itinerant life. Inspired by the mission of the Apostles of Jesus, he set out and arrived in Saint Gilles in Provence. He walked on foot, with only one garment, a cloak and a stick, always carrying with him what was necessary for the celebration of the Eucharist, accompanied by two fellow pilgrims. In Saint Gilles, he met Pope Gelasius II who authorized him to be an apostolic preacher. Today more than ever, dear Brother, the proclamation of the Good News is necessary and requires on the part of everyone, especially of priests, a generous commitment and, even more, a strong coherence between the message proclaimed and the personal and common life.

Since his conversion and throughout his entire life, Norbert was a faithful servant of the Gospel and a loving son of the Church, obedient to the Pope. In order to receive confirmation of his status as a preacher and to meet the new Pope, – Callixtus II, elected in 1119, he returned to northern France where he met his childhood friend, Bishop Burchard of Cambrai, who marveled at the change in his lifestyle. Under these circumstances, Norbert met Hugh of Fosses, chaplain to the bishop of Cambrai. Hugh too was looking for a life more adherent to the Gospel and recognized in that meeting a gift from Providence. With the permission of his bishop, Hugh became Norbert's companion and followed him. Later, he would become the first abbot of Prémontré.

Norbert's biographies tell how he healed the sick along the way, banished evil spirits and succeeded in placating ancient feuds between noble families. These reconciliations brought peace to the regions where the population had suffered greatly from the continuous local wars. For this, Norbert is considered an apostle of peace. He did God’s work, acting in the name of the love of Christ. The ancient authors insist that Norbert always gathered in prayer before setting out to mediate and to foster reconciliations and restore peace, and that he was always faithful to celebrate the Eucharist to meet the Lord whose work he desired to undertake.

On his way to Reims to be received by Callixtus II, Norbert met with Bartholomew, bishop of Laon, who proposed to welcome him into his diocese. He offered him various possible places to settle. It was 1120, and Norbert chose the valley of Prémontré. Here he assembled a group of followers with whom he initiated an intense dialogue about the nature of their nascent community. Since many of them, like himself, were canons, all made canonical profession according to the Rule of Saint Augustine, on Christmas Day 1121, the date that marks the foundation of the community of Prémontré. This profession, in the context of the great Gregorian canonical movement, was a confirmation and deepening of their original commitment. Such, dear Brother, is also the meaning of your profession which establishes a strong bond between each of the members of the community and his own Church. And the mission of praying for and with the whole Church is rooted in this profession.

From the beginning, Prémontré has exerted great fascination. Many men and women joined the community of canons, which intended to mirror the primitive Church- described in the Acts of the Apostles. The initial ardent enthusiasm was structured in an austere religious life, of which hospitality and care for the poor and for pilgrims were an integral part. From the beginning, the Premonstratensians have shown great commitment to people outside the community, welcoming them willingly. Thus, new communities which followed Norbert's lifestyle were born rapidly; several existing communities asked to be affiliated with Prémontré.

Dear sons and daughters of Saint Norbert, always conserve this open heart, which also opens the doors of your home, to welcome those looking for a spiritual counsellor, those who ask for material assistance, and those who wish to share your prayer. May your liturgy always be “canonical”, that is, in praise of God, for the people of God and with the people.

Norbert's strong link with the Eucharist is still a source of inspiration for your apostolic life today. In 1124, at the request of the bishop of Cambrai, he went to Antwerp, where he was faced with the consequences of the “storm” previously caused by Tanchelm and his followers, who denied the validity of the Sacraments and especially of the Eucharist celebrated by priests living in concubinage. Norbert refuted this heresy. Because of this episode, he became regarded as an apostle of the Eucharist during the Catholic reformation. A model of faith for all and, in particular, for priests, Norberto always drew strength from the Eucharistic celebration, especially in situations of crisis or in the face of difficult tasks.

A few years after the foundation of Prémontré, when, in 1126, Norbert became archbishop of Magdeburg, Pope Honorius II granted him the approval of his life purpose, implemented according to the Rule of Saint Augustine in the communities under his guidance. Norbert never returned to Prémontré, but founded various other communities of canons in his episcopal city, some of them engaged in the evangelization of the surrounding region. As archbishop, he remained faithful to his original evangelical inspiration and supported the Pope in conflicts with the Emperor, making every effort to establish good relations between them, while maintaining the principle of free appointment to ecclesiastical offices.

In 1128, Norbert resigned from the responsibility of the communities under his leadership. These became abbeys under the direction of their own abbot. Hugh of Fosses then became the first abbot of the Abbey of Prémontré, and managed to unite a growing number of communities within the framework of an Order with its own statutes and a general chapter as the highest authority.

Nine centuries later, we give thanks for the movement initiated by Saint Norbert who was able to draw lessons from existing, proven structures of monastic origin, but clearly maintained the identity of the members of his Order as canons regular. During this long period, many women also adhered to the Norbertine ideal and still today they essentially dedicate themselves to the contemplative life. Furthermore, many lay people, while remaining in the world, join your communities according to various forms of affiliation. For their part, several Congregations of religious sisters share your spirituality and dedicate themselves to the apostolate, especially at the service of those who are most vulnerable on account of their social condition, health or age.

Thus, over the centuries, the Premonstratensian abbeys have developed an intense relationship with their territory, as from the beginning many canons have dedicated themselves to the pastoral care of parishes. Consequently, the abbeys have not only been active in caring for and welcoming the poor, but have developed and maintained contacts with people from all social classes. Thus, the inspiration of Saint Norbert has remained alive and is still one of the riches of the universal Church. Your Founder lived in many and different environments, but in every circumstance he let himself be guided by the Gospel: whether as an itinerant preacher, superior of a community, or bishop, he continued to listen to God and his brothers, and was able to discern the way to be followed in the various circumstances of life, without losing sight of its fundamental inspiration.

Through the intercession of Mary Most Holy, elected by Saint Norbert as the patroness of the Abbey of Prémontré and later proclaimed Queen of the Order, may the Premonstratensians, now widespread throughout the five continents, remain constantly faithful to a life *ad instar Apostolorum*.

Dear Brother, as a pledge of abundant heavenly graces I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the members of the Order, and to the religious sisters and lay people affiliated to your communities.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 6 June 2021, memorial of Saint Norbert

FRANCIS