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Molly VanDeelen Tollefson '07

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January 2021

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings:

The latest issue of the St. Norbert College Magazine named eight U.S. Norbertine communities, which included the Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph and the Congregation of Norbertine Sisters. Who are these Norbertine women, and how did their communities come to be?

Molly VanDeelen Tollefson '07

Answer:

My dearest Molly,

Your query is especially apt in the year that marks the 900th anniversary of my beloved Norbertine order, an occasion that brings me great joy. Women have played an important role in the order since its earliest years. Today, communities of Norbertine women reside in 13 countries across the globe. The two in the United States are relatively new, as you will see.

In 1997, the Norbertine Fathers of St. Michael's Abbey founded the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph in the Tehachapi Mountains of southern California. A much different environment than that of De Pere, to be sure!

This community of Norbertine Canonesses has grown from five founding members to more than 40 women who lead a cloistered life of prayer, contemplation and work, centered on the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. They support themselves



Ask the Abbot

As the founder of St. Norbert College, and having a prime seat in the center of campus throughout the years, I, Abbot Bernard Pennings, hold the answers to many of your burning questions about the college.

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with a wide range of activities that include dairy farming and cheesemaking – which those of us in Wisconsin can certainly appreciate! – as well as growing organic vegetables, breeding and training puppies, and operating the monastery’s gift shop and bookstore.

The Congregation of Norbertine Sisters, meanwhile, traces its U.S. origins to 2011 but its founding to 1902 by the Rev. Vojtech Frejka, my Norbertine contemporary from the Abbey of Strahov in Prague. Ten years ago, the Norbertine Sisters expanded beyond the borders of Europe upon accepting an invitation from the aforementioned Norbertine Fathers of St. Michael’s Abbey to start a new community in Orange County, Calif. Three sisters traveled from Slovakia all the way to Wilmington, a neighborhood of Los Angeles. (Their pioneering trek spanned even more distance than my own journey from the Netherlands to Wisconsin with two fellow Norbertines in 1893. Two enterprising trios of missionaries, separated by 118 years in time, but united in our commitment to sharing the Norbertine way of life with the world. Ever ancient, ever new, indeed!)

By 2019, the Wilmington community had grown to 10 and expanded to a second convent in nearby Costa Mesa. Their daily life centers on Mass, praying the Divine Office and Eucharistic Holy Hour – all cherished activities of my own, incidentally! These sisters are also active in ministry, which includes teaching in Catholic schools, providing religious education to children and adults, and alleviating poverty through a program that provides food and clothing to more than 700 families.

Both of these communities of Norbertine women do valuable work to ensure that the order’s legacy endures long past this 900th year. St. Norbert himself would be proud to see how many members these communities have gained in such a short span of time – and as someone who knows a thing or two about growing a faith community in a faraway place, I share that pride!

Responses to “Ask the Abbot” questions are penned by St. Norbert College staff in the name of Abbot Bernard Pennings, who founded St. Norbert College in 1898.

St. Norbert College

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