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Is it true that a Norbertine once served in Congress?

Libby Rickards

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October 2022

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings,

Is it true that a Norbertine once served in Congress?

Libby Rickards '25

Answer:

My dearest Libby,

I am pleased to report that this is indeed true. As election season is upon us, it is an especially appropriate time to recall the civic contributions of my Norbertine confrère and esteemed member of the Class of 1941, the Rev. Robert Cornell.

Father Cornell, born in 1919, graduated from both St. Norbert High School in 1937 and St. Norbert College. He entered St. Norbert Abbey as a novice in 1938 and was ordained as a priest in 1944. He became well versed in a variety of disciplines, studying philosophy and sociology at St. Norbert, and later earning his M.A. and Ph.D. in history



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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from The Catholic University of America. This appetite for knowledge served him well throughout a long and distinguished career as an educator, mostly at St. Norbert in two separate stints (1947-74 and 1979-2001) where he taught history and political science as a member of our esteemed faculty.

In 1974, on Father's third attempt, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives as a Democrat representing Wisconsin's Eighth Congressional District. He was re-elected in 1976. He was the second Catholic priest, and the only Norbertine, to be elected to Congress as a voting member. He served on the Education & Labor Committee and the Veterans Affairs Committee where, it gives me great pride to say, he took part in worthy efforts to reform the welfare system and obtain more educational benefits for our Vietnam veterans. As befits a truly Norbertine pastor and educator through and through, our confrere applied most of his salary toward internships in his Washington office for residents of northeastern Wisconsin, as well as toward student aid at all institutions of higher learning within his district.

Father Cornell lost his bid for re-election in 1978 and intended to run again in 1980. However, Pope John Paul I had decided that the Catholic priests in Congress should remove themselves from partisan politics, so Father concluded his political career and resumed teaching at St. Norbert. He chronicled his experience in Congress in his memoir, "Is There a Priest in the House?," which no doubt elicited a chuckle or two from its readers.

In 1984, the governor of Wisconsin named Dec. 16 Bob Cornell Day in recognition of his service in Congress, contributions to education and community activities. In fact, one of those activities, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was organizing and promoting country and rock concerts at Brown County Arena that featured well-known acts of their day like, dear me, Johnny Cash and June Carter, Santana, The Yardbirds and The Carpenters. Father Cornell donated the profits to students in need at St. Norbert and other area schools – yet another way in which he used a big stage to help other people.

Cornell died at St. Norbert Abbey in 2009 at the age of 89, having led a full and memorable life. His distinctively Norbertine legacy reflects the finest traditions of our beloved order and will continue to resonate on campus for years to come.

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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