



## **Abbot General Thomas Handgrätiger, O.Praem., Rome**

### **Message for the 850th Anniversary of the Death of Blessed Hugh of Fosses (1164-2014)**

This year we celebrate the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the first Abbot of Prémontré, Hugh of Fosses. This is an occasion to deal with this significant figure of our foundation history. If St. Norbert is considered the founder of the Order and its initiator, as the great extraordinary figure with tremendous charisma, then Hugh would be called the organizer, who gave structure and constitution to the young Order. Each year he called the abbots together at Prémontré and thereby established the General Chapter as the highest direction and decision making body of the Order. From him come the ideas for the first Statutes, for a life of St. Norbert, for a collection of the elections, ceremonies and other customs (cf. “*liber usuum*”).

Until now there was lacking a comprehensive biography of Hugh. In the 2008 *Analecta Praemonstratensia* there was published the first part of Erik Van Mingroot’s work on Blessed Hugh; the second part will be published in the anniversary year.<sup>1</sup> After the closing of the dependent priory of Bois-Seigneur-Isaac (Averbode), the bones of Blessed Hugh which had been kept and honored there came first to Averbode and then finally to the Generalate in Rome. From the Abbey of Frigolet the Postulator General brought another large relic of Blessed Hugh to Rome. A small part of the relics are in the Abbey of Leffe under the main altar.

#### **Representation**

Blessed Hugh is represented in art among other things, as an abbot holding a church (Villoria di Orbigo, Generalate), with a crozier, chalice and almutium (Park), with a crozier and statutes (Orange), Hugh together with Bishop Burchard of Cambrai (Geras), Hugh is presented by Norbert to the resurrected Christ (Windberg, Osterhofen). This last representation is based on a copper engraving by C. Galle, which was edited in “*Pro Hostia*” as a small picture with the title “St. Norbert and Bl. Hugh”. The Abbey of St. Michael Orange printed their own Vesper book for Vespers on the Feast of Blessed Hugh.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Van Mingroot, Hugo van Fosses als Kanunnik in Fosses-la-Ville en Cambrai (1087/95-1121/23). Bijdrag tot de ontstaansgeschiedenis van de Orde van Prémontré, in *Analecta Praemonstratensia* Tomus LXXXIV (2008) Fasc. 1-4, pp. 250-477 (First Part). The second Part of the Article (§§ 11-15 of 25) appears in *Analecta Praemonstratensia* Tomus LXXXIX (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Vespers. Feast of Blessed Hugh of Fosses, first Abbot of Premontré. February 10, 2009. Abbey Church of the Assumption St. Michael Abbey.

## **His Life**

“As court chaplain of Bishop Burchard of Cambrai Hugh joined Norbert whom he had met in Valenciennes on March 26, 1119. Previously Hugh was a cleric of the chapter of canons of his home city Fosses-la-Ville near Namur. He was especially attracted by Norbert’s ideal of the radical following of Christ and soon became his right hand as his representative in the direction of the mother abbey of Prémontré. After the founder of the Order was appointed Archbishop of Magdeburg, the confreres after 1128 elected their prior, Hugh as first abbot of Prémontré. He built the abbey church and convent buildings. In order to maintain unity among the numerous foundations of Norbert he called the superiors of all the houses together for a meeting. From this the General Chapter later developed. In addition he put together the first Statutes and the first ceremonial book with the liturgical prescriptions of the Premonstratensian Order and had the life of St. Norbert written. Thanks to Hugh a direction was created which made it possible for the young Order to continue through the centuries. He is considered as the organizer and first Abbot General of the Premonstratensians; he essentially had a part in the inner consolidation and quick blooming of the Order, which under his direction grew to more than 100 monasteries. In 1151, after 33 years as Abbot of Prémontré, Hugh resigned and died on February 10, presumably in 1164.”<sup>3</sup>

His beatification did not occur until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bishop Dr. Thomas Louis Heylen, O. Praem. of Namur in 1909 set in motion the beatification process for the Servant of God, Hugh. Under the Postulator General and later Abbot General Hubert Noots the informative process was inaugurated in Rome. On July 5, 1927 the Congregation of Rites approved his cult “*ab immemorabile*”, whereupon Pope Pius IX, on July 13, 1927, raised Hugh to the honors of the altar. Thus Norbert and Hugh rise from the series of great foundation personalities from the beginnings of our Order:

Without Norbert the Premonstratensian Order would not exist,  
without Hugh it would no longer exist.

## **Evaluation for the Order today**

If we are keeping the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death this year, then this event should not be passed over in the Order. We have every reason to hold his memory in honor since he is considered the second founder of the Order. Through his great loyalty to St. Norbert, through his energetic work as organizer, which created the necessary structural framework for the Order, through his long 35 year direction of the Order as the first abbot of Prémontré and through his deep spirituality he has “placed our Order on a firm foundation and wonderfully expanded it” (Prayer for the Day). The Order experienced a great period of flourishing with numerous foundations in all of Europe. It was important for Hugh first of all to keep in direct contact with the other superiors and abbots, to meet with them regularly, to develop common guidelines and thus to create an Order, which in spite of all the independence of the canonries was marked by a strong solidarity. This must also be a task for today, even if it is naturally considerably easier by modern means of communication to inform each other and exchange information quickly and directly. In spite of these techniques, however, in many houses there is still the feeling of isolation and being far away. In this case only personal visits and contacts help. From this perspective international meetings of the Order are necessary. Hugh placed great value on good relations and contacts with other orders, and so with the Benedictines of Cluny and the Cistercians with whom he formed a spiritual alliance. Beneficial for this young Order was his stability and

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<sup>3</sup> Homepage of the Postulator General: [www.postulatio.info](http://www.postulatio.info)

continuity. He refused the bishopric of Chartres and preferred to continue to work with the building up of Prémontré from within and without. Through the annual meeting of the prelates at Prémontré each time on the feast of St. Denis (October 9) he could strengthen the headquarters without being on the road too much or being absent for too long a time. “In 1140 Hugh was able to welcome 30 abbots of the Order, after 18 years (1158) 40 abbots and before his death more than 120 abbots of the Order. This was truly an impressive, polyglot gathering!”<sup>4</sup> Worthy of mention was his plain, simple and humble style. He signed letters with “Hugh, unworthy abbot of Prémontré” or “Hugh, servant of the Church of Prémontré”. Thus he remained faithful and devoted to Prémontré in his untiring zeal, in his exemplary modesty and far from ever striving after praise and power.<sup>5</sup> At Prémontré, in the bad winter of 1125/26 in the absence of Norbert, for days Hugh had bread distributed to the poor who eventually came by the hundreds. Norbert, at first disapproved, but finally surpassed this social operation and laid down basic guidelines: a tenth of the income should be utilized for the poor, 18 poor people should be supplied with clothing annually; with the foot washing on Holy Thursday the confreres should also help with relief from need through donation of clothing. Here one can almost glean something of the position of the present Pope Francis, who continuously speaks about a “poor Church for the poor” and has instructed his almoner to go out on the streets himself and help the poor.<sup>6</sup>

In the person of the first abbot of Prémontré many gifts and virtues flow together. Worth mentioning is his humility and modesty, his patience and gentleness, his firm observance of the Order’s discipline and his leaning and generosity toward the poor. He was completely devoted to St. Norbert, faithful and absolutely loyal to the Church, maintained best relationships to popes, bishops and to the personalities of the Order of his time. He is considered the architect and co-founder of the “Reform Order of Canons Regular of St. Augustine” precisely through his unbroken 35 year long period of office (1129-1164) and his incredible talent for organization. With the help of the directive structures – such as the abbatial structure, the General Chapter and the system of filiation – and with the commitment to unified statutes and norms he provided sturdiness and steadfastness for the quickly growing Order. This made possible an effectiveness and survival of now almost 900 years. Alfons Zak headed his article about Bl. Hugh with the motto “*feliciter et quiete*”, “happily and peacefully”. The quality of resting-in-self and the taking effect of being deeply rooted in Christ led to that admirable serenity and to a transmission which caught hold of and infected others.

Thus we read in the prayer of the day: “Almighty, eternal God, again and again you call men to show your way to others. Let us, through the intercession of the Bl. Abbot Hugh, lead your people into unity through prayer and work. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

### **Idea and Passion**

When we encounter great figures of the Church, we ask what is really the mystery of these personalities and from what do they draw on and live, we want not only to remain with the certainly impressive person, but with the exterior facts as well. Two images could give information about Blessed Hugh and perhaps more easily help reconstruct and convey an interior view which in the end signified for him the “idea and passion” of his so intensive

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<sup>4</sup> Alfons Zak, Der selige Hugo von Fosses, erster Abt von Prémontré und Generalabt des Prämonstratenserordens. Wien 1928, pp. 3-12.

<sup>5</sup> Kris de Brabander, Hugo van Fosses, eerste abt von Prémontré (1093-February 10, 1164),?.

<sup>6</sup> Basilius Grassl, Die Heiligen des Prämonstratenserordens in Betrachtungen. Kloster Berg Sion 1933, pp. 86-91: Betrachtungen auf das Fest des sel. Hugo.

life. At the foundation of Prémontré in 1120 there is a report about an appearance of a crucifix with seven rays of the sun surrounded by a multitude of pilgrims with satchels and staffs. It is said that not Norbert but “a brother who was praying” experienced this vision. Many authors see in this brother the Blessed Hugh, who is said to have been involved with the search for a place for the future monastery and then with the laying of the foundation stone.<sup>7</sup> And in many Norbert cycles there is in addition to this vision of the cross the depiction of how St. Norbert presents and recommends his successor, Abbot Hugh, to the resurrected Christ. Both pictures move Blessed Hugh into the proximity of the Lord, into closeness of the cross, into a tight relationship to the resurrected one. Cross and resurrection are the two turning points of the salvation event, just as we acknowledge after each consecration: “We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again”. Into this event we are baptized and every religious binds himself completely to Christ in his religious profession which we recognize with Norbert and Hugh precisely on that day, on Christmas Day 1121. Christ becomes the central image of his life and the reference point of his monastic work and direction. From this mystery he lived and from Christ he understood and formed his life in a clear shrewdness and a burning passion.

Norbert with every bit of passion and devotion had held tightly to the idea of renewing the Church in the background of the “Gregorian Reform Movement”, through a return to the ideals of the early Church, and to reform the clergy through a new form of life in community, poverty and pastoral offensive. Hugh, fascinated and formed by Norbert, consequently and passionately pursued the idea to create, from the loose “large association” pledged to Norbert, a unified “Order of Prémontré”. He did this by retaining the autonomy of the individual canonries, and by introducing necessary control mechanisms in order to protect and further develop the canonical heritage in the sense of “creative fidelity”.

“Idea and Passion”

in captivating form are found in both images,  
thus they can also have been different.

It is very fitting for the Order to hold in honor the memory of this exemplary member of the Order, abbot and co-founder of the Order, Blessed Hugh.

+ Thomas Handgrättinger  
Abbot General

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<sup>7</sup> Alfons Zak, op. cit. p. 10.