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**Message for the Norbert Jubilee
1134 – 875 Years – 2009**

1. Norbert Feast

This coming year our Order will celebrate the 875th anniversary of the death of St. Norbert who died in Magdeburg, Germany on Wednesday of the octave of Pentecost, June 6, 1134. This jubilee year that began on June 6, 2008 presents a good opportunity for us to get in touch once again with the charisma and the spirit of St. Norbert and deepen ourselves in it.

2. Approach

2.1 For the Universal Church the “Year of Paul” began on the Feast of Peter and Paul 2008. This is the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles. Pope Benedict XVI solemnly announced and proclaimed this last year. It is certainly no accident that the story of St. Norbert’s conversion during his ride to Vreden and his fall from a horse reminds us of the conversion story of Saul/Paul on the way to Damascus. Surely the occasion of both jubilees is an incentive for us to reflect more deeply on our own calling and ongoing conversion and to allow ourselves to be inspired in our own faith by the zeal of both of these saints.

2.2 At the episcopal ordination of our confrere from Averbode, Frans Daneels, who for more than 20 years has been working in the Curia and who is now called to be ordained a bishop, the principal ordaining bishop, the Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, reflected on the founder of our Order.

St. Norbert had great deference, deep respect and admiration for the popes of his time. In the course of his life Norbert served five popes: Paschal II (1099-1118), Gelasius II (1118-1119), Callistus II (1119-1124), Honorius II (1124-1130), who approved the foundation of his “monastic order”, and finally Pope Innocent II (1130-1143), whom Norbert, together with St. Bernard, defended against the antipope.

Since our confrere, the new Bishop Frans Daneels, had chosen the motto “*Spiritus tuus deducatur me* (May your Spirit lead me)”, Cardinal Bertone referred to this with the words, “when we now call upon the Spirit of Christ, who inspired and prompted Norbert, then may this Spirit now support the new bishop in his service so that he can continue to extend his service to the Holy See in this very delicate and significant field of administration of ecclesiastical jurisdiction.”

2.3 I would like to add still another approach to the founder of our Order. With the new arrangement of our chapel in the Generalate there was a hanging left over which I now have in my office. The picture, the original of which is hanging in the choir area of the abbey church in Tongerlo, portrays St. Norbert sketched in light lines, as he sits on a cathedra that is not visible. Included are three attributes: a chalice and a palm branch in his hand as well as a crosier that appears behind the figure. On the side, reading from top to bottom between two shields stands the name “St. Norbert”. Certainly there are innumerable representations of Norbert. This one shows us St. Norbert as we are accustomed to see his image in iconography. And yet just in this simple sketch are portrayed a few characteristics of St. Norbert.

3. Saint Norbert

3.1 Chalice

The center of the picture and of the image of the saint is marked by a golden chalice which St. Norbert is holding in his right hand. The chalice with the blood of Christ symbolizes the Eucharist, which the Council called the “source and summit of the Christian Life”. Norbert is showing us what is central to him and to us: Christ, who gave his life for us, who gives himself to us as food, who becomes our nourishment and source of strength. Since his ordination to the priesthood Norbert celebrated the Eucharist daily which was exceptional at that time. At many of these Eucharistic celebrations extraordinary events and healings took place. Norbert was able to take part in his last Eucharistic celebration on Pentecost 1134, just a few days before his death. All these are little clues that for him life lived from the Eucharist and life in union with the Lord present in the forms of bread and wine were self-evident. Each Premonstratensian community lives from this center and is built up only from there. Each “Norbertine circle of friends” has its center in this celebration of the Eucharist, its unifying strength and its ongoing flowing source of inspiration.

3.2 Crosier

From 1120 on St. Norbert directed the new community, the “ordo novus” in Prémontré. From 1126 he directed, as shepherd and leader, the archdiocese of Magdeburg located in the east of the empire. Norbert is considered the founder and establisher of a new form of canonical life in poverty and community. And he was then active as the shepherd of his diocese for only eight years. The crosier may express both his prophetic initiative and his hierarchical responsibility. In both forms he wanted to give support and direction, guidance and leadership. On several levels, all the way to imperial politics, he had this fundamental concern of the office of leadership: being “founder of a community”, being moderator and inspirer. But the criteria for this office of guardian derive from the Gospel, from Jesus himself, from his words and actions. Norbert wanted to place his life under the direction of Christ according to the well-known saying “*solo Christo duce*”. And, if at the beginning of his conversion, at the time of the fall from his horse, the question was, “Lord, what should I do?”, then during his lifetime this becomes the basic question and basic op-

tion to seek the will of the Lord in his particular situations, in positions, and circumstances. We notice several interruptions and initiatives in Norbert's life, but the basic component is this seeking after the will of God, placing his life entirely under his direction. And his fundamental concern remained the same in all phases of his life: to build up the Church and to renew it, first of all through his own conversion and renewal of heart and the framework of his life; then through the incentive of a new religious community, through the direction of a specific local church, through unprecedented involvement in the highest ecclesiastical and political levels. Henri de Lubac once said that Norbert had something restless about him, "an incurable restlessness". Always driven by the Spirit and an immense love for the Church of Jesus Christ, he sought after new forms of realization for ecclesiastical life.

3.3 Cathedra

St. Norbert is depicted sitting; the cathedra or chair is not visible. This is the position of one presiding, who is teaching and holding an audience, of one who comes in contact with someone and is communicating with him. Thus the three basic ecclesiastical offices are found in Norbert. The prophetic task of hearing and announcing the word of God is represented here in this teaching position on the cathedra. The responsibility of celebrating the liturgy and sanctifying the world is central here in the golden chalice. And the royal task of building up and guiding the community in love is indicated here by the crosier.

St. Norbert is presented here, as he would like to lead us to the center of every kind of Christian and spiritual life, to the celebration of the Lord's self-emptying to the bitter end, then on the cross and forever in the Eucharist. He is presented here as he would like, as "founder and establisher of community", to encourage and inspire us for the building up of our religious community, again and again to overcome anything divisive and hold us together as "one heart and one soul". He is presented here, as he would like to mediate to us guidance and vision through the example of his life, above all through his total commitment to peace and justice.

3.4 Palm Branch of Peace

Now we come to the final attribute on this hanging. St. Norbert bears in his right hand a palm branch of victory or peace, the sign of a life and life framework that was successful and acceptable to God. It points also to his thoroughly involved manner, sometimes almost aggressive, to commit himself to reconciliation, agreement and peace on all levels, even as far as lofty church politics. It portrays Norbert as "minister of peace and concord", as our American confreres like to describe him. With this attribute Norbert gives us, as it were, the further task of first sanctifying our own lives, of continually converting and changing our ways; then above all to become active for others, to fight and struggle, if need be, for a reconciled world, for a peaceful neighborhood, for agreement in our life together, for the building up of community and church here and now, for the credible arrangement and living out of the family of our own Order to which we belong for life through our profession, for the care of all the people around us with whom we feel connected in various ways. For St. Norbert this service was completely concrete and realistic, with full commitment and involvement, with his heart's blood, with the full strength of his faith and love. He did not spare himself nor did he save his energy. He wanted to become what he held in the chalice before him and carried with him: to commit himself as the Lord did, to surrender himself, to give himself away. Whoever loses his life in my name will find it and bring forth much fruit.

That the palm of victory might not stand for an idyll or romantic idea – in iconography martyrs often bear the palm – there is the “chalice of salvation” with His precious blood that was poured out for us and for all – self-emptying to the bitter end.

4. Greeting

In this coming jubilee year I wish all the confreres and sisters much joy and strength from our encounters and gatherings, but above all I wish you inspiration, guidance and a new momentum from your reflection on the life’s work and example of St. Norbert, the founder of our Order.

Saint Norbert, pray for us.

+ Thomas Handgrätiger
Abbot General