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### Excerpt from With The Grace Of God: Norbertine Broadcast Properties

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*St. Norbert Abbey*

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## Norbertine Broadcast Properties

By Abbot Jerome G. Tremel, O. Praem.

The early beginnings of a radio broadcasting station, begun as an "experiment" by the Physics Club of St. Norbert College in 1925, that developed as a commercial radio station described ten years later as "the ideal one-hundred-watt station in this country," has been well chronicled by Norbertine Father Milton C. Strebler in his master's thesis, *WHBY: The Inception and Early History of "The Voice of the Fox River*

*Valley.*" Reading that study one cannot miss the effort and struggle that went into those founding years. There is some anecdotal evidence that those early efforts were not always and universally taken so seriously as by the founders. It is recalled by some that some St. Norbert College students of the time variously and acronymically interpreted the call letters of WHBY as "When Happy Boys Yodel," "When



WBAY television was one of the early apostolates of St. Norbert Abbey. (Photo courtesy of Abbey Archives.)

Happiness Beckons You," or even "Why Have Babies Yearly?"

What began in 1925 as WHBY eventually grew into the commercial broadcast properties of the Premonstratensian Fathers, evolving from WHBY, adding WTAQ and finally becoming WHBY-AM in Appleton, WBAY-AM and FM, and WBAY-TV in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The 1960s and early 1970s were glory years for these broadcast properties. The income derived from their successful operation was a major factor in the support of the life and work of the members of St. Norbert Abbey and made possible the construction of Premontre High School in 1955 and the new St. Norbert Abbey in 1959, as well as the dowering of Our Lady of Daylesford Abbey in Paoli, Pennsylvania when it became independent from De Pere in 1963.

Having been elected Coadjutor Abbot in March, 1969, I was installed as Abbot of St. Norbert Abbey on January 6, 1970. As the leader of a religious community of men that numbered some 175 members, I also found myself "Chairman of the Board" of the extensive technical and financial being that those broadcast properties had become. The Green Bay operation alone employed 125 people. Successful as the operations were, and as ably led by Father Isadore M. Gosz as Managing Director, with the dedicated help and work of many skilled and professional people, the stations began to experience some challenges in the early 1970s.

Competition was heating up in the broadcast industry. Multiple station ownership was becoming the norm which made new technology and program acquisition more favorable for owners of a group of stations than for single station owners. Cable TV, pay TV and home video were on the horizon, with their potential for cutting

into the broadcast market and affecting net income. Federal Communications Commission rules made our entry into those technologies impossible. Top level and second level administrators, skilled technicians and on the air performers could not always be found from within this comparatively small operation and we often had to go outside the organization to find a qualified and experienced person to replace someone who had left.

We had expert advisors in E.L. (Bert) Everson, John Robishaw and Peter Chiu-minatto, and had often used the expert services of Richard Doherty, a broadcast consultant from Washington, D.C. Even so, it became increasingly obvious that we were "over our heads" in trying to continue to operate this increasingly competitive, volatile and rapidly developing technological enterprise. We were doing so inefficiently and the best evidence for that was that our net income was decreasing year after year even though we held the number one audience position among the three television stations in our market.

The available programming for television and radio was becoming increasingly permissive and the reactions from the listening and viewing audiences were becoming increasingly difficult to bear and defend, even though our station personnel made special efforts to censor some of the more questionable material. Our call as religious has always been to live and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and we were often being seen in the public eye, and criticized in the local print media, as ambiguous, middle of the road, permissive, compromising, least common denominator Christians.

After extensive consultation, I brought the matter to the Abbot's Council in early 1974 and we brought the proposal to sell the broadcast properties to a special

Canonry Chapter in May, 1974. A proposal for the use of the monies acquired by such sales as part of a total support plan for the Canonry and its Apostolates was to be developed and presented for consideration by the Canonry Chapter in 1975.

With the help of Richard Doherty, who acted as a "finder," three separate buyers were found for WBAY-TV, WBAY-AM and FM and WHBY-AM. The monies realized were eventually dedicated as endowments to St. Norbert College, Premontre

and Abbot Pennings High Schools, to the future retirement needs of members of St. Norbert Abbey, and as an endowment to our "daughter" Abbey, Our Lady of Daylesford, in Paoli, Pennsylvania.

Some said that "we killed the goose that laid the golden egg." No one can be sure that we made the right decision, or chose the lesser risk, but the decision was made in the best collegial manner that we could manage at the time. So far as I know, no one now is second guessing the decision.



After the sessions of the General Chapter of 1968-1970 Abbot Tremel began the restructuring of the community according to the outlines proposed by the General Chapter to better accommodate the mandates of Vatican II. In 1969, the Community met for the first time in a Canonry Chapter. This was designated as one of the organs by which the community would be self-governing. Further efforts were made to enhance the role of the Abbot's Council, house chapters, and all were designed to assist in the general renewal of community life.

New to the notion of a system of checks and balances in self-government, the community waded into the fray with as much emotion as insecurity. Assuming responsibility is a challenge. St. Norbert Abbey eventually moved toward confidence in the use of chapters and committees. Now, a quarter century later, the Community is at ease with these components of community life.



## **The Sixties and Beyond**

**By Abbot Jerome G. Tremel, O. Praem.**

The developments in society and in the Church that led up to the Second Vatican Council brought about changes that could not have been anticipated when the new

St. Norbert Abbey was dedicated in 1959. Some of these "stirrings" surfaced in the Order's General Chapter of 1962 and developed into a set of questions that Abbot