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Norbert of Xanten: 1080-1134

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Norbert of Xanten
1080 - 1134



St. Norbert College

Norbert of Xanten

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Norbert was born around 1080 in the town of Xanten on the Dutch-German border. He was a member of the privileged class. His father was the Count of Gennep, and his mother was a cousin of the reigning Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV. Destined at birth for a career in the Church, Norbert was enrolled at an early age in a Chapter of Canons at Xanten.

(Canons are chapters of priests who serve a cathedral or collegiate church. Canons Regular live in religious communities in which members live under common rules and are bound by vows.)

When Norbert was 20, his skilled wit and easy charm brought him to the attention of Frederick, the Archbishop of Cologne. Frederick enrolled him as a member of his household. While there, Norbert met his kinsman, Henry IV, who also was impressed with Norbert's charisma. Henry appointed Norbert as his personal chaplain.

As chaplain to the Roman Emperor, Norbert held a position of power and influence. He soon gave in to many of the moral vices that were accepted as part of daily life in the imperial court.

In Rome, Norbert saw first-hand the conflict between church and government and was supportive of the Pope's side of the issue. A year later, in 1115, Norbert underwent a conversion experience. He gave up his privileges and lifestyle and asked to be ordained a priest. He lived a life of poverty, traveling, preaching and attracting many followers. In 1119, he presented himself to Pope Callixtus II.

Norbert settled in the valley of Premontre, France. On Christmas Day of 1120, the Bishop of Laon vested Norbert and his 40 followers in the white habit of canons regular. The Premonstratensian Order (the Norbertines) was founded.

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Norbert's community at Premontre was an innovation, since it was the first to combine active parish work with a true contemplative or monastic life. In 1124, Norbert was rewarded with papal approval of his community.

In 1123, Norbert battled the Sacramentarian heresy of Tanchelin, which questioned the validity of the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. Norbert restored orthodoxy and as a reward was appointed Archbishop of Magdeburg, a city in present day Germany. He died there in 1134.

Pope Gregory III canonized Norbert in 1582. With the assistance of Clement X, St. Norbert's reputation extended throughout the church. The number of Norbertine priests and Abbeys increased throughout the world.

Norbert died on June 6, 1134. His body was transferred from Magdeburg to the Norbertine Abbey of Strahov, located in Prague, Czech Republic on May 2, 1627. In the same year of Norbert's death, Berne Abbey was founded in Holland. This is the Abbey from which Abbot Bernard Pennings, founder of St. Norbert College, began a new Norbertine foundation in Northeast Wisconsin.

Today, Norbert is remembered for his special emphasis on belief in the Eucharist. His preaching ministry, which emphasized peace making, is depicted by the olive branch in the hand of the 'Norbert of Xanten' sculpture on the St. Norbert College campus.



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Norbert of Xanten
Founder of Norbertine Order, 1120
Fearless Preacher of God's Word

"Bearing the branch of peace and the staff of leadership, St. Norbert models for all ages the selfless sharing and reaching out to all others with love that is to exemplify our lives."

MATERIAL COMPILED FROM WORKS BY
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