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**During my Commencement from St. Norbert, I recall the Norbertines wearing a special hat that I believe is called a biretta. Does it symbolize anything in particular?**

Andrew McIlree '06

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## June 2010

### Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings,

During my Commencement from St. Norbert, I recall the Norbertines wearing a special hat that I believe is called a biretta. Does it symbolize anything in particular?

Andrew McIlree '06

### Answer:

My dearest Andrew,

Thank you kindly for your insightful question. I am always most pleased when an alumnus maintains an interest in Norbertine practices after leaving campus.

The hat to which you refer is indeed called a biretta. Its somewhat uncertain origins are rooted deep in the Middle Ages.

It is suspected that the biretta bears some connection to the medieval academic hat. That academic hat also happens to be a precursor to the modern mortarboard you wore during the Commencement in question!

The white birettas worn by my fellow Norbertines and me are unique to our order. The four ridges or “wings,” as some refer to them, indicate our identity as canons regular – individuals living in community under the rule of St. Augustine.

We wear our birettas in a variety of public and liturgical settings. Traditionally, we don them for processions, including



### 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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academic ones like commencement.

I also long wore mine simply for warmth in my outdoor home. The glorious new Mulva Library in which I recently took up residence seems a fitting setting in which to sport a hat with such a distinguished history.

*Responses to “Ask the Abbot” questions are penned by St. Norbert College staff in the name of Abbot Bernard Pennings, O.Praem., who founded St. Norbert College in 1898.*

## St. Norbert College

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