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I have noticed on more than one occasion that many individuals, when passing the outdoor statue of St. Norbert, will touch his big toe. Close examination of the statue clearly shows that his toe has been touched by many, as the surface of his toe is worn smooth. Is there some special reason people do this?

Carl Graf

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September 2016

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings,

I have noticed on more than one occasion that many individuals, when passing the outdoor statue of St. Norbert, will touch his big toe. Close examination of the statue clearly shows that his toe has been touched by many, as the surface of his toe is worn smooth. Is there some special reason people do this?

Carl Graf (Registrar's Office)

Answer:

Dearest Jenna,

My goodness, how grateful I am to you for providing this most interesting inquiry! This is the first instance that I've heard of such a custom here in our midst.

The statue of Norbert of Xanten that you refer to is indubitably the bronze by Paul Granlund, installed in 1998 to mark the college's centenary. Placed centrally in the Bemis quadrangle, this is indeed a striking and beautiful feature of our campus. It serves as a daily reminder, to those many who pass by, of the remarkable reforming saint after whom our college is named.

In order to carefully respond to your inquiry, I sought the counsel of a dear friend with whom many of my readers are familiar: Father Jim Neilson '88. Father explained to me that this practice of touching the toe of a statue is an incredibly ancient one. It predates Christianity, in fact! Passers-by would touch a statue for many reasons in hope of good fortune



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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deriving from its merit; in acknowledgement of the figure’s influence; or perhaps simply to do as others do. In fact, Father Neilson tells me that the the most notable example of this custom occurs in St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, where the silver foot of the statue of St. Peter himself must be periodically replaced due to wear from the devotion of the many thousands of pilgrims who touch the sculpture. (Dear me, how fascinating! What a testament to the devotion inspired by this early disciple of Our Lord and recipient of the keys to his kingdom!)

I invite you and other readers to consider what it might be that calls you to touch our own beloved statue, and to invoke the saint devoutly thus: “Holy Father, St. Norbert – pray for us.”

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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