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I'm so proud of my fellow students and our faculty members at SNC as we've transitioned to online learning amidst the COVID-19 crisis. I was wondering, Abbot, how unprecedented are these times? Has St. Norbert College ever experienced anything like this before now?

Porter Beilfuss '22

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April 2020

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings:

I'm so proud of my fellow students and our faculty members at SNC as we've transitioned to online learning amidst the COVID-19 crisis. I was wondering, Abbot, how unprecedented are these times? Has St. Norbert College ever experienced anything like this before now?

Porter Beilfuss '22

Answer:

My dearest Porter,

I hope you are staying safe and healthy through these difficult times. It warms my heart to hear how seamlessly our remarkable students and professors have adapted in the face of these great difficulties that have now come upon us.

Your question is an astute one, scholar Porter. I have been hearing similar terms to your "unprecedented times," while many seem to have forgotten events that happened not much more than 100 years ago. It was 1918 and we were fighting on two fronts: Our soldiers were serving in World War I, and the Spanish flu (a variant, I'm told, of the virus that we now know as H1N1) was ravaging its similarly deadly impact on our day-to-day lives. To defeat the latter enemy, we were told to avoid contact with others; we were reminded by health officials of basic hygiene; many donned masks in public places: all in an effort to quell the spread of this deadly disease. It was a pandemic that infected a quarter of the world's population and would take 50 million lives: many more, in fact, than the



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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dreadful toll exacted by the terrible conflict from which we would soon emerge.

A century later, I was to feel an agony of compassion once more as I observed our college leadership make the most difficult decision conceivable: the confirmation that classes at our dear college would need to remain online throughout the remainder of the spring semester due to a similarly invasive threat to public health.

Mentally, I was whisked back to Dec. 12, 1918. The De Pere news headline then read “Quarantine Put Into Effect in City of De Pere.” We, too, faced many tough decisions. Athletics were rearranged, events canceled or postponed, our cherished residence life interrupted. By now you, too, understand the process and the heartbreak.

Now, my dearest Porter, back in those days there was no internet, no “Zoom” – dear me! – no Moodle. We did not have the option to move classes online. But, by the time the quarantine was ordered, it was nearly time for our winter break. We sent our students home before the semester was due to end. Those students not still called to service in the armed forces did what they could to preserve their health as the disease continued to wreak its havoc in the world.

A sad memory now comes upon me. I would be remiss in all this if I did not name our young fallen St. Norbert College graduate Earl Wood, who died of pneumonia consequent upon infection with the Spanish flu in November 1918. Mr. Wood was the only known Spanish flu fatality among the St. Norbert College family, I am most thankful to say. Still, I mourn his loss to this day. Those early members of our student body, so much smaller in number as it was than today's ... they are still most dear to my heart. Well, now.

Thankfully, after some nervous months, we were able to return to campus safely for the spring semester with minimal interruptions: a fortune I pray repeats itself in 2020.

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

St. Norbert College

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