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I read that plans to commemorate the Norbertine order's 900th anniversary included the opening of a new abbey building in California. What is that abbey's history, and its relationship to SNC?

Sarah Vandenhouten '21

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April 2021

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings:

I read that plans to commemorate the Norbertine order's 900th anniversary included the opening of a new abbey building in California. What is that abbey's history, and its relationship to SNC?

Sarah Vandenhouten '21

Answer:

My dearest Sarah,

I am most pleased to confirm that the Norbertine Fathers of St. Michael's Abbey will solemnly dedicate the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption on Tuesday, May 4, 2021. St. Michael's is situated in Silverado, Calif., a small community in the Santa Ana Mountains in eastern Orange County. The history of this Norbertine canonry followed a much different path than that of St. Norbert Abbey and the latter's two affiliated "daughter abbeys," Daylesford Abbey in Pennsylvania and Santa María de la Vid Abbey in New Mexico.

In 1950, while SNC had successfully emerged from the challenges posed by World War II, life was much different at the Norbertine abbey of Csorna in Hungary, where the country's oppressive communist regime had outlawed religious orders. Seven of the abbey's priests risked their lives to flee, dodging soldiers and land mines, crawling under barbed-wire fences, and swimming across a river in their



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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daring escape to Austria. These hardy souls continued to America, settled in Orange County and founded their monastery on a 34-acre former cow pasture in 1961.

The work of these pioneering priests paid rich dividends, as St. Michael's is now home to nearly 50 priests and more than 30 seminarians. Gradually, a new site for the abbey became necessary, due largely to geological instability that prevented expansion of facilities the order had outgrown. Construction of a new church and monastery began in 2018 after St. Michael's acquired 327 acres of land and completed a \$120 million fundraising effort. This campaign included a seven-part "web series," bless my soul: "City of Saints," that familiarized prospective supporters with these Norbertines and their works, receiving more than a million views in the process. Impressive, indeed! Among the best-known benefactors to St. Michael's are author Dean Koontz and his wife, Gerda; in fact, Dean has credited his friendship with these Norbertines in part for drawing him back into the Catholic faith.

St. Michael's Abbey was also instrumental in creating the two communities of Norbertine women in the United States: the Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph, and the Congregation of Norbertine Sisters. You may recall my discussion of these women in the [January edition](#) of this very feature!

Finally, an especially strong connection between St. Michael's and St. Norbert is that our college's board of trustees is blessed to include the abbot of St. Michael's Abbey, the Rt. Rev. Eugene J. Hayes, O.Praem. His presence helps to maintain an active and vital link between our respective institutions.

As I look back upon 900 years of Norbertine history, I look forward to many more years of fruitful collaboration between Norbertine communities stateside and worldwide, all united in our devotion to furthering our founder's legacy.

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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