

St. Norbert College

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5-2021

**I am wondering specifically about Commencement during 1918-20. Were there ceremonies, and if so, how were they conducted?**

Carl Graf

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## May 2021

### Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings:

I read, back in an [earlier response](#), that, during the 1918 influenza epidemic, ‘athletics were rearranged, events canceled or postponed, our cherished residence life interrupted.’ I am wondering specifically about Commencement during that time (1918-20). Were there ceremonies, and if so, how were they conducted?

Carl Graf (Registrar’s Office)

### Answer:

My dearest Carl,

Those years were a tumultuous time, to be sure! Many aspects of campus life changed by necessity, much as they have within the past year. However, I am pleased to report that we held Commencement exercises on campus each year from 1918 to 1920. In fact, it was not until 2020 – a full century later, in fact – that circumstances first forced us to postpone Commencement from its usual date.

Though many years have since passed, I fondly recall each of these ceremonies. The 1918 Commencement exercises took place on Wednesday, May 22 – yes, this was before Sunday became our traditional day of choice. Activities included a 9 a.m. Solemn High Mass (celebrated by yours truly!), an 8 p.m. production of the annual play, “Prince and Pauper,” and at 10 p.m., the valedictory by Mr. George Carr, an address by Bishop Paul Peter Rhode, and the conferring of diplomas. A



### 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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late evening, to be sure, but bear in mind that we had many fewer names to read in those days!

I especially cherished our 1919 exercises because the 1918-19 academic year had been so difficult. The influenza pandemic forced me to send students home prior to the end of the fall semester, though we were able to return safely for spring. Commencement that year took place on Tuesday, June 17, with Mass celebrated by the newly ordained Rev. Victor De Cleene, O.Praem., a performance of “A King for a Day,” the valedictory by William Dohoney, and the address again by Bishop Rhode – dear Bishop Rhode, who led the Diocese of Green Bay for nearly 30 years until his death in 1945.

1920 was especially meaningful, too, because Commencement coincided with our celebration of the 800th anniversary of the birth of our cherished founding order. Dear me, to think that 100 more years have come and gone since that momentous occasion! Festivities lasted nearly a week and included a Eucharistic Triduum that closed on the feast of St. Norbert; a Solemn High Mass chanted for the order’s living and deceased members and benefactors; and a reunion of the order’s members in the United States.

On Wednesday, June 9, the celebration concluded with Archbishop Sebastian Messmer from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee presiding over a special Mass for students. Bishop Rhode then sang a Pontifical High Mass, followed by a large banquet in the auditorium of Boyle Hall. That evening’s Commencement ceremony featured a piano recital by Mr. Victor Bellehumeur, who received SNC’s very first degree in music. Father Sylvester Dowling gave the address, and Bishop Rhode presented diplomas and concluded the program by advising our new graduates to “keep in mind the transitory nature of all things except the everlasting principles of Christ.” Well-chosen words, indeed!

As we approach this year’s Commencement – an in-person celebration once more, praise be! – I cannot help but reflect upon how much life at SNC has changed since those ceremonies from more than a century ago. Nevertheless, the values at the heart of our institution remain the same as they ever were. In the 1920s and 2020s alike, our graduates are, as was once said of St. Norbert himself, “prepared for every good work.”

*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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