

The Life of St Norbert by Fr. Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

1075 ca. – 1115. Opportunistic cleric

1115 – 1120. Wanderprediger

1120 – 1126. Order founder and Wanderprediger

1126 – 1134. Missionary archbishop and Advisor to the Emperor

HISTORICAL SETTING

The eleventh-century Church was the kind of world where Martin Luther might have felt at home, for it was teeming with reforms. Pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand) set about eliminating the practice of lay investiture, or lay control of the appointment of bishops. Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians were revolutionizing the monastic world with a stern return to the primitive Rule of Benedict. And Norbert of Xanten led a thoroughgoing movement to improve the lives of the clergy. With the Pope focusing on the bishops, Bernard concentrating on the monks and Norbert emphasizing the clergy, the times witnessed a resurgence of Christian spirit beneficial to Church and world alike.

Norbert began his life journey in Xanten, a town near the Dutch-German border, but he did not start out as a reformer. Quite the opposite, for he seemed bent on being a clerical opportunist of the type that was actually eroding the credibility and effectiveness of the Church. Through the influence of his family he obtained a financial subsidy from the parish church at Xanten when he accepted ordination to the subdeaconate. His only task was to chant the Divine Office at the Church, but he apparently paid someone a small fee to take his place in the choir, because he gained an appointment as a chaplain (religious counselor) to the emperor, Henry V, in Cologne.

The salaries from the Xanten fund and the royal treasury enabled Norbert to live in the pleasurable style of the nobility of the times. He was not, however, a man devoid of idealism or moral sensitivity. The seeds of his moral conversion were planted during a lengthy stay in Rome with Henry V in which he witnessed the breakdown of negotiations over the lay-investiture issue. He saw the Pope standing firm on the principle that it was wrong for a secular power to control the appointment of bishops, both because it gave the impression that the origin of sacramental ministry comes from a secular source and not from God, and because it contributed to the corruption of the episcopacy. At the same time he noted the emperor would not yield and was willing to keep the Pope under house arrest until the Pope changed his mind.

CONVERSION AND EARLY MINISTRY

Norbert was sympathetic to the Pope and experiencing the dawn of a moral awakening. This development was accentuated a year later when he was nearly killed by a bolt of lightning during a storm. He decided to withdraw from imperial service and go into seclusion at the Abbey of Siegburg to permit himself a thorough self-evaluation. After three years of self-scrutiny and prayer, he concluded that he should seek ordination to the priesthood and commit himself to Jesus and the ideals of the Gospel.

A changed man, Norbert returned to the community of clerics at Xanten, determined to live as a principled priest and anxious to engage in active ministry in the area. The easygoing clergymen of Xanten disliked the "new" Norbert and were annoyed by his enthusiasm as well as by the implied reproach his life cast on theirs. Realizing that he was out of place with these men, he decided to leave and embark on a life of evangelical poverty. Norbert divested himself of all his possessions and successfully sought permission from the Pope to become a missionary preacher.

For the next several years he roamed France preaching repentance and peace and moral reform. The darker side of feudalism gave him much to preach about. The absence of an effective police force or national militia made for continuous brutality, brawls and feuds. The ordinary citizen faced the unpredictable violence of armed knights. Those "iron men," clad in their suits of armor, often plundered whatever they wished, with little resistance possible from the helpless commoner. Norbert preached peace and mercy and consideration to a world that was hardly a Camelot or the serene kingdom of an Ivanhoe.

In settlement after settlement he would find cases of armed combat and hatred. In addition he encountered a demoralized clergy, lonely, often keeping mistresses and feeling that the official Church cared little about them. He had plenty of work to do when hearing out the complaints of the serfs, who felt hopeless and were little more than slaves.

At the same time Norbert came in touch with groups of reformed canons -- that is, clergy sharing a common life and dedicated to the common prayer and pastoral practice of a particular church and following the Rule of St. Augustine.

At Clairvaux and Citeaux he would have beheld the Cistercian reforms of the world among the monks. He noted that their churches had plain wooden crosses and walls bare of pictures or stained glass, that their diet was vegetarian and that they were allowed only six hours of sleep a night, while they were required to work at least seven hours a day, mostly doing farm labor. He also became acquainted with the Cistercian administrative system that created an international federation of monasteries with a fair amount of centralized power, though local houses had a certain amount of

independence. These reforms, written up in their "Charter of Charity," would significantly affect the future of the community he founded.

FORMING A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

In 1120 Norbert went to Laon, in northern France, at the request of the Pope. The bishop there, Bartholomew, assigned him to the spiritual renewal of the canons of St. Martin's, but Norbert failed to change them. Still, Bartholomew was convinced that Norbert had a great deal more to offer and that he should stay in the area and establish a community very much in line with his personal ideals. After a considerable number of conversations, Norbert agreed and negotiations were begun to create a community of canons regular.

Historian Barbara Tuchman notes in her study "Distant Mirror" that the Duke De Coucy, who was the overlord of the area of Soissons, awarded a land grant to Norbert in the valley of Prémontré for the purpose of establishing a monastery there. Norbert and a few companions cleared out some of the land for a settlement and rebuilt the ruined chapel of John the Baptist.

On Christmas Day, 1121, Norbert and his friends inaugurated the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, also called the Premonstratensians -- or more simply, Norbertines. They swore to seek Christ by means of community living, poverty, obedience, celibacy and a dedication to contemplation and pastoral care. Norbert held before them the dream of the *vita apostolica* of first Christians after Pentecost, whose community life in Jerusalem was characterized by the power of the Spirit and a desire to be of service to others.

For a rule of life, Norbert chose the Rule of Augustine, as was common among communities of reformed canons regular. The monastic structures of the Cistercians would later be adopted and adapted by Norbert's successor, Abbot Hugh of Fosse. It was Norbert's intention that his communities would reflect the reforms for ministry instituted by Pope Gregory VII and embody the spirit of reform and renewal he had witnessed among the Cistercians and communities of reformed canons regular. In effect he produced a community that would be somewhat monastic, as far as house practice was concerned, and at the same time apostolic and evangelical when it came to pastoral service both within and outside the monastery. The whole idea was that the clerics at the core of the large number of lay men and women gathered around needed an ascetic and contemplative haven that was the purpose of the abbey discipline.

ORDAINED BISHOP OF MAGDEBURG

Norbert's plan was hugely successful. In just a few generations there were Norbertine abbeys all over northern Europe. But Norbert's own future would take a somewhat

different turn. Indeed, just eight years after the founding of his new order, Norbert found himself nominated to be the Archbishop of Magdeburg, in what today is eastern Germany. Like Augustine at Hippo, Norbert turned his residence into a Norbertine monastery and so carried to eastern Europe the ideals he instituted at Prémontré. Always a man to be ready to develop his ideas further, he softened the monastic aspect of the lives of his men at Magdeburg in order that they might have a more dynamic sense of outreach and commitment to active ministry. Experience had shown him that monastic practices tended to pull the men away from external ministry and to "withdraw" them too much from the world.

Even though Norbert was a man of deep prayer and spirituality, he was always aggressively interested in the needs of the people. Almost certainly his many years as a missionary in France accounted for his action-oriented mindset and therefore his ability to note the boundaries of inwardness that his abbeys observe. The administrative model of an international federation of abbeys did much to sustain these communities of canons and assure many of them of survival as centers of service to the people and the parishes. Before Norbert's time, communities of canons tended to be individualized and isolated, lacking supervision, control and a means of self-renewal. The Norbertine canons surmounted this pitfall both by the above-mentioned organizational model as well as by the unique adaptations Norbert made to the Rule of Augustine.

Norbert died in 1134, leaving behind him an example of ministry-minded priests, lay brothers and cloistered nuns living in community, a model that was to become a norm about a century later.

REFLECTION ON THE SAINT'S LIFE

Norbert attempted to reproduce the lifestyle of the apostolic community of the early Church. In his theological outlook he saw the Holy Spirit as the originating power of the group. Common prayer and celebration of the Eucharist was to be the sustaining dynamic of the community. Selfless sharing and reaching out with love was the moral power that should surge from the members.

He dreamed of the emergence of a primary community whose members had the capacity to live together with a shared value system and shared beliefs. The first sentence of their Rule said, "Be of one mind and heart on the way to God." Thus they were to have the ability to model and generate other communities based on divine love and human sharing.

By emphasizing the primacy of communal love in Premonstratensian existence, Norbert sparked all over Europe the possibilities for ministry grounded in a soul-satisfying community context. This is a goal still being sought for today.

Our societies, so far removed by time, share two common features: the church's desire for renewal from within and a society in a state of constant change.

No wonder Norbert remains an engaging figure, for the voice of this great charismatic personality has not been stilled by the centuries!