

120 YEARS

1902  2022

The Congregation of Norbertine Sisters was established in 1902 in the Czech Republic by a Norbertine priest, from the Abbey of Strahov in Prague, named Fr. Vojtech Frejka. He desired to renew the Norbertine way of life in that region due to the abolishment of cloistered Norbertine canonesses in 1782 during the reign of Emperor Joseph II. Fr. Frejka began this inspired mission by first reviving the Norbertine Third Order in 1897. The Third Order community certainly prepared the grounds for new vocations. Yet, Fr. Vojtech still had to wait for more than 20 years before it bore any fruit. Finally, in March 1900, after much prayer and patient endurance, the first vocations arrived!



Fr. Vojtech with Mother Michaela and the first three postulants.



Fr. Frejka brought these young women to a cloistered Norbertine monastery in Krakow, Poland where he entrusted them to the care and guidance of Mother Michaela Andrusikiewicz. She was the novice mistress of the monastery at that time. After receiving formation, they were vested in the white Norbertine habit in Svaty Kopecek, Czech Republic on April 27th, 1902. Mother Michaela would join them several months later. Not long after, they began to receive many new vocations. By the year 1939, the Congregation had grown to have 153 sisters, 67 of them originally from Slovakia. Several generous benefactors also helped the sisters to build a mother house in Vrbove, Slovakia. However, not long after the beautiful flourishing of the community, World War II began.

The communists hoped all of this would break the spirit of the sisters. Nevertheless, by the grace of God, all remained faithful.

By 1948, one of the main enemies of the communists was the Church. In April of 1950, active priests were outlawed and put on trial; 881 priests and male religious from eleven communities were suppressed and put into concentration monasteries or work camps. Many worked in either steel mills or mines. In August of the same year, the communists removed sisters from schools. Religious sisters from various communities were sent to “concentration convents” where they were crammed together and forced to work in factories and fields. The only apostolate the sisters were allowed to continue was working with handicapped children because they believed that the sisters would have minimal religious influence. The property and documentation of the sisters were confiscated, and there were many attempts by the communists to persuade, bully, threaten, and bribe the sisters to leave religious life and take off their religious habit. The communists hoped all of this would break the spirit of the sisters. Nevertheless, by the grace of God, all remained faithful.

In January of 1968, there was a brief period of hope and joy, which became known as the “Prague Spring.” New vocations were allowed to be accepted once again, and religious communities resumed their previous



Sisters ministering to handicapped children.

apostolates. Sadly, however, this did not last very long. Only eight months later, in August of 1968, communism intensified.

The Church was again suppressed and controlled, and religious life was again illegal. Acceptance of new vocations was forbidden, and sisters without religious vows were forced to leave the community. Despite all this, in 1973, the Congregation made a courageous decision to accept new vocations secretly. These sisters continued to work in hospitals, factories, labs, daycares, or as shop assistants while living their religious life quietly. To sustain the life of the Congregation as well as a life of common prayer, the superiors sent 3-5 sisters to different cities where they lived in small apartments or houses.



Sisters in civilian clothes, living their religious vocation secretly.

At long last, in 1989, there was a time of great celebration for all of Eastern and Central Europe. After 40 turbulent years, the communist regime crumbled, and their entire leadership resigned. Unjust laws and regulations were lifted, and people were once more allowed to worship God freely. There was a renewal in religious life as well as a great inflow of new vocations. Sisters were permitted to wear the religious habit again, return to their communities, and resume their previous apostolates.

After several years of growth and grace, a General Chapter of the Norbertine Order was held in Freising, Germany in 2006. Among the many participants for this worldwide gathering was Mother Hermana Lalikova, S. Praem., General Superior of the Congregation of Norbertine Sisters, and Sr. Adriana Gacikova, S. Praem., her Vicar. It was during this meeting that the sisters met Fr. Thomas Nelson, O. Praem., a Norbertine priest from St. Michael's Abbey in Silverado, California. Fr. Thomas took the opportunity to ask Mother Hermana if she would consider establishing a community of contemplative-active Norbertine Sisters in the United States.

Over the course of three years, Mother Hermana and the community prayed about the possibility of sending sisters to America. In hopes of better discerning God's will, in 2009, Mother Hermana and Sr. Adriana flew 13 hours to visit California for the very first time. One of the first places they visited was St. Michael's Abbey. Upon their return

to Slovakia, Mother Hermana asked the sisters from each Slovak community for volunteers for this endeavor. With exemplary courage, Sr. Adriana Gacikova, Sr. Benedikta Hornikova, and Sr. Roberta Sprlakova offered themselves to help establish this new foundation. Thus, they arrived in Wilmington, California at Ss. Peter and Paul Parish in August 2011. Since the opening of the formation house in 2014, the three Slovak sisters have been blessed to witness their spiritual family steadily grow.



Sisters visit Wilmington, CA.

In the spirit of St. Norbert, the Congregation has sought to maintain a balance between liturgical prayer, zeal for souls, and contemplation. Their life is centered around daily Mass, praying the Divine Office, and having a daily Eucharistic Holy Hour. The sisters strive for unity of mind and heart which overflows into a love that embraces all people whom they encounter. Today, the sisters are assisting in Catholic schools, Ss. Peter and Paul's parish bookstore, serving the poor in Wilmington, and hosting retreats, young adult meetings, and monthly bible sharing for young women.



Community photo of the Congregation of Norbertine Sisters, past and present.

Only five years after its establishment, the convent in Wilmington met its capacity. In response, the sisters accepted an invitation from pastor Fr. Augustine Puchner, O. Praem. to occupy a convent at St. John the Baptist Parish in Costa Mesa, California. Thus, the sisters branched out in 2019, leaving five sisters to reside in the Wilmington house and the remaining four to be in Costa Mesa.

When asked about their dream or vision for the future of the community, Sr. Adriana expressed, “It’s not about the numbers, or having many convents, or even becoming the largest Congregation in the world, my only desire is that our sisters are holy and that Jesus feels loved in our communities.”

This jubilee is an opportunity for our religious family to reminisce with gratitude on our origin and history and to call to mind the faithfulness of God who has sustained us through it all, both joyful and trying

times. We pray that our Mother Mary will continue to protect us within her mantle. May she and our holy fathers, St. Norbert and St. Augustine, obtain for our communities the grace to be “prepared for every good work” and build the Kingdom of God wherever His Providence may lead us.

“ A religious congregation can be established without many things, even those otherwise considered indispensable. But no congregation can exist without *zealous* members, who are eager for the **THINGS OF GOD** and totally *committed* to the congregation. ”

- Fr. Vojtech Frejka, O.Praem.