

CHAPTER 4

THE WANDERPREDIGER

If self-awareness wasn't one of Norbert's more pronounced traits, he surely had enough of it to understand why he'd run into such a wall of antagonism from his former colleagues in Xanten. But his far more likely takeaway from that debacle was this: that trying to change the Church from inside its clerical hierarchy might not have been what God had in mind for him when he so rudely unhorsed him on the road to Vreden. Maybe, it seems, he was destined to be the outsider. Norbert departed the Xanten chapter, licking his wounds and more determined than ever to find his true path. He could scarcely know that this process would occupy the next three years of his life. Yet it would be during this crucial period that the once aimless young subdeacon managed to transform himself into the man we now recognize as Norbert of Xanten—a Gospel avatar so fanatically focused, and so mesmerizingly persuasive, that he could one day attain sainthood. If the canons back at his collegiate church would have thought such a notion preposterous, well, on that one point Norbert certainly would have agreed with them.

As Norbert withdrew from the Xanten canonry, he turned first, unsurprisingly, to his “home away from home,” Siegburg

Abbey. The Benedictine community of more than a hundred monks—the leading reform institution in the Cologne archdiocese—had become a high-functioning center of literature, learning and monastic renewal, and Norbert clearly enjoyed spending time there. Still, it doesn't seem he ever gave serious consideration to throwing in with the Benedictines. In fact a different, newer foundation was now piquing his curiosity. Around this time Norbert was introduced to a community of Augustinian canons at Rolduc, west of Cologne, in what is now the Netherlands. Rolduc was only a decade old and its communal life was a radical departure from what Norbert knew at Siegburg. The Augustinians had adopted a highly austere regimen: abstaining from meat, forgoing all personal possessions and disassociating from the outside world. Norbert would become a regular visitor to Rolduc, and he took careful note of how its rule contrasted with the Benedictines, not to mention with his own secular canons at Xanten. This in turn got him contemplating which aspects of each he might cherry-pick were he starting his own community from scratch—although it's only conjecture whether, at this point, he had given such a prospect any real thought.

Rolduc figures prominently as well as the setting for another signature anecdote from the Norbert legend. In it, Norbert was saying Mass in a chapel in the abbey's dank crypt when a spider suddenly dropped from the ceiling into his chalice. As Norbert had just consecrated the wine, he felt obligated to consume it, spider and all—although in medieval times many people believed spider bites to be fatal. But later, kneeling in prayer, Norbert sneezed—and out came the spider! Grauwen and other

Norbertine historians consider this story almost certainly apocryphal, but as one of the declared miracles that fixed Norbert in the popular imagination and was cited later in support of his canonization, it bears relating. It's also a tidy illustration of the kind of colorful exploits that attached to many medieval-era saints.

Maybe Norbert's single most important influence during his reflection period was the hermit-priest Ludolf, a familiar and controversial figure to people around Xanten. Ludolf's existence was ascetic in the extreme, and he preached regularly against the evils of clerical corruption—tongue-lashings that earned him the approbation of his peasant audiences and the wrath of many clergy. Norbert spent a great deal of time with Ludolf and through him became acquainted with another reform movement, one known as “the poor of Christ,” that was popular in the early twelfth century. This movement consisted of itinerant preachers—the Germans coined a word for them, *wanderpredigers*—who were committed to an almost literal emulation of the roving ministry and humble existence of Christ's own apostles. As described by the Dutch Norbertine writer A.W. van den Hurk, these roving preachers “renounced all goods and possessions, changed their monastic or canonical habits for a rough ascetic cowl of undyed wool, fed themselves with roots and herbs and slept on the bare ground. As a rule they wore rough unkempt beards, walked barefoot or traveled on a donkey while they preached peace and penance wherever they went. They had as their model St. John the Baptist and lived the Gospel to the letter.”

Here was an idea that spoke powerfully to Norbert: fashioning a pared-down way of life modeled after Christ's disciples. He

was so inspired, in fact, that for the next two years he dedicated himself to a quasi-hermitic existence. For his modest home he commandeered a small chapel on a hill; it was located on property his family owned in the village of Fuerstenberg, just outside Xanten. He maintained a strict daily regimen: praying, reading, scriptural study, meditation and saying Mass. Often he was fasting, and on occasion he would force himself to stay awake through the night. While these exercises were authentic expressions of penance and prayer, Norbert was also training himself in the discipline of self-mortification. And there was one more important change: like Ludolf and other eremites of his acquaintance, Norbert gradually began to step out and preach to his neighbors. Echoing his new influences, Norbert's themes too were peace, repentance, reconciliation—and, for those many clergy he maintained were leading disreputable lives, reform.

As with Ludolf, local people began to take notice. And as with Ludolf, Norbert began to collect enemies among churchmen who were feeling the sting of his criticism—a sting that, again, was especially galling given Norbert's well-known background of privilege and profligacy. One particular critic was a Benedictine theologian and writer, Rupert of Deutz, whom Norbert would have encountered at Siegburg. According to admittedly sketchy accounts, Rupert loaned Norbert a copy of one of his theological tracts, which Norbert later returned without comment. Not long after, Rupert began to hear reports of Norbert alleging that certain passages in the book were heretical. Rupert—who was said to be a prickly and argumentative type anyway—took this up with Norbert, who apparently had

misunderstood his meaning. Depending on the source, Norbert may or may not have realized this, and may or may not have apologized. Either way the damage was done, and Rupert would remain an influential and lifelong critic of Norbert.

With the bad blood building up against Norbert, it was inevitable it would seek an outlet. It found one in the summer of 1118, when hundreds of high-ranking clergy from around Germany were summoned to the town of Fritzlar, east of Cologne. The main aim of the council was to again condemn Henry V, who upon the death of his nemesis Paschal had immediately set up an antipope in Rome and helped chase the newly elected Gelasius II into temporary exile. But Norbert's critics seized on this important assembly to lodge several serious charges against him. Specifically, Norbert was accused of preaching without appropriate authorization; of presenting himself as a religious when actually he belonged to no order; and of donning sheep- and goatskins to convey the impression that he was impoverished when in fact he still had considerable wealth and possessions. While these would all be considered violations of canon law, Norbert's enemies basically were accusing him of being a hypocrite. Norbert was compelled to appear at the council to explain himself.

According to his *Vitae*, he mounted a stiff defense that scarcely hid his disdain for the accusers he considered the true hypocrites. Norbertine biographer Bernard Ardura summarized Norbert's argument (with Norbert's own reported remarks in quotation):

They resent my preaching. Is it not written: "Whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save

his soul from death and will cover a multitude of his sins?” We have the power to preach by reason of our ordination, for the bishop said to us: “Be transmitters of the Word of God.” They want to know to what religion I belong? “Religion pure and undefiled before God our Father consists in visiting orphans and widows and in keeping oneself unspotted from this world.” They criticize my clothing? Does not St. Peter teach that God takes no pleasure in fine clothes? St. John the Baptist was clothed in camel’s hair; St. Cecilia wore a hair shirt next to her body. Better yet, the Lord did not give our first parents a purple tunic, but garments of skin.

There was no official or clear-cut resolution to the case of this paradoxical defendant Norbert—a man well known to many of the Church leaders at Fritzlar, but as a refined noble and courtier, not the startling-looking ascetic before them now. The council leaders seem to have finessed the matter, issuing Norbert something of a rebuke but also some constructive suggestions. But on a more political level, they were beginning to appreciate that Norbert’s dramatic conversion presented them with a bit of a dilemma. His passionate conviction paired with his gift for oration surely could make him a useful tool for reform; yet as an independent thinker with a stubborn streak, he might also prove hard to control. However personally motivated the charges against Norbert, and however much they wounded him—and they did—he took the chastisement to heart. It certainly would have been understandable if he had responded to Fritzlar by

rejecting Church authorities and becoming an ecclesiastic renegade, as indeed many itinerant preachers were. Instead, Norbert decided he would play by the rules. He would immediately seek out Pope Gelasius—now in southern France—and secure his authorization to preach. What’s more, he would end any question of hypocrisy by renouncing all his worldly goods. Almost overnight Norbert sold his property and gave the proceeds to the poor; he gave away all his clothes; he turned over his Xanten canonical prebend to Archbishop Frederick; and he donated his Fuerstenberg chapel to the Siegburg Benedictines. It’s even said he gave a valuable chalice to the canons at Xanten as a sign he bore them no ill will—and just maybe to have a satisfying final word on their dispute. All he retained was a mule, a small amount of money for expenses and his Mass vestments and kit.

The other lesson Norbert clearly carried away from his “prosecution” was that he needed to leave his home area. By now he had simply made too many enemies in Xanten and environs; the sensitive issues he was raising, and intended to keep raising, were hitting literally too close to home. Their fallout was always going to be a distraction for him, or worse.

