

Letter from James Johnson – 17th March 2024

St Patrick's Day – Friday Wk5 Lent, 2024

Dearest Fr Tony, Fr Paul & Parish of Our Lady, Star of the Sea,

Firstly, special greetings to Frank, Lisa and their families – Sláinte agus táinte! My best to any other Irish or Irish descent in the parish too. I hope you celebrated well.

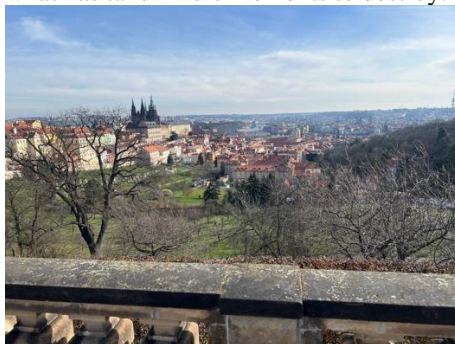
I begin my letter to you on this popular feast day before any drinks get poured, naturally. My sister, Helen Patricia Johnson, always gets a decent party for her birthday. I got St George's day, which is fitting because our family hails both from Cork but mostly from in and around Southwick. I'm not sure how my mother arranged for that.

Palm Sunday & the Holy Triduum are fast approaching and there is much to be done and organised. I will surely be praying for everyone involved with the liturgy in various ways down South and I have been kept up to date with the ongoing success the musicians and singers are having.

It was a joy to prepare for Holy Week with a merry band of volunteers last year. The church looked and smelt clean; all the metals were polished with much detailed effort and when we arrived at Easter with all the beautiful flowers, sparkles, fresh smells, the prepared sacristan and readers, as well and the musicians...oh, and having a super priest, culminated in an Easter that felt special and right. A fitting way to begin celebrating our Resurrected Lord. I am confident that Fr Tony has or will tell you that Eastertide is longer than Lent and he's right! We are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song! I get ahead of myself though, first we must all pray fervently for whatever is pressing in your hearts, continue the last push in our fasting from things that are indulgent and luxurious, fill that food bank so others may have satisfied bellies over Easter. Keep up the good work on this front and congratulations to Juliette, who publishes the news and lists for everyone, detailing what is needed by the foodbank, I am trying to persuade the parish to do the same here, although they are already very active in the things they have already set their minds to.

Whilst writing this message I am thinking and praying for Liz (Elizabeth Smith), who joined me at the Chrism Mass at Arundel Cathedral a few years back. I took a lovely photo of her with the rose window in the background, which I have with me here at the priory. I have fond memories of sharing that experience with her and I urge anyone to go, it is a very special occasion. The diocese has advertised it online with some very posh photography – very nice. I think that Juliette or Fr Tony have also linked this on the parish's social media too.

Fr Thomas Swaffer O.Praem (the superior here) and I, have not long returned from the Royal Abbey of Strahov in Prague, our newly appointed motherhouse. It was a great trip and I have blisters on blisters to prove how much we were able to enjoy the city, as well as the abbey. The community there is at full tilt preparing both for Easter but also as hosts of a General Chapter later in the Summer. This is when all the abbots, superiors, and delegates, as well as translators will gather from around the world. It happens every six years but this year it is extra special because St Norbert's earthly remains are in Strahov. All rooms are being redecorated, bathroom suites replaced, new plumbing for a posh new freezer with an icemaker in the recreation room (Abbot Daniel having seen the one we have in Muston!). All this whilst they run an enormous abbey with historical importance that crowns the Czech capital city, providing for many other parishes and communities of sisters and the endless list of responsibilities they have or take on. There really isn't a 'spare' person there, so they are blessed to be fit and able-bodied. Much of the abbey they are only just regaining control of from the Communist regime. Much of the building has required a variety of serious restorations. It is why we must keep our steadfast prayers for the Holy Land and Ukraine because it takes decades to rebuild what has taken mere moments to destroy.



View from abbey gardens over all of Prague. Views to the castle, cathedral, the Charles Bridge etc. Often the president hires a summer house that is part of the abbey to receive guests on state visits.



Saint Norbert of Xanten above the altar in a chapel within the Abbey of Strahov.

Fr Thomas, our travel companion, Lukas and I, had the opportunity to celebrate an intimate and private Mass where St Norbert's remains are above the altar. It was amazing to be there and to recall all the challenges the order has survived – Reformation, Dissolution of the Monasteries, Revolution, Communism, just to name the big ones and there is me sat there - not particularly gifted in any discipline, wondering what God might challenge me with and what Graces he might bestow on me to meet those challenges. I didn't get any answers but I am still here, praise God, and thank you for any prayers that may have been offered up.

I met many of the community in Prague and another novice from the Abbey of Tepla (also Czechia), who is studying at Strahov. I am due to return there in August or thereabouts and will at some point over the next year have to stay there for a month. Not enough time to learn Czech but I will brush up on the little Latin I know because they use it for the Liturgy of the Hours. I had to be cautious on my recent visit because the prayers and Masses are all streamed and recorded. I had a microphone straight in front of where I was sat! We may have a member of the community come over for a period of time later in the year and we await the decision to be made on a member from our close relations, the Dominicans. He has written a book about the Norbertine Order returning to the UK, which I believe has been published whilst I was away. I do not know where it is available yet, so I will let you know when I write during Eastertide.



View from the guest accommodation in the Abbey of Strahov looking over the cloister to the abbey church and bell towers, which contain five beautiful new bells that were installed as part of the 900th year anniversary.

We have a visit from two of our tertiaries/associates this coming week. They come from Storrington and have probably been friends of the community much longer than me but we became associates together in Storrington. It will be great to receive them as a member of the community this time and to enjoy the company of familiar faces and names after our trip to Prague.

It was great to receive a message and photo from the coffee group I enjoyed the company of. It brought me a smile when I received it. Life here is not stereotypically strict, as one might imagine, however, there has to be an adjustment in mind and heart to progress in this way of life. This is what a postulancy and noviciate is for – I've not been booted out yet... The parameters of living are altered, we give up certain things but gain others. As long as I feel it brings me closer to God - then I'm in!

I have been tasked with cataloguing the library here, which is a rewarding job for me. I will get to know what is in there well and it will please my, perhaps neurotic, need for order. I have warned the community that the kitchen will be next – forewarned is forearmed!

I must sign off now because this message is plenty long enough but I am heartened by the news that has filtered up to me, as well as the pastoral plan's next evolution. You have some truly gifted clergy in the deanery and it makes me very optimistic for you.

My prayers and best wishes to you for Holy Week and I'll write again towards the end of Eastertide.

Solemn Novena of Masses in honour of St Joseph – for the return of lapsed Catholics.

23rd April – 1st May.

Petitions and offerings to:

(Please make cheques payable to "The Norbertine Order")

The Novena Director,

St Mary's Priory,

King Street, Muston,

North Yorkshire, YO14 0EW

Guest accommodation is available. There is a large double/king size bed, en suite, separate toilet, kitchenette and nice little sitting room with a real fireplace. Naturally, there is also wi-fi. Guests can join in with Holy Mass, prayers and meals but they are not expected to. Bookings are currently dealt with by Fr Thomas Swaffer 01723 639 580. Donations towards the upkeep, cleaning and laundry are welcome, even better if they can be Gift-Aided.

Yours in Christ, Our Immaculate Mother, Our Holy Fathers St Augustine & St Norbert,

James