

chapter 2: The Consolidation of Our Identity (1900-1922)

2.4.4. Dom Norbert Sauvage (1876-1923)

("The art of Preparing one's successor," an article that appeared in french in Colletanea 63 [2001]: 213-223, signed by armand veilleux, published here in english with the addition of a few biographical points.)

When dom Godefroid douillon, second abbot of scourmont, died in 1901, the community elected dom norbert sauvage, age twenty-five, as his successor. scourmont was then a fairly large community, so there was no lack of candidates among the older and more experienced monks. If they elected fr. norbert, it was not because he demonstrated particular talents as an administrator or because he was a brilliant intellectual; it was simply because he was a deeply spiritual man and the embodiment of goodness. Monk of Scourmont Léon-Parfait sauvage entered scourmont at eighteen years of age in 1894, after having spent a few years in the minor seminary at Cambrai in france.

00 he wanted to be a lay brother, but was received into the choir, where he remained in spite of his oft-repeated wish to be a lay brother. 00 even before entering, he had received the grace of an intense prayer life and a deep love for Jesus. at the mon-astery he showed much goodness to everyone. dom Godefroid Bouillon, who had a keen knowledge of human nature, perceived in him early on a gift of God for the community. on the day of his simple profession he was appointed sub-master of novices, and ten months later became the infirmarian, an important position in the community. he showed the qualities of a monk able to combine an intense prayer life with great dedication to his brothers. a short time later dom Godefroid placed him on his Council. he had not been infirmarian for long when, in october 1901, he had the sur-99 dom armand veilleux has been abbot of scourmont since 1999, after having served as abbot at Mistassini (Canada) from 1969-1976, and at Conyers (usa), from 1984-1990, and as the order's Procurator from 1990-1998. 100 he was born on July 3, 1876 in the north of france at avesnes-le-sec. he lost his mother before reaching the age of 11, at which age he made his first communion. Beginning when he was fourteen, he wanted to become a priest, but at age seventeen he began to look at Trappist life, and was already living a rather austere way of life. 101 he took the habit on september 17, 1894, taking the name Br. norbert; he made simple profession on october 4, 1896, and solemn profession on october 29, 1899. From 1892 to the Close of the Second Vatican Council 130prise of finding the sub-prior, who was also novice master, dead in bed. a few days later, young fr. norbert was appointed sub-prior and father Master. 00 struck with an illness that would quickly carry him off, dom

Document extrait du [site de l'abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont](#), qui se trouve sur le territoire de Forges, à sept kilomètres au sud de la ville de Chimay, en Belgique. Notre-Dame de Scourmont est une abbaye de l'Ordre Cistercien de la Stricte Observance.

Godefroid pre-dicted to fr. nobert that the community would elect him abbot, and he advised him to accept. dom Godefroid died on december 18, 1901. his prediction came true on January 15, 1902, when the community elected fr. norbert as its third abbot. he begged to be spared this responsibility, rightfully pleading that he was too young and inexperienced. he explained that, by electing him so young, they risked having him as abbot for a long time, thus preventing much more capable persons from acceding to this office. The community would hear none of it. he then proposed that he be appointed temporary superior. nothing doing; he had to accept. Abbot of Scourmont (1902-1913)his eleven and a half years as abbot were of utmost importance for scourmont and, it might be said, for the order. first of all, he devoted himself mainly to being an apostle of the interior life and to teaching intimacy with Jesus to his monks. he was entrusted with some important assignments within of the order, especially regarding Tilburg in 1909. But, since he was aware that his young age and lack of expertise in many areas were inherent shortcomings, he worked hard at form-ing a successor. as soon as he had one ready, he stepped down from office. among the many fine recruits he received into the novitiate were anselme Le Bail, who entered in 1904, and Godefroid Bélorgey, who entered in 1910. after being elected abbot, he had to appoint a novice master, since that had been his task up until then. he chose fr. alphonse Bernigaud, who held that posi-tion until 1907. In no way prepared for that responsibility, fr. alphonse worked by trial and error for a time, seeking a method other than Rodriguez's manual, 102 he had been ordained subdeacon on december 31, 1899, deacon on May 23, 1900, and priest on october 3, 1900.103 Given his age, it was a postulation. he was granted the dispensation on february 11, 1902 and was blessed on april 7.104 But he had a strong spirit of faith. as he said later on: "I could be no more than a mediocre abbot, but I think I was, at least, always supernatural, never self-seeking, and always trying to edify and motivate. My first concern was the best interest of the house, and I wanted above all to foster the interior life. I did not have any major trials, although I had to suffer at times. But I was often badly humiliated because of my many inabilities breaking in on all sides. I placed my trust in Jesus, Mary, and st. Joseph, the patron of the house. on fridays I said a Mass to the sacred heart, on saturdays one in honor of our Lady, and on Wednesdays one in honor of st. Joseph, asking that they help me in administering the community. They helped me a great deal, and often prevented me from mak-ing serious errors, as I realized later on. I never did anything important without first praying to the sacred heart, to our Lady, and to st. Joseph. I owe them a great deal, because it is a miracle that, with such a young, unskilled and ungifted superior, the community made rather a lot of progress on all fronts."

131chapter 2: The Consolidation of Our Identity (1900-1922)used in most novitiates at the time. having taught a number of cycles on devo-

tions and various themes, in 1905 he came up with the idea—which was novel at that time—of using the Rule of Benedict as a formation manual. since he did not know the Rule too well, he had his novices write papers on the Rule. one of those novices was young Br. anselme Le Bail, who had been attracted to the Rule from the start of his novitiate, and who worked on his paper with great enthusiasm. he filled a thick notebook, which he finished on May 10, 1906. already at that time, Br. anselme was in possession of a vast synthesis of the Rule of Benedict, a synthe-sis he elaborated on throughout his life as a monk and an abbot. Just as dom Godefroid had quickly perceived the spiritual qualities of Br. norbert, so too did dom norbert perceive the qualities of Br. anselme early on. he soon gave him major responsibilities. In 1909, he appointed him novice director for the lay brothers. Br. anselme gave them a full course on the liturgy, and wrote a little treatise entitled “The divine office of the Cistercian Lay Brother,” present-ing the Pater and aves office as “prayer of the Church.” The following year Br. anselme became novice master for the choir monks, a novitiate that included Br. Godefroid Bélorgey. In 1909, the year Br. anselme was appointed novice master, the holy see published an important document on the clerical studies. dom norbert, whose own formation had been under the system of a single professor for all subjects, obeyed the holy see’s demands without hesitation, and appointed fr. Joseph Canivez (a good theologian, even though he is mostly known as a canonist) to organize the studies. eager to win over hearts for Jesus, not only in his community but also in the order as a whole, dom norbert proposed to the abbot General a kind of congress to be held at the time of the 1913 General Chapter. That Chapter coincided with the eighth centenary of saint Bernard’s entrance at Cîteaux. The purpose of the congress would be to take several days to examine “possible means for increasing the knowledge and love of Jesus in our houses.” Contrary to all expectations, the plan was accepted, and it was decided that this congress would be held just before the General Chapter. dom norbert was put in charge of organizing it. This event, which gave the capitulants a chance to appreciate dom norbert’s abilities, influ-enced the way things evolved later on. 00 since the time of his election at scourmont, even though he fulfilled his abbatial service quite well, dom norbert had maintained his intention to turn the 105 having left for Belgium at the age of 18, he had not fulfilled his military service in france. Therefore, in order to avoid trouble with the law, he could not return to france before reaching the age of thirty. That is why he only began attending General Chapters in 1906.

From 1892 to the Close of the Second Vatican Council 132 office over to another as soon as possible. as we read in his own reflections on this subject: I was determined to do everything in my ability to give up my place as soon as someone with the necessary qualities came along, no matter what kind of humiliation it might cause me. Later on I heard it

said that one is always ready to resign when one is young, but that it becomes unthinkable when one is older. This frightened me, and I wanted to protect myself against such a danger. I came up with the idea of binding myself with a vow on pain of mortal sin. having reflected about it for several years, one Good friday, while at prayer, I vowed on pain of mortal sin that I would give my resignation immediately, without objection, and without asking for any explanation the day an authority of the order—General Chapter, abbot General, or father Immediate—asked told me it would be good for me or the community that I resign. But, in order to make it easier for them to say so freely, I committed myself by this same vow to inform the abbot General and the father Immediate about these dispositions as soon as possible during the Regular visitation or at the General Chapter. a few months later I told them, and I even told it to the community at chapter. These lines are too clear to require any comments. Their sincerity became apparent a few years later. dom norbert continued putting all his energy into serving his community as abbot, and the community was thriving. It never occurred to anyone to suggest that he resign. But, in 1913, he came to the conclusion that, for himself and before God, the time had come for him to do so. This was no snap decision, nor was it easy. here is what he wrote about the matter: I have never had any illusions about myself. Jesus has always seen to it that I have enough good sense to see that I was not in my place as abbot of st. Joseph (scourmont). I had an excellent Prior and fr. Master, who was much more capable than I, and who would have been able to do much good in the monastery. In august 1913, I believed that the time had come for me to do all I could to turn my place over to him. It was not easy, but I wanted to do what I considered to be the will of Jesus. after long prayer and reflection, I thought it was God's will that I go and announce to the abbot General that it would be to the community's advantage for me to be replaced at st. Joseph, and that I was therefore ready to cooperate with any arrangement 106 This quotation and the quotations that follow are taken from the archives of the abbey of scourmont.

133chapter 2: The Consolidation of Our Identity (1900-1922) aimed at doing the best thing for my abbey. It was a serious step, because I was leaving myself open, not only to being a resigned abbot of Chimay, ... but also to the possibility that the abbot General would take advantage of my availability to make use of me for another abbey, where the situation might be much more difficult and disagreeable. I had nothing to gain by such a change, just the opposite. nonetheless, I believed I needed to move ahead, abandoning myself to the wisdom and love of Jesus, who wanted me to do so. Jesus was asking me to make a greater act of faith, trust, and abandonment than I had ever made before. I wanted to give him this token of love and trust, and so I went to Laval, where the abbot General was. on my way, in Paris, I spend two hours before the Blessed sacrament at Montmartre, declaring

to Jesus with tears that I would do anything for love of him, that I wanted only what he wanted, and that the serious step I was taking was a matter between him and me. The Most Rev. fr. General saw no need to attach any importance to my initiative, and answered that replacing me at the abbey of forges was out of the question. nevertheless, I had taken the step; it was done, and I could expect anything. at the next General Chapter, they were looking for a Procurator General to see to the order's business with the holy see. The abbot General, aware of dom norbert's dispositions, suggested the fr. abbot of scourmont. after an initial moment of surprise, the suggestion was accepted. on october 4, 1913, dom anselme Le Bail was elected abbot of scourmont, and a new and no less important stage than the previous one was about to begin for dom norbert sauvage. ¶ Rome: Procurator General and Spiritual Director (1913-1923) during the ten years he spent in Rome as Procurator General, that is, until his death in 1923, dom norbert, in addition to the various dealings with the holy see that the Procurator's job involves, provided any number of services for the order. he had an undoubtedly positive influence on the students who lived at the Generalate, as he noticed himself: "during my first year in Rome, I noticed that several of our students had mistaken notions about their vocation and about the spirit of our order.... The study of works of saint Bernard and the decisions of the General Chapter can help one see more clearly." ¶ each summer, when offices 107 In spite of his willingness and his inner resolution, it was not without sadness and suffering that he left the abbatial office of his cherished community. 108 among the students of 1913-1914 was fr. Colomban Tewes, future abbot of achel, who later wrote: "dom norbert immediately stood out for his marvelous monastic spirit and his love of the contemplative life, including From 1892 to the Close of the Second Vatican Council 134 were closed in the eternal City, he preached retreats in monasteries of the order. he returned to Rome in september after the General Chapter, which was always held at Cîteaux. he was much sought-after as a spiritual director, and did a great deal of spiritual teaching in various communities in and around Rome. Two communities in particular benefited from his attention, and thus began an extraordinary network of relationships. The communities in question were Grottaferrata, which later transferred to vitorchiano, and the Little sisters of the assumption in via Bixio in Rome. a) Grottaferrata The beginnings of the Grottaferrata community were rather atypical, as was the case of many foundations in this period. around 1870, Julia astoin, daughter of a senator in Lyon, entered the abbey of vaise, near Lyon, as a novice. since she did not have sufficiently good health to make profession, she became an oblate. she owned property in Italy, near Turin, and she persuaded the vaise community to allow her to make a foundation there. With six companions (two choir professed, two lay sisters, and two novices), Julia, the superior of the group, founded the community of

san vito. since she had not made vows, she owned the monastery and administered it freely. In the end, she did pronounce vows, becoming Mother Teresa, and was canonically installed as superior of the community. having never made a novitiate, she proved to be a difficult superior. nonetheless, many from the rural areas of Piedmont and Lombardy entered the community. When most of the sisters who had come from vaise returned there, the Cister-cian character of the san vito community was quickly lost, and, 1886, eleven years after the opening of the foundation, the archbishop of Turin withdrew permission to receive postulants and accept professions. These sanctions were lifted by the new archbishop in 1892. nevertheless, Mother Teresa had further difficulties with the father Immediate, dom Ignazio, abbot of Catacombs (now frattocchie). The 1898 General Chapter ordered the community's dissolution before finally giving in to the request of thirty-one sisters who wanted to continue living in submission and obedience. It was decided that the community would move to Grottaferrata, its sacrifices and mortifications as practiced in our order. during holy Week of 1914, he preached the annual retreat to the students.... one could sense his enthusiasm for the magnificent ideal he was pursuing. There is no need to hide it: that retreat was, thanks to him, a decisive moment in my life. full of fervor, he proposed Christ as our ideal, just as saint Benedict would have done for his monks.... on an excursion to subiacco...[with] the stu-dents...he spoke passionate words to us in the grotto." fr. alexis Presse, who completed his three years of study in Rome in June 1913, obtaining a doctorate in Canon Law, stayed on at the Generalate as master of students for the year 1913-1914.

135chapter 2: The Consolidation of Our Identity (1900-1922)near Rome, where Catacombs owned a plot of land. It had formerly been a center of orthodox spirituality and Greek culture, where a monastery had been founded in 1004 by saint nil. Mother Teresa stayed behind at san vito with two oblates, and it was there that she died. When dom norbert arrived in Rome as Procurator General, he immediately began to look after this community, dedicating himself to its spiritual formation. he went there as confessor, and substituted for the father Immediate, who was mobilized during the first World War. every saturday afternoon and on the eve of feasts, he went to Grottaferrata, staying on through the following day, preach-ing, hearing confessions, and giving conferences. he wanted to give the sisters a solid formation in spirituality, scripture, and the sources of Cistercian spirituality. he also gave courses to the novices, which the whole community attended. he collaborated closely with the abbess, Mother agnes, a holy and very intelligent woman, who was among the sisters who had come from san vito.b) Mother Pia (Maria Elena Gullini)at the same time, dom norbert helped out at the community of Little sisters of the assumption. one day, a rather unusual candidate presented herself at the convent. her name was Maria elena Gullini. her father was a

brilliant engineer, who had developed Italy's railroad system, and had become a government Minister. Maria elena, born in 1892, had received her first communion in venice at the hands of the Patriarch, sarto, the future Pius X. she was an intelligent and extremely elegant young woman, who had done her schooling with the french sacred heart sisters in venice. she had left school well supplied with degrees in languages, music and painting, and she had come to Rome to be with her father. When in 1916, at age twenty-five, she wanted to join the Little sisters of the assumption in Rome, the Mother General wondered if such an attractive person with so many qualities could adapt to their simple life of care for the poor. she therefore advised her to make a discernment retreat under the direction of dom norbert sauvage, who was the community's confessor. dom norbert obtained permission for Maria elena to make an in-house re-treat with the Grottaferrata community. at the end of this retreat he told her he thought she had an authentic vocation of self-giving in love, but that he thought she could fulfill that vocation in the contemplative life just as well as in the active life. he invited her to become a Cistercian. she entered six months later (on June 28, 1917), not at Grottaferrata, but at Laval, in france. dom norbert had discerned that a person cast in such a mold and possessing such human and spiritual qualities would be invaluable for

From 1892 to the Close of the Second Vatican Council¹³⁶Grottaferrata, but that she should first receive a solid formation. That is why, with the agreement of abess agnes, he directed her toward Laval, where she took the name sr. Pia. dom norbert had much esteem for the abess of Laval, Mother Lutgarde hémary, who for over forty years (1900-1944) led a thriving community that numbered nearly 115 members, and where the life was very austere. unknown to sr. Pia, the superiors had made an agreement that she would be formed at Laval, but for Grottaferrata. at Laval, just as at Grottaferrata, the exuberance of this lively young woman inspired a bit of fear at first. But she was admitted to profession on July 16, 1919. In order to give her some pastoral experience, she was soon appointed as mistress of the professed lay sisters. Ten years after her entry at Laval, she returned to Grottaferrata, where she took stability the following year. from then on, Mother agnes counted on her a great deal. a few years later she was appointed abess by the holy see, and then elected unanimously by the community three years later. c) Mother Tecla (Maria Fontana) about the time Maria-elena Gullini was being sent to Laval, another novice, Ma-ria fontana, entered at Grottaferrata. she was a woman of mature age, around forty-five, who had been the assistant General of the franciscan Missionary sis-ters of the sacred heart of Mary. Before presenting herself as a novice at Grottafer-rata, she had spent twenty-five years caring for poor people of all religions in the streets of Cairo, egypt. during her novitiate she had dom norbert sauvage for spiritual direction. When she was turned down for profession

(officially because she had a weak voice, but it was probably because they did not know how to integrate into the community a person with that kind of experience), dom norbert sent her to Chimay, where she was accepted and made profession on september 8, 1921, taking the name sr. Tecla. during her seventeen years at Chimay, she had dom anselme Le Bail and dom Godefroid Bélorgey as chaplains. no sooner was Mother Pia appointed abbess at Grottaferrata—on december 30, 1931—than she called sr. Tecla back from Chimay to help her as novice director. from that point on, the community of Grottaferrata was for a long time in the hands of two exceptional women: Mother Pia as abbess, and sr. Tecla as novice director. They 109 her time as abbess was not without moments of weariness, darkness, and trials, even from her own order. on two occasions she had to resign. The first time, in december 1940, she was replaced by Mother Tecla, who appointed her novice director. Re-elected in 1946 and 1949, she once again had to resign in 1951, and was sent in exile to La fille-dieu in switzerland. once again, Mother Tecla replaced her for two years. Mother Pia was called back in 1959, which cleared her name, but she died of cancer on the return trip on april 29.

137chapter 2: The Consolidation of Our Identity (1900-1922) were the abbess and novice director of the Blessed Gabriella sagheddu, who arrived at Grottaferrata in 1935. It is quite striking to see this extraordinary network of relationships, in which dom norbert played an active part, and through which divine Providence prepared the way for a future Blessed. These few lines on norbert sauvage's role in the vocations of Mother Pia and Mother Tecla give us a glimpse of a large part of his ministry in the order during the last stage of his monastic life. he was a great spiritual director. he stayed in touch with Mother Pia until the end of his life. While she was at Laval he visited each year when he went to france for the General Chapter. he maintained regular correspondence with her and with several other women he had oriented toward monastic life. The depth of discernment, the solidity of spiritual teaching, and the refinement of sentiment that come through in these letters bear witness to his great emotional and spiritual balance. d) Sister Marie-Joseph (Anne-Marie Granger) one of these persons was a young woman from Guéret, anne-Marie Granger, who sought his help in discerning her vocation, while he was stationed nearby at the beginning of the war. at the end of this discernment he told her: If I were a young woman of twenty, and if I were Miss anne-Marie, I would enter Trappist life tomorrow at Laval.... I am aware of an abbess who would scratch my eyes out if she knew I was sending you to Laval, because at Laval there is no lack of vocations. But I am speaking in the interest of your soul, not in the order's interest.... Pray and ask for the graces you need to make your choice according to God's will. This young woman entered Laval in 1915, where she took the name sr. Marie-Joseph, and was one of the founders of Igny in 1929. sr. Marie-Joseph wrote the following about dom norbert in her

memoirs:110 although he did not do military service, dom norbert did present himself at the french embassy to be mobi-lized in 1914. he was sent to the military depot at Condé, and then to Rouen and Reims. But he fell seriously ill, and was hospitalized at saint-Maur-des-fossés in val-de-Marne, until february 21, 1915. he convalesced first at Champigny, then at Guéret, and finally at Maubec. he was demobilized in March 1915 for reasons of bad health, and returned to Rome in June.111 It was the abbess of Igny, Mother alphonse Gastineau, who put Mother Pia, then abbess of Grottaferrata, in con-tact with a friend of the dominican fr. Christophe dumont, director of the Istina Center for ecumenical studies at Paris. It was fr. dumont who introduced her to fr. Couturier. That is how the monastery of Grottaferrata was included in the list of 1500 addresses to which the 1937 Christian unity Week brochure was sent, a publication on which Mother Pia commented to her community, and which prompted sr. Gabriella to offer her life for the cause of Christian unity.

From 1892 to the Close of the Second Vatican Council138I entered Laval on october 2, 1915. dom norbert kept in touch with me until his death, and took part in all my joys. In June 1917, he sent us Mother Pia from Rome, and she is now prioress of Grotta. he came to the abbey in person after the war, and preached at sr. Pia's simple profession on July 16, 1919, taking as his text "Who is this coming up from the desert, leaning upon her Beloved?" during his vacation each year he spent a few days in the chaplain's house at La Coudre, thus becoming once again for both of us fr. norbert, "poor little abbot without an abbey and without any authority." In october 1921, he gave us our annual retreat. These few lines should suffice to show how interesting it would be to have a complete biography of this exceptional monk. one can hardly begin to list the lessons to be drawn from his relatively short but full life. Let us nevertheless note three aspects: the abbot, the spiritual director, and the preacher.dom norbert had a strong sense of community. he saw his role as abbot in terms of service to the community. This service was first of all a matter of foster-ing love for Christ, of leading the monks of his community to a deep life of prayer, and of developing each monk's spiritual and intellectual qualities. for him, this service was completely subordinate to the community, so much so that he considered it normal to hand everything over to another when the right moment came, and even to prepare someone to replace him as soon and as well as possible. This concept of abbatial office corresponds with that of the key centuries of monasti-cism, when some abbots remained in office for many years or even until death, but when it was not rare for abbots to resign after a few years in office when it seemed, for one reason or another, in the best interest of the community to make a change. The idea that the abbatial office is by its very nature "for life" surfaced at the time of the restoration of monasticism in europe, within the context of nostalgia for monarchy.dom norbert's

sense of responsibility as abbot for the members of his community could also be seen in the way he dealt with persons who asked him to help guide them in seeking God's will. In more than one case, this responsibility 112 This retreat attracted a great deal of attention. The complete text of these twenty sermons has been preserved in the archives at scourmont. It is enough to mention the titles of each to give an idea of the rich content of his teaching at a time when preaching tended to be rather moralizing. 1) The need to study Christ to know him, love him, live in intimacy with him, and to allow him to live in us. 2) The five dispositions that produce knowledge of God in us: admiration, adoration, respect, submission, and trust. 3) The divinity of Jesus Christ. 4) The mother-hood of God. 5) The mystery of Jesus Crucified. 6) The characteristics of the savior in Jesus. 7) Mary, co-redemp-trix of humanity. 8) Jesus, the divine friend. 9) Jesus, the divine spouse. 10) The eucharist. 11) our membership in the Body of Christ according to st. Paul, part one. 12) Part two of the same. 13) our life in God, our sanctification. 14) Mortification. 15) Means for working at our sanctification. 16) The motherhood of Mary. 17) Jesus' humility. 18) Jesus' charity. 19) Communion. 20) Conclusion: the life of prayer.