

**Norbertine Fathers Welcome Event Opening Remarks
July 1, 2023**

**Bonaventure Hall
Springfield, Illinois**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Thank you all for joining me here today to commemorate this historic moment for the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, the Norbertine Fathers, and for this magnificent facility and grounds.

For those of you visiting this place for the first time and for those who have fond memories of visits here over the years, I am confident you will agree that this is a truly remarkable place, which I like to call a hidden gem!

These buildings and grounds do what great Church properties are meant to do: they lift our eyes, our imagination, and our hearts to heaven. To enter this place is to step away from the bustle and busyness of life and experience the Lord's peace.

With this in mind, I want to thank the Hospital Sisters for their faithfulness and prudence in stewarding all that the Lord has entrusted to their care and to share a bit of "behind the scenes" background that has led up to this day's celebration.

From humble beginnings here with the founding of the American Province in 1875, the Hospital Sisters established and grew a health system that, last year alone, served 1 million people in Illinois and Wisconsin and helped to bring nearly 8,000 babies into the world.

In 1886, the sisters also established the first-ever Catholic Nursing program in the United States, St. John's College of Nursing, which still operates here in Springfield today.

The legacy of the sister's ministry of healing has impacted generations of people in our region and will last for generations to come.

After starting St. John's Hospital in 1875 in downtown Springfield, where the Hospital Sisters also lived, in 1917 the Sisters purchased 500 acres of land situated six miles northeast of Springfield for the building of St. John's Tuberculosis Sanitarium and later the construction of St. Francis of Assisi Church and St. Francis Convent. This sacred place is a visible and powerful element of the Sisters' enduring legacy.

Apart from the church, which will celebrate its 100th anniversary of dedication by Bishop James Griffin next year on April 27th, most of the buildings you are seeing here are new, having replaced older, larger buildings that served,

originally, as a tuberculosis sanitarium and a large convent that once housed several hundred sisters.

About 15 years ago, the sisters replaced those buildings with the facilities you see today, trusting that in some form they would be of use to the Church for years to come.

As efforts to secure that future became more concrete, however, the only serious consideration the sisters' received was from an outside entity that would have forced them to leave their home in less than a year and would not have been a Catholic entity using the space. This was a non-starter for the sisters, so they had a community meeting, at which one of the older Sisters - in fact, 102 years old - said, "Why don't you call the Bishop?" That started our conversation.

Providentially, during that same time-period, Bishop Kevin Vann, the Bishop of Orange County, a native of Springfield, a long-time priest of our diocese, and a lifelong friend and one-time employee of the Hospital Sisters, had introduced me and Monsignor Hoefler, my Vicar General, to the Norbertine Fathers of St. Michael's Abbey. Through that connection, some of the Norbertine Fathers spent time in our diocese, offering retreats and conferences for our priests and lay faithful. Some of our priests visited and made retreats at St. Michael's Abbey in California.

It was almost four years ago, on July 17, 2019, that I concelebrated the Mass for the Dedication of Christ Cathedral in the Diocese of Orange. At the luncheon after Mass, I met Abbot Eugene Hayes of St. Michael's Abbey. Having heard of their growing community, I casually remarked that it would be wonderful for the Norbertines of St. Michael's Abbey to establish a house in our diocese, something I am sure Abbot Eugene hears quite often from bishops around the country. Rather than politely declining the invitation, as I was half expecting, Abbot Eugene did not laugh and did not say no. Instead, he handed me his business card and said, "Let's talk." That began a conversation with Abbot Eugene and his leadership council about the possibility of them establishing some kind of more permanent presence in our diocese. As providence would have it, the Norbertine Fathers had experienced decades of growth and fruitfulness, and were discerning the establishment of a new foundation.

In turn, when Sister Maureen approached me and Monsignor Hoefler to discuss the future of the property, it quickly became clear to all of us that the hand of God was at work in this – that so much had been preordained and set in motion, that all the foundation of all these connections had been established far in advance.

With a lot of diligent effort and planning from many people on the Hospital Sisters' staff, our diocesan staff, and the Norbertine Fathers, we have now arrived at this historic occasion today.

In particular, I would like to thank Sister Maureen O'Connor and Mr. Rick Haberkorn for their great partnership, wisdom, and collaboration without which this day would not have been possible.

This is, indeed, a day of great gratitude, of consolation, and of inspiration. As I mentioned in my homily, the faithful response of the Hospital Sisters and Norbertines is truly a powerful witness to all of us.

Father Augustine, and all the Norbertine Fathers, whom we will meet momentarily, we welcome you warmly to Springfield. We are grateful that you are here.

Abbot Eugene and Father Gabriel, we thank you, your leadership council, and all of your confreres for accepting our invitation to establish your new foundation here in Springfield.

To all the Hospital Sisters present here today and to those who could not be with us, I thank you for your faithful service to the people of our diocese and for your prudence and stewardship, and, above all, for your fidelity and faithful witness to the Gospel.