

Benedict Nivakoff and fellow Benedictine monks seek to rebuild Norcia after earthquake

by [Josephine McKenna](#) in the [December 7, 2016](#) issue

When a 6.6-magnitude earthquake struck Norcia, Italy, Benedict Nivakoff and the other Benedictine monks who live there escaped injury.

But their historic basilica and monastery, built above the birthplace of St. Benedict, collapsed on October 30.

“Is this the end of the book or the beginning of a new chapter?” asked Nivakoff, an American monk from Connecticut who has lived in Norcia for 15 years and is the subprior of the community. “We want to make this a new chapter.”

The 16 monks launched a fund-raising campaign called Deep Roots to rebuild the 14th-century basilica and monastery and to breathe new life into Norcia. They have already drawn the support of billionaire cashmere manufacturer Brunello Cucinelli, who lives in Solomeo, another medieval hilltop town 90 miles away.

“I will help them with sustenance and the monastery’s reconstruction,” Cucinelli told the Italian daily *La Repubblica*. “Their presence has brought back spirituality to [Norcia].”

Norcia—also known by its Latin name, Nursia—was the home of St. Benedict, founder of Western monasticism. Norcia’s Benedictine monastery was active from the tenth century until it was suppressed under Napoleon 200 years ago. The monks returned in 1998 and built a business exporting beer to the United States.

Brewery production has been suspended, and the monks have moved to another monastery, which they are restoring outside Norcia, as they work out what comes next.

For now Norcia is a virtual ghost town. Many people had already been evacuated from the area after a string of recent earthquakes, including a 6.2-magnitude quake in August that killed nearly 300. Another 22,000 people are homeless.

“Almost everyone was gone when it happened,” said Nivakoff, referring to the October 30 earthquake. “Four of the priests went around the town trying to give people the last rites. We had to force people out of their homes. Every church in Norcia is on the ground.”

The loss of the basilica was devastating for the monks.

“It is a bit like when a loved one dies, you don’t realize the loss at first,” Nivakoff said. “The basilica lasted more than 1,000 years. It feels like the end of an age.”

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