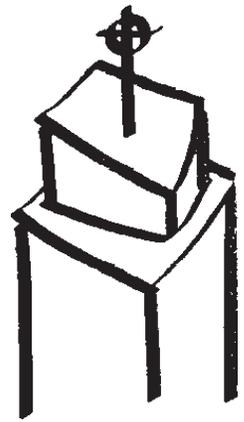


# OUR FAMILY

# NEWS

For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

September &  
October, 2016



# THE “THIN PLACE” REVISITED

*Oblate Jim Warren, senior pastor of First Christian Church in Bloomington, Illinois, first explored the subject of the “thin place” in the March & April, 2012 issue of Our Family News. He takes it up again as we continue to examine, at our monthly meetings, the experience of prayer in our lives.*

My home church has two large and beautiful stained glass windows. A dozen scenes from Jesus’ life line the sides of the sanctuary’s front window, and a winding grape vine grows in the back window. When I was a boy, those windows and the sunlight that played through them captivated me.

I looked forward each Sunday to following the tiny, confetti-like fragments of colored light that the sun brought to life. These pieces of light appeared and danced unhurriedly through the pews, and then disappeared, only to appear again elsewhere, like glowing summer fireflies that leisurely glide about the night, and then go dark, rendering themselves invisible, until they shine again.

The communion table was the focal point of the sanctuary. It sat slightly to the right of center and was directly in front of the stained glass window depicting Jesus’ life. Not only did the window’s colors twirl around the table, but the window itself became a glowing backdrop to our service of communion. I sensed that this space was holy and otherworldly, unlike any other place I’d ever experienced.

Our preacher at the time shared my sense of the sacredness of our sanctuary. He declared that the few square feet of blue carpet in front of the table was holy ground, and he didn’t permit anyone to step into that space. His directive came to carry the same weight as God’s command at the burning bush for Moses to remove his sandals and come no closer. Holy ground, whether at the table or around the burning bush, was inviolate and was to be treated with the utmost reverence.

I knew this was a place where God was especially near and where God could be encountered easily. To this day, when I return to my home church and enter its sanctuary, when I once again experience the measured choreography of the windows’ sunlit colors, when the elders and deacons gather around the table to offer prayers and serve communion, and when the window’s glow fills the chancel with an ethereal gleam, I know that I am in the presence of the divine.

The sanctuary of my home church was my earliest experience of a “thin place.” The notion of thin places comes from Celtic spirituality, and Mindie Burgoyne defines these holy spaces as follows:

In simple terms a *thin place* is a place where the veil between this world and the Other world is *thin*; the Other world is more near. This meaning assumes the perceiver senses the existence of a world beyond what we know through our five senses. A thin place is a place where connection to that “Other” world seems effortless, and ephemeral signs of its existence are almost palpable.

A thin place is simply that – a PLACE where the veil is thin. The place itself calls you, draws you into itself, transports you into the presence of the world beyond this world. The very ground itself seems to call out, “Come here and be transformed.” The thinness of place moves you into the presence of the mysterious power. There, all things you perceive through your senses are charged, electrified,

illuminated with the presence of that power.

How well Burgoyne describes my experience in my home church! The sanctuary, and even more so the chancel, were places where connecting with God was easy and natural. God was near, and I could feel it.

Since those early experiences in my home church, I have come upon many other thin places where I've encountered the pronounced nearness of God. This has happened in houses of worship, outdoor "shrines," the grandeur of God's creation, cemeteries, historical sites, and even in ballparks. (Wrigley Field, of course!) God has generously sown thin places all around us.

I took a three-month sabbatical last summer and used that time to visit thin places, 19 altogether. I didn't choose places based on specific and detailed criteria. Rather, I selected sites that were generally regarded as sacred in some way by the tradition or religion to which they belonged. The purpose of the project was to understand better what a sacred place is and to reflect on the importance of sacred places for our spiritual lives today.

One of my first observations about the places I visited was that they were often in liminal geographic locations. Lake McDonald in Montana's Glacier National Park demonstrated this perfectly. When I stood on Lake McDonald's rocky beach, I followed the rocks at my feet and watched as they slowly disappeared into the cold, clear water. I continued across the glistening lake to the mountains that rose from the water and climbed toward heaven, their snow-capped peaks piercing the blue Montana sky and pointing to calm, soothing clouds.

Nothing at Lake McDonald was static. Colors shifted, shadows moved, clouds meandered, tiny waves lapped at the shore, the wind altered its direction, and everything before me changed in each moment. A thin place brings us closer to the transforming forces that can lead us "into the presence of the mysterious power."

While I was at Glacier National Park I had the honor of baptizing Owen, my grandnephew, with the waters of Lake McDonald. Owen's parents and grandparents lived nearby, and Glacier National Park was for them a sacred place where God was very near. In my remarks at the ceremony I touched on the charged and electrifying presence palpable in this setting:

We are gathered in one of the most beautiful and striking places on earth. The glory and splendor of God's awesome creation surround us.

In the distance we see snow-capped mountains ascending powerfully, touching the blue heavens and connecting us with the One who is beyond all. Between the distant mountains and this rocky shore is Lake McDonald, its unsullied waters



flowing powerfully from the earth's center and connecting us steadfastly to the One who is in all.

We are in a holy and sacred place where heaven and earth meet, where Creator and creation connect easily. We are at the boundary between this world and another, and this boundary is very thin and permeable. God, in whom all of creation exists, is especially near and real here.

In the very nature of this place we encounter God's dynamic Spirit working around us and in us. God has drawn us here for more than a fun family celebration. God has pulled us to this thin and sacred place that God may more easily transform us into the loving and faithful human beings God created us to be.

Owen's family brought him to this liminal place on the rocky shore of Lake McDonald, where all was quiet and peaceful. It was a place nestled in the otherworldly shadows of mountains that reached mightily toward heaven. This place, which Owen's family knew well, had called them to bring Owen here that they might encounter the grace-filled presence of God and invoke God's blessing on Owen and all who gathered. The veil between this world and the other was not just thin, but had been seemingly lifted by God to reveal the limitless power of God's love, which had become tangible in that moment. We stood at the edge of a very thin and porous boundary.

The liminal location of sacred places characterized many of the sites I visited. Often these sites were found where water and land met, on hills and mountains where earth and heaven converged, at the intersection of two roads where the traveler had to choose one path, and behind fences and gates that narrowly separated two realities. It is at boundaries like these that one world touches another, and connecting the two becomes effortless. Sacred places are part of almost every tradition and religion, and the need for thin places where the boundary between worlds is porous and transforming is almost universal.

One explanation of this phenomenon for Christians is that ours is a decidedly incarnational faith. We value the physical world as God's good creation, and we belong to that creation. The physical and spiritual are two parts of one whole; one is essential to the other. In the physical birth of Jesus Christ, God came to dwell among us in the flesh; God consecrated the material world. And in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, God transformed and redeemed God's physical creation. God is active in both the physical and spiritual realms.

We Christians need physical places where we come closer to God than we do elsewhere. We make pilgrimages, for instance, so that we may visit a thin and holy place where "the very ground itself seems to call out, 'Come here and be transformed.'" Sometimes we fashion a room, corner of an office, or garden chair into our own thin place. Our frequent prayer wears thin the boundary between this world and the other, like a stair worn concave by unceasing foot traffic.

Or we may happen upon a thin place near us. Church sanctuaries and chapels are often thin places where we may touch the divine. My most frequented thin places are a particular bench in Bloomington's Franklin Park, the outside of the fourth pew on the left under a stained glass window at First Christian Church, and a certain chair and location on my front porch.

God created all that is, so God is everywhere. Nevertheless, specific thin places exist within God's physical creation that draw us into the world beyond this world. We and God connect almost instinctively in these sacred places, and the love of God in Jesus Christ works its transforming power in us.

The Scottish poet Kenneth Steven, in his poem *Iona*, eloquently expresses our yearning for thin and sacred places:

Is this place really nearer to God?  
Is the wall thin between our whispers  
And his listening? I only know  
The world grows less and less –  
Here what matters is conquering the wind,  
Coming home dryshod, getting the fire lit.  
I am not sure whether there is no time here  
Or more time, whether the light is stronger  
Or just easier to see. That is why  
I keep returning thirsty, to this place  
That is older than my understanding,  
Younger than my broken spirit.

--- Jim Warren



**Our Family News** is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, Our Family News, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

## SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church from  
1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2016

Sunday, October 9, 2016

Sunday, November 13, 2016  
(Oblates Day)

Sunday, December 4, 2016

Sunday, January 8, 2017

Sunday, February 12, 2017

Sunday, March 12, 2017

Sunday, April 9, 2017

Sunday, May 7, 2017

## NOVEMBER 13 OBLATES DAY SCHEDULE

10:00 A.M.	Conventual Mass, within which oblates will renew their oblations
12:00 noon	Midday Prayer with the monks
12:15 P.M.	Lunch with the monks in the monastery refectory
After lunch	Gathering in the abbey church
2:30 P.M.	Conclusion of meeting

## Passage for *Lectio* at the September Meeting

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:9-10

## Passage for *Lectio* at the October Meeting

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:10-13