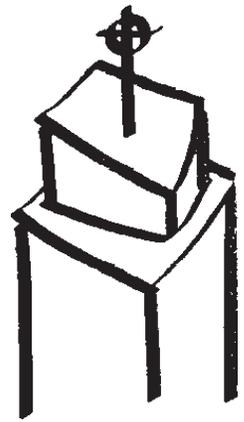


# OUR FAMILY

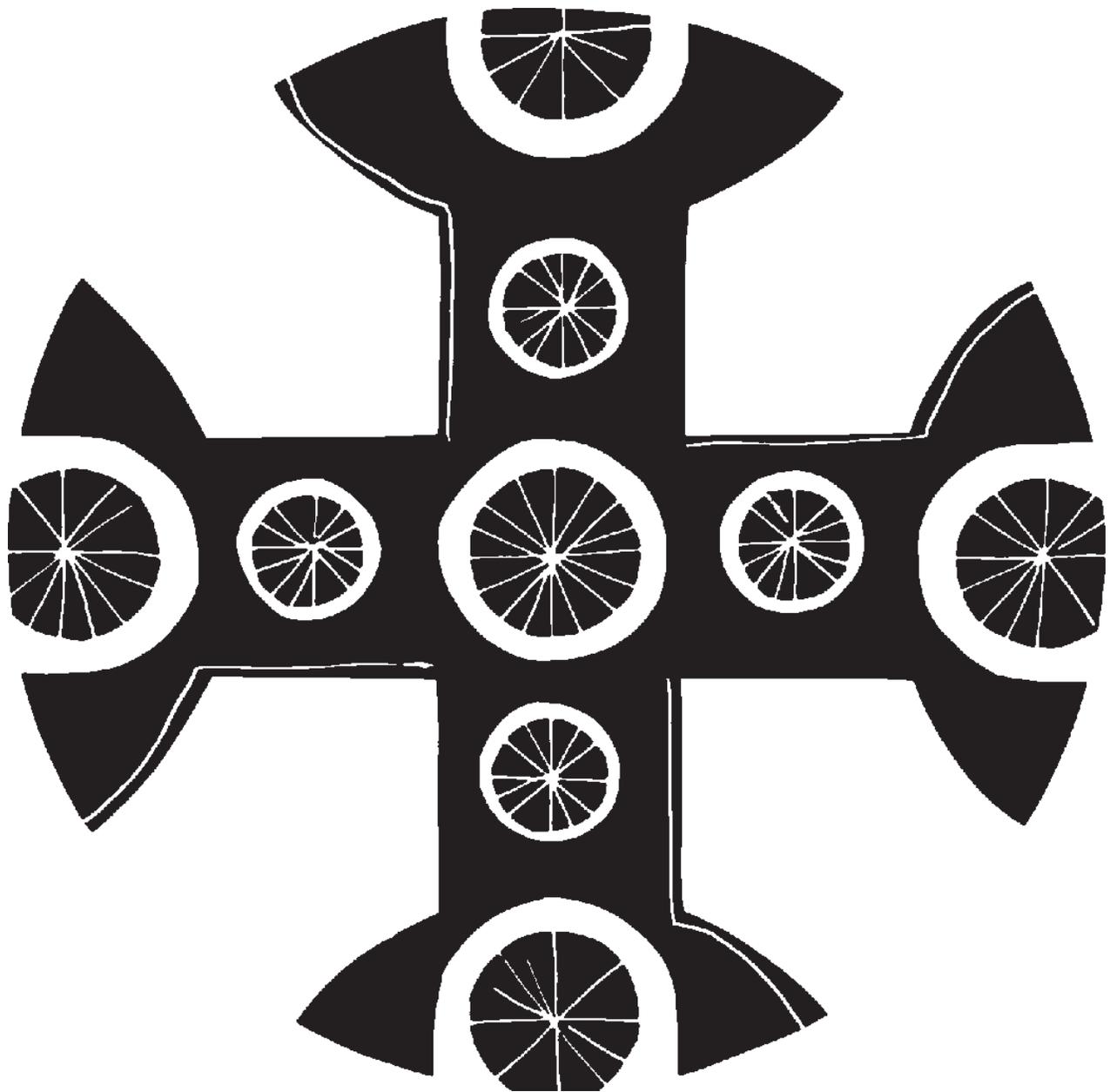


# NEWS

For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois



January &  
February, 2017



## LENT: A TIME FOR GRATITUDE

The topic for the prayer group was gratitude. The leader invited us to think of the three things we would have most difficulty giving up. Silently we sifted through all we cherished, struggling to reduce the list to just three. After a time, the leader asked us to cut the list to two things, and finally to only one. Invited to share what remained, most of us mentioned large ideas such as “faith,” “family,” and “intelligence.” The last person to contribute was Alvin, an older man who rarely spoke. After a pause, he said quietly, “My aspidistra plant.”

I was reminded of Alvin when I read Anthony Bloom’s story of the cucumber in his book *Beginning to Pray*. Bloom uses the anecdote to illustrate his point that “too often the kind of thanksgiving we offer [to God] is too much a general thanksgiving” (42). In the story, the teen-aged Bloom sets out on a visit and carefully calculates his arrival to coincide with the dinner hour. When a late train thwarts his plan, Bloom and his companion arrive “ravenously hungry” to find that the meal is over and all that remains is a half cucumber. Bloom’s companion suggests they say grace. Though not particularly grateful, Bloom joins in a rather lengthy list of prayers, admitting that, “all the time I had difficulty in detaching myself from the half cucumber, of which a quarter would be mine.” However, reflecting on when he finally got to indulge in his meager meal, Bloom notes:

In all my life I haven’t been so grateful to God for any amount or quantity of food. I ate it as one would eat sacred food. I ate it carefully, not to miss any moment of this rich delight of the fresh cucumber, and after we had finished I had no hesitation in saying, “And now, let us give thanks to the Lord” (43).

In another section of the book, Bloom suggests that a key to learning to pray continuously is to “awake in the morning and the first thing you do, thank God for it, even if you don’t feel particularly happy about the day which is to come” (75). The day is a gift from God, and like so many other of God’s gifts we often take it for granted or offer only grudging thanks because the weather is gloomy, or we didn’t sleep soundly, or the hours ahead hold tasks we don’t want to do or realities we don’t want to face. But Bloom insists that if we start each day in this way, and consider seriously what it means, we will realize that

every person you meet is a gift of God, every circumstance you will meet is a gift of God, whether it is bitter or sweet, whether you like it or dislike it. It is God’s own gift to you, and if you take it in that way, then you can face any situation (76-77).

I have no doubt that Bloom is correct in the above, but I don’t think it is as easy as he suggests to simply resolve to wake up grateful for the day and then go into the world as “God’s own messenger.” I think we need to start small, to practice more specific and concrete habits of gratitude. I would like to suggest, therefore, that this Lent we resolve to be intentionally grateful for everyday things—like cucumbers.

Br. David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., has developed a ministry devoted to fostering the habit of gratitude. Like Bloom he advocates our “becoming aware that every moment is a given moment...a gift.” He urges us to “build stop signs into our lives,” practices that will remind us to open all our senses to the gifts present to us in that very moment. He recalls that on his return from a stay in Africa during which he lacked access to drinkable water, he became overwhelmed with gratitude for the gift of water. But, he notes, after a while that joy diminished, so to avoid losing his awareness of the gift, he created his own “stop signs,” little stickers that he attached to the faucet, so that every time he turned it on, he would be grateful for the water that flowed from it.

Now, I am not suggesting that we spend Shrove Tuesday plastering our homes or offices with post-it notes, but I do believe we can devise a plan for Lent that will help to ingrain in us a habit of gratitude. My idea comes from the Jewish theology of blessings, which is based on “the rabbinic appreciation of the religious

significance of the physical world.” These blessings “evoke in us the awareness of living in God’s world...they awaken our consciousness to see the world as God’s temple” (Kimelman, 947).

The blessings follow a format that always begins “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe.” Catholics will recognize a variation of this in the Offertory prayers over the gifts of bread and wine: “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation.” These prayers are, in fact, based on the ancient Jewish blessing formulas. Each blessing then mentions a particular gift from God. The Babylonian Talmud mandates one hundred blessings a day for everything from rainbows and lightning to smelling spices and using the washroom. There are even morning blessings of thanks for not being born a slave or a gentile or a woman! “The assumption of all these blessings is that no aspect of the world is devoid of spiritual resonance” (951). In Christian terms we would say that the blessings recognize the sacramentality of all creation.

This Lent we, too, could resolve to offer an intentional blessing prayer of thanks for some gift we experience every day. It doesn’t have to be elaborate. For example, the Jewish blessing said before eating fruit that grows on trees is simply, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the trees.” Perhaps we could put a note on our cupboard reminding us to admire and be grateful for the ability of our hand to grasp a mug of coffee, or on the stair rail to draw our attention to the way the muscles and joints of our legs work together as we climb the stairs. Maybe a note by the door could cue us to stop and give thanks as we open it for the fresh morning air that fills our nostrils or the ability to hear whatever sound greets us, be it a bird, or a child or the garbage truck rattling by. Accompany this prayer with a brief silence that recognizes that no words can adequately acknowledge God’s generosity to us.

Before long the blessing prayer will become second nature, and you will find yourself unable to pick up a mug of tea without saying, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for you have made my fingers jointed so I can grasp this cup.” At the same time you will become more aware of the incredible intricacy of your own hands, those appendages you have perhaps never really contemplated.

If we determine to foster a habit of gratitude just once each day, I believe that by the end of Lent we will find we are far more aware not only of the one gift we have focused on, but also of the innumerable gifts God gives us daily. And this awareness can only spill over into all aspects of our lives. We will take more time over a meal, be more attentive to each person we encounter, see beauty in unlikely places. And awareness will become action. Our appreciation of a bowl of homemade soup might prompt us to share some with a colleague. Our gratitude for our knees that work might lead us to visit a friend whose knees don’t work so well and offer to help with some chores. Our wonder at the intricacies of the leaves on a favorite houseplant might cause us to start a cutting to give to a friend. Anyone have an aspidistra plant?



---Kathy Martin

### References

Bloom, Anthony. *Beginning to Pray*. New York: Paulist Press, 1970

Kimelman, Reuven. “The Rabbinic Theology of the Physical: Blessings, Body and Soul, Resurrection, Covenant and Election.” *History of Judaism—The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*. Vol. 4, 946-976. Eds. Katz, Steven and Reuven Kimelman. Cambridge University Press, 2006

Steindl-Rast, David. “Want to be happy? Be grateful.” [https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_steindl\\_rast\\_want\\_to\\_be\\_happy\\_be\\_grateful/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful/transcript?language=en)

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**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, January 8, 2017  
Sunday, February 12, 2017  
Sunday, March 12, 2017  
Sunday, April 9, 2017  
Sunday, May 7, 2017

### Passage for *Lectio* at the January Meeting

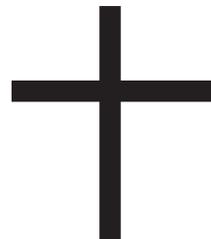
Be joyful always; pray continually; give  
thanks in all circumstances, for this is  
God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

### Passage for *Lectio* at the February Meeting

The Twelve gathered all the disciples  
together and said, "It would not be right  
for us to neglect the ministry of the world  
of God in order to wait on tables.  
Brothers, choose seven men from among  
you who are known to be full of the Spirit  
and wisdom. We will turn this  
responsibility over to them and will give  
our attention to prayer and the ministry of  
the word."

Acts 6:2-4



PLEASE REMEMBER THESE  
DECEASED OBLATES  
IN YOUR PRAYERS

PAUL SMUDZINSKI

MORRIS CALSYN

ELIZABETH "LEE" LENSKI

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### Abbey Prayer Schedule

Visitors are welcome to join the monks for Mass and for the hours of the Divine Office. Conventual Mass is celebrated on the first level of the abbey church, the hours of the Divine Office on the second level. During the school year, the monks' schedule is as follows.

5:45 A.M. Morning Prayer\*  
7:45 A.M. Conventual Mass\*\*  
12:00 Noon Midday Prayer  
5:30 P.M. Evening Prayer\*\*\*  
\* on Sunday, 7:00 A.M.  
\*\* on Sunday, 10:00 A.M.  
\*\*\* on Saturday & Sunday, 5:00 P.M.

