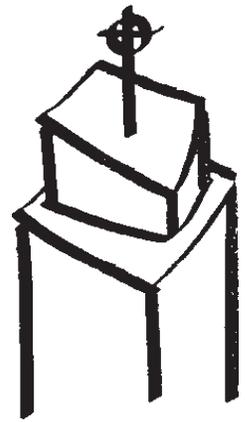


# OUR FAMILY



# NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

March &  
April, 2012

*We are very pleased to offer you the following reflection by oblate Jim Warren, senior pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Bloomington, Illinois.*

*Jim is originally from Mattoon, Illinois. He earned a B.A. from Olivet Nazarene College, an M. Div. from Harvard Divinity School, and, with a dissertation on family spirituality, a D. Min. from San Francisco Theological Seminary. Ordained in 1984, he took on his present pastorate thirteen years ago.*

*In the theological realm, Jim has maintained special interest in monastic history and spirituality, Carmelite history and spirituality, and Trinitarian theology, the last particularly as found in the works of Jurgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff.*

*Beside his church congregation, Jim has another flock to tend: he and his wife Sharon have ten children, by name (and in order) Ben, Chris, Katherine,Carolynn, Johnathon, Samuel, Rebekah, Gabriel, Lydia, and Bethany. In his free time, he enjoys doing things with his children, reading, cooking, and working on the old house that is the Warren family residence.*



*This coming April 15 will mark the 175th anniversary of the founding of Jim's church, which is the oldest continuing congregation in Bloomington. On behalf of all Jim's fellow oblates, we extend hearty and prayerful congratulations to him and to the members of First Christian Church on this joyous occasion.*

*Vicki Gensini, Editor, Our Family News*

*Br. Nathaniel Grossmann, O.S.B., Director of Oblates*

## A THIN PLACE

Several years ago I had the privilege of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Seeing the biblical sites that had lived in my imagination since I was a boy was a powerful experience, and the feeling of being in such a sacred place was just as moving. I stood where Jesus was born in Bethlehem, where he was baptized in the River Jordan, and where he taught and healed in Galilee. I made my way through the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, a sprawling structure that marks where Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried, and where he was resurrected Easter morning.

Wherever I went, I knew I was on holy ground. Saints and martyrs, apostles and disciples had hallowed this land with their prayers and sacrifices. Kings, prophets, and priests had travelled the same roads, climbed the same steps, and hiked the same paths as I did. Countless pilgrims had made their way to this sacred place to experience the biblical story anew. My sojourn in the Holy Land brought me into that great cloud of witnesses who had lived, worshipped, prayed, and sought God in this place. Each day I was overwhelmed by the tangible sense of the divine abiding nearby.

I was in what Celtic Christianity calls a "thin place." Celtic Christianity, which emerged in the British Isles as Christianity spread to what was then the farthest fringes of the Western world, recognizes the presence of "thin places" in our world. These are places where the veil between this world and the other, the barrier between earth and heaven, the dividing line between the finite and the infinite, is especially thin. Thin places are awash in God's presence, and the divine becomes real, palpable, sometimes overwhelming. Because God is so near, one connects with God in a thin place almost effortlessly.

The travel writer Mindie Burgoyne describes “thin places” in these words:

Truth abides in thin places; naked, raw, hard-to-face truth. Yet the comfort, safety and strength to face that truth also abide there. Thin places captivate our imagination, yet diminish our existence. We become very small, yet we gain connection and become part of something larger than we can perceive. The human spirit is awakened and will grow if the body and mind allow it.

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 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.

Clearly, Burgoyne articulates well my experience while journeying through the Holy Land. The veil between this world and the other was very thin, and I felt as if I could reach out and touch God, as surely as I could touch the waters of the Jordan, the walls of the Temple, or the stones of the Via Dolorosa. It was a place charged with the divine.

One doesn't have to travel halfway around the world to find such thin places. Celtic people had a keen awareness of thin places all around them. Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England are dotted with monuments, markings, and ruins that cry out, “This is a thin place. This is holy ground.” Celtic Christians knew, in a real and concrete way, that the divine was present all around them, and even more so in certain thin places where heaven and earth draw near to one another.

My world is likewise populated by thin places. There's a bench in a nearby park that I have come to experience as especially thin. I have found it an excellent place to stop in the morning to pray the Office – at least in warmer weather. Somehow, I know when I sit on that bench that I am just a little closer to the one with whom I am engaged in prayer. Another thin place is the third pew from the front on the lectern side of our sanctuary, just below the stained glass window of a dove descending. No matter how dark the day may be, enough light filters into that spot to illumine the eyes of my soul and allows me to see what I need to see. When I find thin places such as these, or, rather, when these places find me, I hold on to them and return to them often, for I know that there I will draw close to the one who seeks me. Thin places have long tugged at those who seek to enter more fully and deeply into the mystery that is God.

As I have studied the history of monasticism, I have often wondered whether early monastics were attracted to thin places in which to settle. Did Saint Anthony retreat to the Egyptian wilderness because it was a thin place in which he could encounter God more naturally? Did Saint Benedict retire to the cave at Subiaco because God was in the dark solitude of that thin place inviting him to enter and remain? Did the first monks populate Cîteaux because that proved to be a thin place where they could listen intently for God's still, small voice? Were those who followed these pioneering saints, the daughters and sons of these early monastics, also bidden by God to discover a thin place where they could be transported into the presence of the world beyond this world, and away from the hectic thickness that walled them in?

It was, I believe, the Holy Spirit who guided Benedict to realize the importance of place in the lives of those who would seek to follow his little rule. In Chapter 58 of the *Rule*, Benedict instructs that novices who are to be accepted into the community must pledge “stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience.” Stability, the first of those vows, ensured Benedict's monks would understand the blessings – and curses – of being in one place. By committing to a particular monastic community for the remainder of one's life, the monk can come to experience the depths of that particular thin place, and contribute to wearing it down further, much as worshippers and pilgrims ascending into and descending from a medieval cathedral over the centuries hollow out and thin the stone steps leading to that holy place.

In Chapter 1 of the *Rule*, Benedict illustrates the vital importance of stability when he writes about the four kinds of monks:

- *cenobites*, “who are based in a monastery and fulfill the service of the Lord under a rule and an abbot or abbess,”

- *anchorites*, who have spent significant time in a monastery and who now “venture into single combat in the desert relying only on their own arms and the help of God in their battle against the evil temptations of body and mind,”
- *sarabaites*, who “go around in twos or threes, or even singly, resting in the sheepfolds which are not those of the Lord, but which they make to suit themselves,”
- *gyrovagues*, who “are always on the move,...never settle to put down the roots of stability,...[and whose] own wills they serve as they seek the satisfaction of their own gross appetites.”

The gyrovagues, Benedict concludes, “are in every way worse than the sarabaites.” Gyrovagues are gadflies, hopping willy-nilly from one place to another, satisfying only their superficial appetites, and never allowing themselves to pause long enough to enjoy the companionship of God abiding in a thin place. Cenobitic stability, i.e., stability within a monastic community, is Benedict’s ideal, and without that permanency one cannot enter fully into the thinness of a place. Stability allows one to discover the reality that is God and how one is to live before God. Indeed, Benedict notes at the end of Chapter 4, in which he describes tools for good works, that the only effective way to learn to use these tools is in a stable, permanent community. Benedict writes, “The workshop in which we are called to work along these lines with steady perseverance is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in community life.” The commitment to physical stability in a place can produce an inner stability, a stability characterized by unwavering love of God and neighbor.

St. Bede Abbey is, for me, a thin place, and it was that thinness that first attracted me here. Whether I have come for a Sunday afternoon oblate gathering or for an overnight retreat, I have revelled in the thinness that exists here. The veil has been stretched quite thin through 120 years of *ora et labora* in this holy place, and I know God to be near in the church, choir chapel, and refectory. Walking the grounds through the orchards, sitting by the small pond, or lingering in the cemetery transports one into the mystery abiding just beyond the senses. St. Bede *is* a thin place, awash in the flood of the Spirit’s outpouring.

When Abbot Philip Davey met with our oblate group in November of last year, he named “stability” as one of the gifts monastic living offers to our fast-paced and frenzied world. When asked what would attract someone to a vocation as a Benedictine monk, Abbot Philip stated that many are looking for the stability that one finds in a place like St. Bede. Stability in a thin place permits one to plumb the depths of God and self and draw ever closer to that deep-down place where the veil is not just stretched incredibly thin, but is removed altogether.

All of us need a place that is both stable and thin in our lives. We live in a world that speeds by at an ever increasing pace. Change is not just constant, but mind-bogglingly rapid, and wherever we look we see a blur, as one thing disappears before we can bring it into focus and another just as quickly takes its place. We rarely seem to land in one place very long before we uproot ourselves, or are uprooted by forces beyond our control, and move on to the next best thing, until that, too, becomes obsolete and we go in search of something better. Our society, it seems, is comprised of Benedict’s gyrovagues, not quite satisfied with what is in front of them, hungering for more, and blindly led by their less-than-divine appetites and passions. Being rooted in a place, especially a thin place, gives us, according to Burgoyne, the “comfort, safety and strength” to encounter God and what Burgoyne describes as the “naked, raw, hard-to-face” truth about ourselves.

I always leave St. Bede with my own world a little thinner, the veil between the triune God and me stretched just a little more. I go about my days connected – genuinely, deeply, indissolubly connected – with the place and people of St. Bede. As I pray Lauds and Vespers from the daily Office, as I pause to recollect myself during the day, as I become aware of God’s presence in this moment, I know that I do so in company with my brothers at St. Bede, with my sister and brother oblates, indeed, with all those whose lives are intertwined with mine through Jesus Christ. In my busy life,

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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 St. Benedict*, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

pulled as I am in many directions by family and church, I need the rootedness, stability, and thinness I encounter each time I turn into the tree-lined entrance to St. Bede.

I am a preacher by vocation, so permit me to conclude this article with an invitation. The next time you are at St. Bede, allow yourself to pause in the thinness of this place and be electrified by the eternal and infinite breaking into our mortal and finite existence. God is truly very near, and God waits, eager to make God's self known to us, and to invite us to join with God in the Trinitarian dance of love and grace. For me, St. Bede is a holy and thin place where my spirit is readied and opened to hear anew these words from Benedict's *Rule*:

Listen, child of God, to the guidance of your teacher. Attend to the message you hear and make sure it pierces your heart, so that you may accept with willing freedom and fulfill by the way you live the directions that come from your loving Father. It is not easy to accept and persevere in obedience, but it is the way to return to Christ, when you have strayed through the laxity and carelessness of disobedience. My words are addressed to you especially, whoever you may be, whatever your circumstances, who turn from the pursuit of your own self-will and ask to enlist under Christ, who is Lord of all, by following him through taking to yourself that strong and blessed armor of obedience which he made his own on coming into our world.

From experiencing the sites of the Holy Land, to sitting in the stillness of the third pew from the front on the lectern side of our sanctuary, to gathering for prayer and study at St. Bede, I have found that the mystery encountered in thin places touches my soul and invites me to listen closely to my loving God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

---Jim Warren



## SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

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

SUNDAY, MARCH 11

Sunday, April 15, 2012  
Sunday, May 6, 2012

## Passage for *Lectio* at the March Meeting

We are forgiven whether we like it or not.

Fr. Thomas Hopko

Copies of this passage will be made available at the meeting.

