



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Walking Together An Interreligious Tudong in Minnesota

Jotipalo Bhikkhu, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB
from **Bulletin 79, July 2007**

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Jotipalo Bhikkhu of Abhayagiri Monastery, Redwood Valley, California, and Father William Skudlarek, OSB, of Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, undertook an interreligious walking pilgrimage that began at Brainerd MN on July 11, 2007, and continued north along the Paul Bunyan Trail, which ends a hundred miles later in Bemidji. Their journal is a lighthearted account of what they experienced as they shared the religious practice of pilgrimage.

Day 1, Wednesday The On-Star Miracle

Jotipalo's parents, Don and Dorothy, were about to drive us from Saint John's Abbey to the trailhead of the Paul Bunyan Trail in Baxter when they discovered the keys to the car were missing. After having looked in all the obvious places, Don determined he might have locked them in the trunk. When he called in to report the problem, the service provider asked for his code, and though he had never used it since buying the car a year and a half ago, Don amazingly remembered it. Within seconds a satellite unlocked the car door, we opened the trunk, and--sure enough--the keys were there!

Arriving at the trailhead, we were met by a reporter from the Brainerd *Dispatch* who interviewed and photographed us as we began our pilgrimage. We started out around quarter to four under an auspicious light rain. We walked for two hours (about six miles), at times in silence, at times talking about our hopes and expectations. Cautiously ignoring a "No Trespassing No Hunting" sign (we weren't going hunting, after all), we pitched our tents and settled in for our first night on the



An interreligious tudong



Jotipalo Bhikkhu (the name comes from the Pali terms for "light" and "protector") was born in Crawfordsville, Indiana, in 1965. He received his B.A. from Wabash College in 1988. Ordained as a novice in 1999, he took full ordination a year later at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, a recently opened monastery in the lineage of the Thai Forest Tradition of Theravadin

trail. Yes, the mosquitoes were bad, but only when we left the trail to find a camp site.

Day 2, Thursday, July 12

Hospitality Extended

After a sleepless but uneventful night in the woods (neither one of us knows the reason for our insomnia, since we were both feeling confident about the walk and our tents were comfortable enough), we got back on the trail at 6:40. About an hour into our walk a biker stopped to chat. He told us he was running a summer camp in Baxter for Korean adoptees, something he has been doing every summer for the last twenty years or so. He himself has adopted four Korean and two Chinese children, in addition to being the natural father of two.

Shortly after eleven we arrived in Nisswa, a resort and tourist town in the Minnesota Lake Region. Jotipalo suspects the reason our alms round was not successful was because William, who was walking in his lower robe (tunic), unwittingly stopped to put on his upper robe (scapular and cowl) in front of a ladies' boutique!

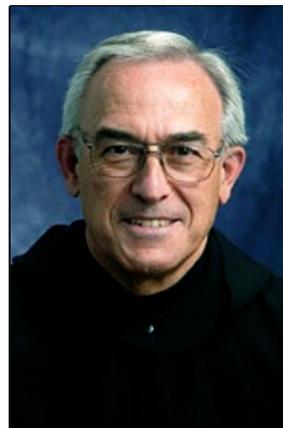
We had chosen to conduct our alms round by standing unobtrusively along the Paul Bunyan Trail, which runs right through the middle of town. A few people smiled, but most simply walked by and pretended not to notice us. After about a half hour we decided to draw on the donations we had received to buy lunch. As we left the restaurant some people did ask us who we were and what we were doing.

We then made our way to the Catholic parish where William had done some Sunday services the previous summer. The pastor was gone, but Judy, the organist and liturgy director, was in her office in the church. She made arrangements for a place to spend the night, which we gratefully accepted. She also called a couple from the parish and arranged for us to stay with them the following night.

Our conversation during the walk focused on community life and, in particular, on how the alms round is done. Jotipalo pointed out that an alms round is not about begging for food, but about making Buddhist monastics available to others. This daily contact insures that monastics

Buddhism located in Redwood Valley, California. He also spent a year at the Arrow River Forest Hermitage near Thunder Bay, Ontario.

**All articles by or about
Jotipalo Bhikkhu**



Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, has been the Secretary General of DIMMID since November 1, 2008. Prior to that he served as chair of the MID board from 2000 to 2005, and as Executive Director of MID until his appointment as Secretary General. He is a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, but resides at Sant'Anselmo in Rome.

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remain accountable for their actions, because if monks misbehaved, they would probably get very hungry.

Day Three, Friday, July 13

“Why are you dressed so funny?”

On the trail around 6:20—intermediate destination Pequot Lakes (mile 21 on the trail).

Arriving at 9:00, we called Diane, a reporter from the Pine River *Journal* who had asked for an interview. We sat and talked for about a half hour before continuing our trek. During the interview Jotipalo noted that we had received remarkable signs of support—donations, publicity, making arrangements along the trail, offering hospitality, kind words from strangers—but most of these offerings came from people with whom some kind of connection, however recent, had been established. At least thus far it has been rare to receive hospitality from complete and total strangers.

There may be a lesson here that can be applied on a global scale. Most people are genuinely generous and hospitable. However, when they meet a stranger, especially ones dressed like us, they are understandably reluctant to interact, especially in a time of manipulated anxiety regarding security.

However, for every rule there is an exception. Vainly in search of today’s edition of the Brainerd *Dispatch* in which the article about us was to appear, we entered the Silver Creek Trader, where William was enthusiastically greeted by the owner, Jan, with “Why are you dressed so funny? Are you a minister or something?” To which William responded, pointing to Jotipalo, still out of view in the entry way, “If you think I look funny, wait till you see him.”

Jan was immediately intrigued when we explained that we were Catholic and Buddhist monks on a pilgrimage, and asked about Jotipalo’s alms bowl. When she saw that it was empty, she invited us to go onto the veranda to do “your Buddhist and Catholic thing,” and she would bring us some coffee. We told her we were running behind schedule, so she placed two “seven layer bars” in the alms bowl. (Bars,

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as anyone who has listened to Garrison Keillor's stories of Lake Wobegon know, are a staple of Minnesota cuisine). Jotipalo offered a traditional Pali blessing chant. Jan, touched by the blessing, replied, "We celebrate our differences."

We then walked an additional three miles on our way to the home of the people who were offering us hospitality for the night. Turing on to the highway that would take us to their place, we stopped at a gas station, determined to purchase today's paper. The cashier asked what we were doing, and Jotipalo pointed to his picture on the front page of the paper. We had a laugh about how famous we were, and as we left, we heard someone send us off with a cheery, "Have a good day, you people and your egos!"

Half way between the gas station and our destination we met by our host, Jerry, who had walked out to greet us. We were taken to a beautiful home and immediately made to feel welcome. Jerry and his wife Sharon began preparing lunch, and we sat down to a delicious meal and enjoyable conversation. Jerry gave us a tour of his twenty-acre yard (literally twenty acres), which contains a wood sculpting studio, a small barn filled with life-sized Christmas figures with which they decorate their yard each year, a one-acre berry patch (raspberry, strawberry, blueberry among others), numerous flower gardens, a pond, and an osprey nesting site on top of a very high pole. Later in the afternoon Jerry discovered that the nest had been destroyed and that some predator had probably killed the two five-week old fledglings.

Several people have already expressed their desire to receive us over the next few days. The hospitality we are receiving has already exceeded anything we might have hoped for and makes us grateful. There still are many uncertainties ahead, but we are enjoying one another's company and continuing to walk in faith.

Day 4, Saturday, July 14

Talk of the Town

Sharon made us a wonderful breakfast, almost enough for an entire day's nourishment. We departed around 7:30 a.m. Jerry walked with us

the first half mile to the trail junction in Jenkins. As we parted ways, he slipped William ("the banker") a very generous donation, along with the wish that we contact them if we needed anything.

Not long on the trail, we met April, who was bicycling from Nisswa. She stopped and told us that she saw us walking past her shop on Thursday. She said we were the talk of the town. (Funny, because few had approached us.) She even knew what we had eaten for lunch! It appears that one of the comments people were making was, "I thought all Buddhists were vegetarians." She thought what we were doing was great and was happy that people in Nisswa were talking about it.

About an hour later we saw a familiar red van in the distance and heard Diane, the reporter from Pine River, calling out cheerfully, "No, I am not stalking you!" She had brought her seven-year-old daughter Ari to meet us and presented food offerings: bananas, plums, and a snack pack. Ari mentioned that she loved snack packs, so we offered that back to her. We have been very touched by the support we have received from Diane and by her interest in what we are doing.

We continued on, stopping before we reached the town of Pine River to meditate and pray along the banks of the Pine River. Before heading out we made a small meal of the many food offerings we had recently received. A few more miles along the trail we arrived at the Pine River Welcoming Center. John, the manager of the Center, welcomed us warmly. If anyone was ever perfectly suited for a job, it's John. According to him, however, it was not a job; he was simply doing what he loved. John explained that the Paul Bunyan Trail was born in Pine River because it was the first municipality to make a town resolution to convert rails to trails. After the last train passed through the town in 1984, he took part in a town council meeting in the basement of the Methodist church. "The reason I remember the meeting so well," he said, "because carrot salad was served, and I hate carrot salad!"

Before we left town John's wife and daughter came to greet and have their picture taken with us. His daughter, a college student at the U of M, wanted it for Facebook—to which William responded, "Oh, we could be friends!" (Jotipalo didn't have a clue what they were talking about.)

We planned to walk at least ten miles today and then call Mary, who had contacted us and offered to put us up for the night and to take us to Mass on Sunday morning. Along the trail we met a couple who spotted us as they were driving south on Highway 371. Cindy had read about us in the Brainerd paper and wanted to make a food offering. Her husband had not read the article, and when she asked him to stop, he replied, "What are you talking about, woman?" Cindy had recently been in Thailand and showed respect by asking if it would be all right to shake hands. They offered a box of Pop Tarts and a banana, the only food they had in the car. As he has been doing whenever someone offers us food, Jotipalo chanted a traditional blessing chant in Pali, the scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism. As we talked, William discovered that a mutual friend was the Confirmation sponsor of their son, who will be a junior at Notre Dame.

After a slightly longer walk than we had expected, we reached the Mildred church, where we called Mary, who came to pick us up. We estimate we walked between eleven and twelve miles today.

Mary and her husband Donny live on a small forty acre lake—so small, they pointed out, that the loons have to circle it three times to gain enough altitude to clear the trees. Their home, built by Donny, is nestled in a secluded section of the forest, far from the noise of the world. Mary told us she refuses to have a computer in the house; "Donny would use it as a boat anchor," she explained, "and a boat anchor is a lot cheaper!"

Once again, we have experienced the joy of being warmly welcomed into the home of strangers, who have now become friends.

Day 5, Sunday, July 15

Hackensack and Back

Mary invited their neighbors Kathy and Verdale over for breakfast, after which we made our way to Mass in Pine River. The church was full, partly due to the influx of vacationers during the summer. The pastor, Father Bruce, gave us a warm welcome, as did many of the parishioners. During the Mass there was a second collection to support

an abused women's shelter sponsored by the parish. We decided to make a contribution from the donations we had received—and then received almost the same amount back from people who wanted to support our walk.

The Gospel for the day was Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, which Father Bruce interpreted as an expression of compassion for anyone in need, simply because they are human. His sermon was the topic of discussion for much of our afternoon walk.

After Mass a woman told us she was one of the caretakers of a young man we had met on the trail yesterday. He was in an electric wheel chair and appeared to us to have cerebral palsy. When he arrived home, he told her that he had seen us on the trail and was happy because we had greeted him.

We joined the parishioners for coffee after Mass and there met John, who had led the singing. He told us that he was a lay member of the Brothers and Sisters of Charity, a Catholic organization headquartered in Arkansas. Last summer the organization's founder, John Michael Talbot, invited William to lead a retreat for them this October on interreligious dialogue. John will be present for that retreat.

After church Mary dropped us off at the trail in Backus with instructions to call her if it started to rain and we needed a place to stay. It had been a beautiful morning, but it was now threatening rain. We left Backus at 1:08 p.m. for Hackensack, eight and a quarter miles away. That was perhaps the most peaceful stretch of walk we have done so far, as Highway 371 was a good distance from the trail. Along the way we met Gail from the Walker newspaper, who gave us a bag of cherries and asked us to call the paper when we were approaching Walker tomorrow.

The closer we got to Hackensack, the more it felt like rain, so we only stopped once for a short break. We started feeling sprinkles after about six miles and a light rain just as we entered town. We checked at the Catholic church, but since the pastor lives in Walker, it was locked. So, without further ado, we called Mary to take her up on her offer to put

us up a second night.

Our conversation with Mary and Donny that evening centered on their neighbors and friends who were suffering from cancer—a sobering reminder of what it means to be human.

Day 6, Monday, July 16

Back to Hackensack

Mary drove us back to Hackensack through a rather heavy rain, which let up as we approached the village. We resumed our walk at 6:45 a.m. After walking about 100 yards, we saw a box alongside the trail that looked like a discarded fruit container. "Oh look, a package for us," joked Jotipalo. When he looked closer, he was surprised to see a note that read, "To Fr. Bill and Jotipalo." We opened it up and found blueberries, cherries, six peaches, and six fresh ears of corn, with another note that said, "You can eat the corn raw. If you do, you'll never cook it again." (He was absolutely right!!)

There was also a card inside the box with the following message: "You both walked by my fruit stand in Pine River yesterday. I recognized you from the Brainerd newspaper, which I read last night, and I wanted to pass on a few goodies. About ten years ago I was just a simple Catholic boy befriended by a Southern Baptist gentleman (thirty years my senior). What we did with our collaboration ended up having some amazing results. I believe it started with our mutual respect. I wanted to share that with you both. (signed) The Pine River Fruit Stand Man."

Today's walk was long and grueling. It was the first time we had to use rain gear, and we also walked a long stretch along a busy highway. As we were approaching Walker a couple people stopped to offer us a ride, but we declined. As soon as the cars left, we looked at each other wondering what we were possibly thinking of, since we were both exhausted.

About a block from the Walker *Pilot Independent* newspaper office, we were met by Hope, the journalist who was to interview us. During the course of our conversation she expressed her concern that we had a place to stay and were eating well enough, offering us cheese and more

cherries. Before we knew we would be able to stay at the Catholic church in town that night, she said we could pitch our tents in her back yard.

Hope mentioned that she and her partner had moved to Walker from Los Angeles about a year and a half ago--a daring move for both of them, and especially for her partner, who commented that he was boldly going where no Jew had gone before. When asked how they had survived the shock of their first winter in a small town in northern Minnesota, she said that their standard of living had increased exponentially and that they actually enjoyed the peace and quiet of small town life.

We arrived at the Catholic church in the early afternoon and discovered that the pastor, Fr. Mark, was in the middle of moving in, having just taken up residence in Walker three days earlier. We spent the next couple hours helping him move furniture. Having received so much generosity over the past six days, it felt good to be of service.

At least for the next two nights we're expecting to be sleeping outdoors. (But who knows?) We hope to reach Bemidji on Thursday and possibly be driven up to the Red Lake Native American Reservation on Friday, where four sisters from Saint Benedict's monastery in Saint Joseph MN are in residence.

Day 7, Tuesday, July 17

Beyond Benedict and Back

After an early breakfast, we went to Mass, where Father Mark introduced us as a couple of hobos who showed up at his back door, but whom he welcomed with delight. The Scripture text for that day was about the birth and early years of Moses. Fr. Mark pointed out that even though Moses had a shaky beginning (including killing a man), he became a holy person. The lesson: don't judge people who are currently in a shaky situation. Leaving church a lady said she had read about us in the paper and now, having met us, was going to go home and put us in her scrap book.

Because we had been walking for six straight days, we were

considering taking a rest day, but finally decided to continue walking after lunch. Before leaving town we bought a few supplies, since it looked like we would not be hitting any sizeable town before Bemidji.

We got on the trail at 12:15 to much warmer temperatures than we were accustomed to (upper 80s). After four miles the trail was no longer paved; it looked more like a well kept logging road. In many ways, it was actually more pleasant than walking on asphalt, though we had to be attentive to removing ticks. The main drawback, however, was that we met no walkers or bikers on this section of the trail.

About mid-afternoon William spotted some steps leading down to an abandoned dock on Kabekona Bay of Leech Lake. After a refreshing swim, our first, we continued on to Benedict. Misreading a sign that said it was .25 miles to the right, we continued on for about a half mile. Spotting a couple men building a house we asked them where Benedict was. They sent us to the highway, telling us we had walked a half mile too far.

In Benedict we found three building, one of which was the Fort Benedict gas station-grocery store-post office-live bait shop. We enjoyed a leisurely one-and-a-half-hour tea and got back on the trail about 6:00 p.m.

Before leaving William reached his cousin Ed's wife Marla, who told us that although they were leaving for vacation, we could use the guest cabin next to the lakeshore home near Bemidji for as long as we wanted and that she had arranged for a friend to pick us up when we arrived in town on Thursday afternoon.

After walking for another hour, completing about eleven miles for the day (twelve if you count our backtracking), we found a good enough patch of trees with soft and level ground where we decided to pitch our tents. There was a good bit of traffic on the near by road until about ten. The only noise Jotipalo heard later in the evening was from a rather large deer who was not happy with his new neighbors and snorted his displeasure on and off for a couple hours.

Day 8, Wednesday, July 18**Nothing to Prove**

We got up at dawn and were on the trail around 5:30 a.m., but soon began walking on the highway to avoid the dew. About an hour and a half later we arrived in LaPorte where we indulged ourselves in a typical Northern Minnesota breakfast at the town's gas station-convenience store-cafe-mechanic shop. The local breakfast club of about ten people warmly welcomed us and took great interest in who we were and what we were doing.

We settled into a comfortable walking pace, with a ten minute break every two miles. Though it was warm, we were able to walk in the shade most of the morning. About two hours after leaving LaPorte William remembered he had forgotten to pay for breakfast. We decided to call as soon as we could to explain, certain that we were already the talk of the town in LaPorte!

Shortly before 11:00 a.m. we entered what the map said was the town of Guthrie. We found a Bible church, two houses, and a stop sign. Pam, one of the residents, kindly allowed us to charge the cell phone in her house and gave us water. We then rested for an hour behind the church. Looking at the map we decided to try to reach Nary, 5.2 miles further north, and then decide what to do for the night.

Returning to Pam's, we explained our situation with the LaPorte gas station and asked if she could find the phone number for us. She offered us the use of her phone, and when Kathy, the cashier answered, Jotipalo asked, "Did you have two monks stop at your cafe this morning?" Kathy (rising inflection), "Yes, we did." "Did they leave without paying?" (Another rising inflection), "Yes, they did." "I'm one of those monks." A relieved Kathy replied, "That's good!" William then made arrangements to send a check when we got home.

In the course of receiving Pam's hospitality, we discovered that her husband is the nephew of a priest with whom William had been in the seminary.

We reached Nary, which now consists of nothing but a cemetery,

around 3:00 p.m. Spotting a house across the road, we stopped to replenish our water supply. There we met Toni, who was busily at work remodeling the house.

Toni welcomed us in, and while William was filling the water bottles, Jotipalo asked about the nearest motel. Because she was new to the area, she called her husband. As she conveyed his directions, she stopped mid-sentence and asked, "Would you like me to drive you there?" Jotipalo waited a full two seconds before accepting her offer. Later William confided, "Am I glad you said 'Yes!'" At this point we had walked fourteen miles and had decided to push on to Bemidji another seven miles and possibly get a motel for the night. But when the offer for a ride came without our asking, we took this as a sign (from God?).

Toni drove us to Bemidji and dropped us off at a motel. On the way she mentioned that her husband was a bit concerned that she was taking two strangers into town. She reassured him that it was OK because we were monks, which didn't seem totally to alleviate his concerns because he said he would be praying for her!

Upon arrival, William called Mary, the person who was planning to pick us up tomorrow afternoon, to tell her that we were already in town. We assured her that it would be no problem for us to stay in a motel, but she arranged for her husband Jim to come and take us to the cabin that Ed and Marla had arranged for our use.

When Jim picked us up, he asked if we wanted to swing by the airport to pick up the truck Ed had left for our use. (Ed, Marla, and their son had just left on vacation.) The blessings just keep coming!!!

Day 9, Thursday, July 19

Rest and Reflection

We've been joking with one another about how grateful we are that we didn't have to walk the last seven miles, because that would only have reinforced our egos!

Mainly we've been reflecting on the generosity we have received. We walked for eight days, covering eighty-five miles on foot, unsure about

the kind of reception we would receive. Not a day passed when we didn't encounter some--even many--acts of kindness. Just today William's cousin Ed called to be sure we had arrived all right and to offer us the use of his house in addition to his truck and the guest cabin where we are staying. Being on the receiving end of such generosity is both humbling and gratifying.

On the walk that he attempted two years ago, and which he wrote about in Bulletin #76, Jotipalo encountered this same kind of generosity in Mississippi. Because that walk ended so abruptly, he desired to confirm the experience. These past eight days have indeed confirmed that a walk done in faith is not only possible but will exceed expectations.

Prior to the walk, William, who was unfamiliar with the practice of alms rounds, anticipated that he would experience feelings of humiliation and embarrassment. Instead, he too discovered how uplifting it is to make yourself available to gestures of generosity and hospitality. He went on the walk hoping to deepen his understanding of a particular Buddhist monastic practice and the teaching that supported it. What especially impressed him was how interested and supportive others were of this practice and of the interreligious harmony that it demonstrated.

Now that we know that an interfaith pilgrimage can be done, and can be done joyfully, we hope that other Buddhist and Catholic monks might consider the possibility of doing something similar. Since Buddhist monks are already doing this practice in America, Christian monks might also consider doing a walk like this by themselves. While Benedict is extremely critical of monks who do nothing but wander from monastery to monastery, a brief experience of walking in faith is a powerful way to reinforce a sense of community and of one's dependence on the goodness of others.

This will be our last entry. If we add further reflections, they will be linked to the MID website. For those who might be interested, articles about our walk appeared in the **St. Cloud Times**, the **Brainerd Dispatch**, the **Catholic Spirit** of the Archdiocese of St.

Paul/Minneapolis, and twice in the Pine River *Journal*, **first** and **second**.

With folded hands and bent knees, we give thanks to all who have supported us with their gifts, their generosity, their prayers, and their good thoughts.

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