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Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2017 Aug 3. Saint John's: a thin place [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 Aug 4]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2017/08/03/saint-johns-a-thin-place/>.

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Saint John's: A Thin Place

The sense of place at Saint John's is what drew many of us here. I have had dozens of alumni tell me that they got on campus and just knew this was the right place for them to live and study.

We still consider a campus visit an essential part of recruiting Johnnies (and no small number of Bennies). Alumni and parents come back to campus often simply to re-visit the beauty and experience the reinvigorating ethos of this place.

It is always a pleasure to welcome visitors to campus, especially those who have not visited before. Invariably they comment on the beauty of the place—both natural and manmade—and how well-maintained the grounds and buildings are.

As someone lucky enough to live and work here, I thought I had a very good sense of Saint John's and its beauty, but this summer a guest to campus offered an insight that made me look at this place with new eyes.



Dennis Turner, Wikimedia Commons

A non-alum friend of one of the monks was here for an event in June. He told the monk how much he always enjoyed visiting because he considered Saint John's to be “a thin place.” The monk was not immediately familiar with the reference. His friend said the term came from Celtic spirituality and “described a place where heaven and earth are very close, where the veil between here and above is thin.” The Celts used it to describe, among other places,

the western Scottish isle of Iona, where St. Columba brought Christianity from his native Ireland.

I liked the description and did a little more searching and found the following description of a **thin place**:

In the Celtic tradition, a “thin place” is the place where the veil that separates heaven and earth is nearly transparent. It is a place where we experience a deep sense of God’s presence in our everyday world. A thin place is where, for a moment, the spiritual world and the natural world intersect.

I trust for many alumni and friends of Saint John’s, this is one of their thin places.



Courtesy: An Oblate of Saint John's Abbey, June 2016

'Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller.'

- Celtic saying

About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)



Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).