

Benedictine Volunteer Corps

Sant'Anselmo, Rome

Andrew Ellingson

The two prime characteristics of the Benedictine way of life are prayer and work (*ora et labora*). The need for each of these in a good life has become more apparent to me as a result of my time with the Benedictine Volunteer Corps (BVC).

In June 2020, my family and friends must have thought I was in a stage of denial. Since my last college classes were moved online and our graduation exercises cancelled, surely volunteering in Italy would be cancelled too! However, after sifting through the restrictions for foreign travel on the Italian government's website, I still thought it would be possible to begin volunteering on schedule—meaning I would depart for Rome in August 2020. In fact, I told people I would be leaving then, although I said it with some humility and skepticism.

It may have seemed to others that I was pretending my BVC service was immune from the restrictions of COVID-19. But when the necessary documents arrived in the mail, I had a renewed optimism and motivation to get a visa. This optimism quickly shifted to what felt like self-deception, however. After repeatedly calling and emailing the Consulate General of Italy in Chicago for a visa appointment



Noah Becker (left) and Andrew Ellingson

Simon Stubbs, O.S.B.

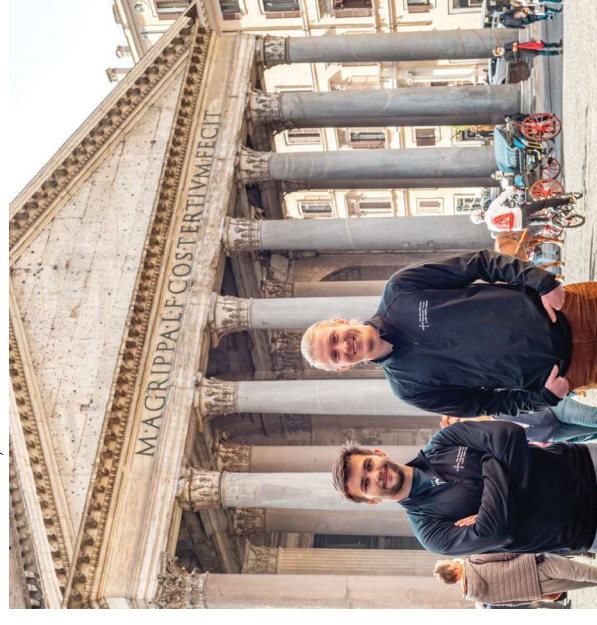
and not receiving any reply for weeks, I began to think the idea of serving at Sant'Anselmo in Rome was unlikely, if not impossible.

With the help of many others, Brother Paul Richards, O.S.B., director of the Benedictine Volunteers, arranged for the 2020-2021 BVC participants to live, work, and pray with the

monks at Saint John's Abbey (see the Winter 2020-21 issue of *Abbey Banner* for more details). Part of my *work* while at Saint John's was to find a way to Sant'Anselmo. Part of my *prayer* was focused on patience, humility, and steadfastness during that search. While searching for Italian government contact information, I found an honorary consul who assured me that we could get visas. At our appointment, the consul saw we were from Saint John's and noted the importance of work and prayer in Benedictine life and how they were especially important now. After the appointment, some paperwork, and a few weeks of waiting, Noah Becker and I were set to go! We arrived in Rome in mid-November and early December, respectively. (Now the Benedictine Volunteer Corps participants are serving monasteries in Israel, Spain, Italy, Mexico, Guatemala, and the U.S.)

Since my arrival in Rome, I've learned that prayer and work at Sant'Anselmo are a bit different than at Saint John's Abbey. Prayer, for example, is said and sung in Italian and Latin. Having studied more Italian than Latin, I prefer the former. Following along and connecting what I understand in Italian to the biblical passages I know in English creates a translational focus on the message.

When we first arrived here, we took a beginner's course for the Italian language. This has helped with our life, work, and prayer. For work, our responsibilities vary day by day. In addition to Noah and me, there are three other volunteers here: two from Germany, one from Tanzania. With our volunteer coordinator, we practice *lectio divina* (sacred reading) once a week and keep a weekly blog. We also rotate washing dishes daily. Other work includes helping in the



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sacristy, cleaning the church, assisting with office work/running errands, working the front desk, and gardening. All of this is done so the residents at the Pontifical University of Sant'Anselmo, the international house of Benedictine studies, can continue to teach and study. Subjects studied here include

liturgy, theology, philosophy, languages, and independent doctoral studies. Some students reside at the college and study at other schools in Rome. Through these interschool connections, we began participating in a homeless outreach mission.

Another responsibility I have is driving Abbot Primate Gregory Polan (a monk from Missouri) to and from his various meetings and appointments. He is one of the most kind and sincere persons I know! Driving in Rome, compared to Minnesota, is more chaotic—or at least that is how it seemed initially. The reduced activity due to COVID restrictions has also reduced traffic a bit, and that has alleviated some of the stress I felt earlier while driving. Now that I know some major streets and the general flow of traffic, the driving is much smoother.

Last June, serving the community at Sant'Anselmo was only an idea. Now it is the reality in which Noah and I live. Sant'Anselmo was one of the first sites to be staffed when the Benedictine Volunteer Corps was established in 2003. The BVC continues to serve this community in its everyday needs, so monks from around the world can develop their minds and draw closer to God.

Mr. Andrew Ellingson and Mr. Noah Becker are 2020 graduates of Saint John's University. Follow their adventures on their blog: <https://volontarisantanselmo.blogspot.com/>.