

Italy, Israel, and In-between

Joseph Pleschel

With tears of awe in his eyes, a stranger opened his heart to me in a brief window of peace and rest during my first Friday of work. Standing in the rain and surrounded by a lush green landscape of palm, orange, and olive trees that is the backyard of my home in the village of Tabgha, Israel, he shook his head and looked to the sky, telling me what a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity this is for me: “The freedom! To stand in a new life and breathe the air and feel the culture around and within you, to go to the mosques and churches, to connect with people you know you will never see again, but it doesn’t matter because they are so important to you in this moment. To live and experience what it feels like to be alive on this earth! What a miracle! To know how fast life goes by and then death, and you know it’s right there. It’s amazing: to be your age and young and free! I have my wife and my child, and it just . . . I don’t know where that time has gone. It’s gone! Just like that!”

I was frozen by the gravity of the moment when, with a warm smile he said, “I envy you.” Chills ran through me, and I felt an overwhelming sensation of gratitude as I began to reflect more deeply on the question that began this whole encounter:

What is the Benedictine Volunteer Corps (BVC)?

My BVC journey began the day after I graduated from Saint John’s University. Under the guidance of BVC director Brother Paul Richards, I along with twenty other partied-out, freshly diplomaed Johnnies discovered the first Benedictine element to living a balanced life: prayer, work (*ora, labora*). Without phones, finals, friends, or family as distractions, we quickly formed a bonding brotherhood, living in community and learning each day (said Brother Paul) “more than you have in the last four years!” After two days, I called my parents to tell them I would not be returning home for the summer. Instead, I would begin my year of service early, waking up each day to participate in morning and then mid-day prayer, with the opportunity to take part in meaningful, diverse work in-between: collaborating with my college film mentor Brother Simon-Hòa, moving paintings with Father Jerome, working in the woodshop with Father Lew or in the abbey arboretum with

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Brother Jeremy, and bottling maple syrup with Brother Walter. Connecting with monks within their specialties broadened my horizons and has grown my appreciation for the inner workings of Saint John’s, a place that for the rest of my life, I will call home.

Six days after learning of a temporary site opening, I found myself on an airplane to Rome and Sant’Anselmo, the international Benedictine house of studies. Soon I was busy washing dishes, mowing cloister lawns, cleaning the church, singing prayer in Latin, and enjoying multicourse lunches with a hundred monks of diverse origins. I was joining the life-or-death flow of Roman traffic on my way to learn Italian at Scuola Leonardo da Vinci. I was exploring museums, theater hopping the Rome Film Fest, and truffle hunting in the Bracciano countryside.

In an unexpected moment in-between serving in Italy and Israel, I had my most meaningful experience in the Benedictine Volunteer Corps and one of the most powerful spiritual encounters of my life. While volunteering in Saint Raphael Hall, the abbey’s healthcare and retirement center, I was encouraged to introduce myself to Father Gordon Tavis, who had just found out that a dear friend was dying. I walked into his room, and he was crying, holding a book of prayers for the sick. All I could say at this delicate time



Joseph Pleschel on the shores of the Sea of Galilee

BVC archives

was: “I heard about your friend. I’m really sorry, and I want you to know that I’m here for you.” A moment later, Father Gordon learned that his friend was being placed on hospice care, likely with only a few more days to live. Less than an hour later, Father Gordon and I were with her. Gordon placed his hands on her, preparing to say goodbye to a friend of over sixty years, and explained: “I’m going to perform the Anointing of the Sick. Is that okay?” She mouthed, “Yes.” Together we prayed the Lord’s Prayer, and she mouthed every word.

The Benedictine Volunteer Corps is a mosaic—something beyond its individual parts. Like the honeycomb of our own abbey church, the world travel, the Benedictine life structure of prayer and work, serving others, the total immersion of self into another culture and way of life, each of these elements is beautiful on its own. But it is God who acts as the cement, connecting and breathing life into each element to form the whole. The day that I met Father Gordon, my life was missing the cement. I was unable to see past the parts. But as I watched him

breathe life into his friend with his words, and as we prayed the Lord’s Prayer, I could feel—deep in my heart—the Lord’s presence. God was revealed to me. To all of those who make the Benedictine Volunteer Corps possible: *grazie; toda raba*; thank you.

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