

# Benedictine Volunteer Corps

Esquipulas, Guatemala

James Gathje

**N**oisy fireworks. Twenty-four languages. A five-hundred-year tradition of pilgrimage to the capital of Central America. Feeling overwhelmed. Confused. Exhausted. Uncomfortable. Sick from new food and new sights and new people and a new life. But also, so welcomed!

Arriving in Guatemala was a blur of new experiences for fellow Benedictine Volunteer Corps (BVC) member Michael Garber and me. Our Spanish? *Muy poco*—especially when most of the things people say in



James Gathje harvesting honey

Guatemala aren't in a textbook or on language learning apps. Our stomachs? They've learned to be *chapin* (the Central American term for a Guatemalan). The thing that I'll never forget about Guatemala? Nothing has marked life here like the sense of hospitality that we have experienced.

Michael and I lived with a family for the first five months of our time here, so we experienced Guatemalan hospitality in a very intimate way. Our host parents (we are their *gringhijos*) welcomed us to their house and sought to attend to our every need. Coming from the very different culture of the United States, we felt a little uncomfortable and struggled to accept the level of hospitality offered us. Those inhibitions and misunderstandings slowly disappeared, but I didn't really understand the culture of hospitality in Guatemala until a friend visited at the end of November. I was picked up from the bus station in Guatemala City by a sister of our host mother, taken to their brother's home, fed, and then we all went to the airport to meet the plane. They provided a bed, a ride to Antigua the next morning, breakfast and lunch, and returned us to the bus station the next afternoon. I learned that it would have been rude to turn down offers of food, lodging, or transportation from a Guatemalan. They will offer guests their bed to sleep in; they want to cook them a meal, even if

they don't have much. Having a person in their house as a guest is not considered a burden nor an intrusion into their life. On the other hand, refusing a place to stay or a meal or a cup of coffee would be considered rude and ungrateful.

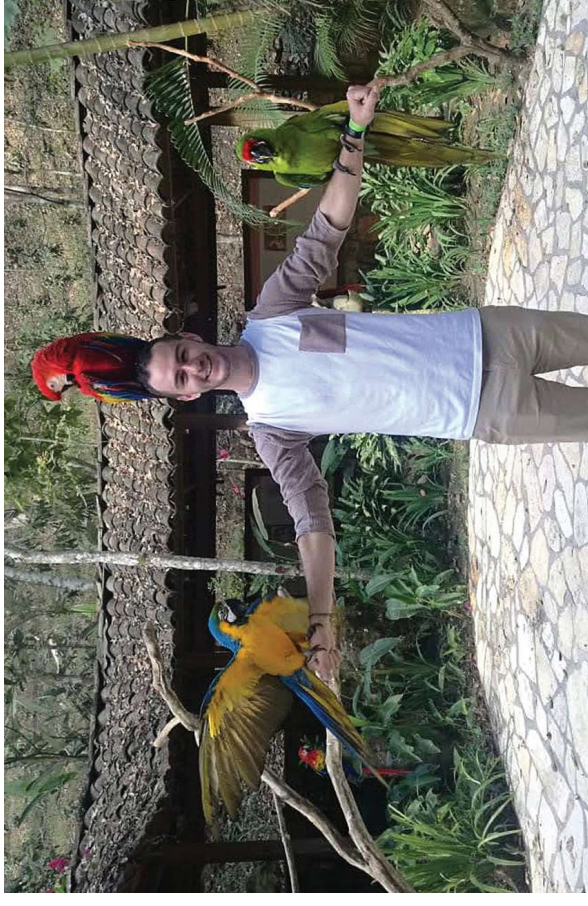
In short, our Guatemalan hosts receive us as Christ and take joy in our visit. What could be more Benedictine and Christ-like? I pray I learn from their example and do the same in my life.

**Abadía de Jesucristo  
Crucificado**

Michael Garber

When we first arrived in Esquipulas, Guatemala, we only knew that there was a school affiliated with the monastery, called Colegio San Benito. In the beginning of our Benedictine Volunteer Corps experience, we were teacher assistants, helping the English teachers in *primaria* and *básico* with students who were struggling (*primaria* is first through sixth grades; *básico* is seventh through twelfth grades). When the new school year started, we had the opportunity to be in charge of our own classes, to develop valuable relationships with the students and our fellow teachers, and to discover that our presence here is more than just being teachers.

I believe that our undergraduate experiences have better prepared us to be creative and well-



Michael Garber (top) with friendly macaws; Michael and James (above) offering English lessons

rounded in order to adjust to things outside of our comfort zone, such as teaching English in another country. The colegio does have an English program for *primaria*, but they explained to us that they had been struggling to find good teachers. We were graciously offered positions in the school for fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. Monday

through Thursday we teach three forty-minute classes, while Friday is our day either to help the English teacher in the kindergarten or to plan for next week's classes. *Primaria* starts at 7:00 A.M., after *lectio divina* (spiritual reading), and ends at noon. *Básico* starts at 1:00, after *lectio divina*, and ends shortly before we go to Vespers at 6:30 P.M.

James and I also help the English teacher with pronunciation, grading, and being an extra hand in the classroom.

During our first seven months here we have developed great relationships with the faculty. Though our Spanish was very limited initially, the teachers were helpful with our Spanish immersion and learning. Now that our language skills have improved, we have established friendships with staff and look forward to conversations with the teachers and learning more about the local culture.

During our BVC orientation we were told that our ability to speak English would be a great asset here. We have seen a greater eagerness from the students and teachers to learn English. The teachers willingly participate in our classes, completing assigned worksheets and continuing to practice their English with us when they can.

The work we do now keeps us busy and excited! At day's end, it is fulfilling to know that every time a student says, "Hello, how are you?" or greets us with "Good morning," we are making a difference in the lives of students and faculty at Colegio San Benito. **B**

Mr. James Gathje, from Richmond, Minnesota; and Mr. Michael Garber, from Milaca, Minnesota, are 2019 graduates of Saint John's University.