

# Benedictine Volunteer Corps

Cuernavaca, Mexico

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In September, after weeks of uncertainty about our departure date, Blake Hoeschen, Nathan Kobb, and I found our flight to Mexico to begin our year of service with the Benedictine Volunteer Corps (BVC)! Stepping off the plane, we wore faces that exhibited blissful, tourist-like enthusiasm. This persona quickly changed, however, when we encountered our new reality: everything was now in Spanish! I was reminded of our first lesson as Benedictine Volunteers: if we go into new adventures with unreasonable expectations, we will inevitably be disappointed. Unreasonable expectations limit us from enjoying new experiences because we fail to allow ourselves to be present and value each experience for what it is.

In Mexico City, we met four fellow graduates from the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. They were taking a break from their volunteer service of teaching in San Miguel de Allende to visit Mexico City. Together we explored Mexico City's Metropolitan Cathedral, the Frida Kahlo Museum, Xochimilco Canals, Palace of Fine Arts, Latin American Tower, and the Teotihuacan Pyramids. At the conclusion of our brief rendezvous with another service group,

Nathan, Blake, and I boarded a bus to Cuernavaca in the state of Morelos.

As we entered the gates of Monasterio Benedictino de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles (Benedictine Monastery of Our Lady of the Angels), the ringing bells served as our North Star, assuring us that we were in the right place. As we moved toward the living quarters at the top of the hill, we passed wild horses; clusters of avocado, coffee, and lime trees; bushels of corn, and other native flora. Following a brief orientation from our site supervisor, Brother Francisco, our year of Benedictine immersion—consisting of community living, prayer, and work—officially began!

Because of all the work we do together, it was a rather seamless process of befriending the thirty resident monks and integrating into their community. The monks are youthful, determined, very personable, and love a good joke! They enjoy talking about their town's unique culture and teaching us local colloquialisms like *Qué padre!* (meaning "How cool!"). They are especially eager to learn about our lives or to play volleyball on a sunny

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*Gracias a Dios!*

afternoon. (They only play volleyball on Wednesday afternoons!) Above all, they lead by example, showing the importance of approaching our tasks with a positive attitude.

A typical day for us starts at 7:00 A.M. with Mass—in Spanish with splashes of Latin melodies—followed by breakfast with the monks in their dining room, before we disperse to our individual job assignments for the day. These include teaching English in one-on-one sessions or online, beekeeping, helping in the kitchen, working in the fields, cleaning, organizing, or making candles. The agrarian work changes seasonally: from using *ganchos* (a bamboo stick with a pocket and hook) to pick avocados in the fall, to collecting honey and picking coffee beans in the winter. Our work is convivial, frequently challenging, and always makes an impact on the community. After our work periods, we join the monks for more prayer, lunch, and dinner. Every Friday the whole community works together to complete a particular project. In the fall, we constructed garden beds by axing a grassy knoll, then sifting the soil with a homemade sieve and enriching it with fertilizer. We layered the soil by texture in rectangular beds bordered by porcelain blocks.

Another aspect of daily life in Cuernavaca is the constant booming of fireworks! One day,



Simeon Farquharson: laboring in the fields of Cuernavaca

after hearing about twenty-five rounds of rockets, I asked one of the brothers about this. He explained that each firecracker represents the life of someone who has passed away. From this enlightening conversation, I learned the importance of thanking God for life daily.

A special moment in our BVC service was 15 September. Sharing the Mexican Independence Day with the monks was a delightful combination of patriotism and brotherhood. We all participated in a brief ceremony paying tribute to the Mexican, Nicaraguan, and El Salvadorian

independence, as there are monks from each of those countries living in the monastery. We delighted in numerous variations of tacos, chips, and guacamole, tres leches cake, and other native dishes. With decorations and cultural costumes creating a festive ambiance, we transitioned to the final stage of our night: karaoke. I would never have imagined that I would be in Mexico celebrating their independence with monks and singing Gloria Gaynor's, "I Will Survive"!

Our Benedictine Volunteer experience has been awesome,

second to none! I am living in Mexico, strengthening my relationship with God, teaching English to monks, laboring in the fields, harvesting different agricultural produce, engaging with hundreds of different individuals who attend Mass (in a COVID-friendly manner, of course), and immersing into the Benedictine way of life. For all these blessings, I join my fellow Benedictine Volunteers in saying *Gracias a Dios* (Thanks be to God)!

An accounting and finance major, Mr. Simeon J. Farquharson is a 2021 graduate of Saint John's University.