



Catching up with Brother Benedict

TWO SEWANEE PROFESSORS

GET A TASTE OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

WITH A SEWANEE ALUMNUS

Story and photos by Christopher McDonough

THE SUMMER OF 2003, you may recall, was one of the hottest summers on record for Europe. Thousands suffered in Paris from heat-related causes, and the Eternal City was a virtual inferno. Professor Leslie Richardson and I were there in July, doing preliminary research for a Sewanee summer program entitled "Sacred Spaces in and around Rome," slated to be offered in May 2005. At the end of our first week in Rome, we were eager to get out of the urban heat.

But instead of joining the tourist hordes under the Tuscan sun, we headed for the hilly region to the east, hoping to find serenity in *l'ombra dell'Umbria*, the shade of Umbria. Our destination in particular was not Perugia, with its art treasures, nor Spoleto, with its famous music festival, but rather the small and relatively obscure medieval hill-town of Norcia, to meet up with a young American monk living in the Benedictine monastery there.

I had heard about Brother Benedict from Leslie and other Sewanee faculty who had known him, before he had taken his monastic vows, as Jeremy Nivakoff, C'01. As an undergraduate, Jeremy seemed to have been a ball of energy: a medieval studies major, member of the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity, president of Sewanee's Right-to-Life movement, student worker in the development office, and devoted denizen of the Blue Chair cafe. Leslie recalled how Jeremy would take over her elementary Italian class by habitually bringing a coffee-maker and serving his classmates before the lesson could begin. I heard similar stories of his ebullient personality from various other Sewanee quarters. So, as we traveled into the rural hillside, you could say my curiosity was piqued.

In the medieval component of Sewanee's Humanities Program, I have several times taught the Rule of St. Benedict, which stresses the need for silence, humility, and discipline, and which students often describe as "extreme" and "hardcore" in its insistence on withdrawal from the world. So, besides being eager to meet an honest-to-God Benedictine

monk, I wanted to see how one of our students, who until recently had lived by a typically overbooked undergraduate schedule, was faring in the life of quiet contemplation.

Driving *dominus nobiscum*-style

When we arrived at Norcia, we were confronted by a real medieval city, ringed by a wall meant to withstand siege engines and accessible only through protected gates. Winding our way through its narrow streets, we finally reached the abbey where we would be staying, only to find Brother Benedict helping unload the groceries of the nuns who lived there. The monks themselves live in the monastery on the other side of town, but often help out the sisters here, who are generally much older.

As you can imagine, there's something pleasingly ironic in the picture of the brother in his medieval black robe carrying bags from a supermarket. The scene was one of great good cheer, and it was clear that the elderly sisters dote on the young monk, teasing him as only Italian ladies can about how skinny he is.

One heard similar things from other older women in town: Mrs. Ivanovi, the superintendant of the local archaeological museum, told me how she once saw Benedict trip over his robes in the piazza.

"You've fallen," she said, "from Heaven!"

"If only," he replied, and ever after she has called him Brother If Only.

During the customary rounds of introductions, we were a little surprised to meet a fellow weekend guest, Brother Ephraim from Switzerland, who was studying advanced Italian with Benedict in Perugia in preparation for seminary studies in Rome.

After the bags were put away, Benedict whisked me, Leslie, and Ephraim off in the monastery's car for a drive through the surrounding mountains to give us the lay of the land. "Don't go to the mountain peak," the nuns warned him. "It's so windy, you'll blow away."

Up, up, up the winding road we sped. Monk though he be, Brother Benedict





Clay Gilkerson, C'02, and a fellow employee of the monastery gift shop meet with Chris McDonough and Brother Benedict on the square of Norcia.



drove like a demon. "Driving of this sort," intoned Brother Ephraim, "is what we sometimes call *dominus nobiscum*." That translates as 'The Lord is with us' — in other words, God is my co-pilot. I prayed it was true.

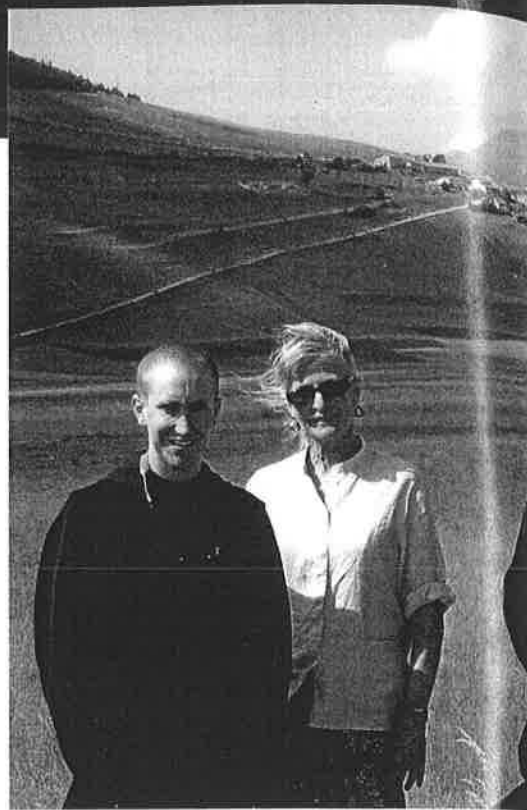
From the mountaintop, the Umbrian countryside unfolded before us, a vast panorama of hilltops and hamlets amid motley shades of green, not unlike one of Sewanee's bluff views. The nuns were right — it was windy up there, downright chilly in fact, and we temporarily forgot that this was Europe's worst heat wave in decades.

A further drive took us to a view of the Grande Piano, the limitless azure fields where Europe's finest lentils are grown, big bags of which Leslie and I purchased at a special discount rate for friends of the monks. But almost immediately we had to rush back to Norcia, so that Benedict and Ephraim could participate in the Compline service, to which we had been graciously invited by the abbot.

The brothers hurried into the church to prepare, and Leslie and I used the time to stroll around the piazza. Norcia's primary exports are black truffles and mountain boar, we learned, and nearly every storefront sported at least one boar's head, and some several. Well, I know what I'll be having for dinner, I thought to myself as, coming into the church at sunset, we were quickly ushered into the crypt.

Listening to the exquisite Latin service, sung entirely in Gregorian chant, I felt a deep sense of calm entirely at odds with the rest of our bustling day. Seated just yards from the archaeological ruins of St. Benedict's birthplace, hearing the church's ancient tongue, one got an overwhelming feeling of eternity. I could only imagine how transcendently peaceful even our busy friend's life must be, structured as it was around the Divine Service.

Famished from the day's activities, that evening Leslie and I feasted on pasta with boar meat at a fine restaurant run by Mrs. Bianconi, and were eventually joined by Clay Gilkerson, C'02, whom Benedict had cajoled into working for a year as the abbey's porter and gift-shop manager. A little later Benedict showed up but, as is



monastic custom, he ate nothing.

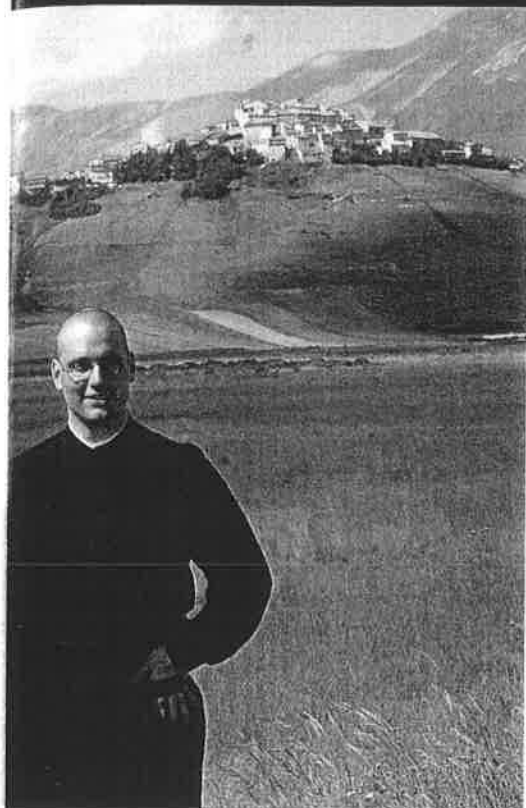
He had to leave soon, in any case, to pick up yet another Sewanee student, Andrew Doak, C'05, who was to spend July assisting Clay. Andrew was due to arrive on late train to Spoleto, 50 kilometers away. "I can make it in 15 minutes," Benedict assured us. Sure enough, they were back in half an hour, just as we were ordering dessert.

It was close to midnight when we all left. Benedict was off to bed (he had to be up at 4 a.m. for Matins), but the rest of us joined the town in the traditional Saturday night promenade.

There's just no saying "no"

Sunday, the day of rest, proved to be just as frenetically busy. Leslie and I met Clay, Andrew, and Benedict in the piazza for coffee early in the morning. Early for us, I should say; Benedict had been up for hours.

As the town square came to life, Leslie likened the scene to the opening of an opera: The shopkeepers opened their doors, sweeping the threshold and dusting off boars' heads, while children kicked a ball past a pair of befuddled tourists. By the stairs of the church stood Brother Ephraim, arms crossed, a forbidding figure in his long black robe, as much a part of the scene as he was a spectator. All that



was missing was Maestro cueing the music.

Benedict then took us on another speedy drive into the country, so that he could show us a ramshackle villa he hopes he can convince Sewanee to renovate as a conference center and retreat house for the monks. He wants to call it Villa degli Angeli, alluding to the Sewanee angels. We hurried back, this time for Mass — in Italian, alas, since the bishop has put his foot down on too much Latin — and then, after a trip to the museum and another splendid meal, we made our way to wake the nun from her siesta so we could pay for our room.

It was now late afternoon, and we all had to be on our way. Leslie and I had dinner plans in Orvieto, and the monks had to be back for language study in Perugia on Monday morning. Somehow — I'm still not sure how this transpired — we were convinced to take Benedict to Perugia, although it was quite out of our way, while behind us would follow Brother Ephraim with a carload of Swiss monks who had arrived sometime last night. (Sometimes it seemed like all the world was coming to Norcia!)

As we drove, Leslie asked Brother Benedict what he missed about America. Among other things, he said that he sometimes longed to hear country music. With some wheedling, we got him to sing us

his favorite song, in which, as you might guess, Jesus featured prominently. It was yet another pleasing irony to hear a monk, who chants the Divine Office seven times a day, emit a bit of Country and Western twang.

About an hour into the drive, however, it began to dawn on Benedict what an inconvenience he'd put us to. "Let's pull over at that coffee bar," he said. "I'll hop in with Ephraim and you can be on your way." We parked just in time to see the Swiss monkmobile fly by, evidently not noticing us by the side of the road.

Into the bar we went to mull over our options and down a quick cappuccino. Like so many such establishments in rural locations, this bar was the center of the region's social life, and young and old were gathered here, noisily idling away their Sunday afternoon.

Let me tell you, though, that when one enters such an establishment with a monk in a long black robe, there is a palpable change in the atmosphere. Ties got straightened, nursed drinks got drunk and hidden away, the teenagers around the pool table giggled a little nervously. One fellow recognized Brother Benedict from some obscure connection and, eager to look good before the crowd and maybe even God, made a display of paying for our coffee.

After a phone call or two, we decided it would be best to take Benedict to the train station in Spoleto — the one he had whizzed off to just the night before — where we said our goodbyes in the idling car. After grabbing his bag from the back seat, Benedict gave us his blessing and dashed off to catch his train.

It wasn't until hours later, when we got to Orvieto, that Leslie and I noticed that his ticket had been left on the car floor. Neither of us had any fear, of course, that he had been stranded. In fact, we were sure he rode first class to Perugia without any ticket. Forty-eight hours in his company was enough to know that there's just no saying "no" to Brother If Only. ■

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Center: Brother Benedict, Leslie Richardson, and Brother Ephraim pause to admire the "limitless azure fields" around Castelluccio, famed for its lentils. Above: Benedict slakes his thirst at a traditional public drinking fountain.