

KEEPING THE SPIRIT IN THE WATER OF THE 21ST CENTURY

By Dave DeLand

There was a time when the Benedictine ethos of Saint John's University seamlessly permeated the campus, enveloping inhabitants and visitors like a plunge into Lake Sagatagan.

**THOSE BENEDICTINE VALUES YOU HEAR SO MUCH ABOUT?
THE SPIRIT AND FEEL AND SENSE OF PLACE AT SAINT JOHN'S?
YOU BASICALLY GOT THOSE THINGS BY OSMOSIS.**

"I always like the phrase about it being in the water," said Rodger Narloch '91, director of SJU's Benedictine Institute. "That's what everybody talks about here – it's just something that's so pervasive that you can't help but pick up on it."

Times have changed. Fifty years ago, Saint John's was a very different place.

In 1968...

Saint John's Abbey included 359 monks.

Now there are 120.

There were 77 monk faculty members.

Now there are 11.

Saint John's student body was 98 percent Catholic.

That figure currently stands at 57 percent.

Welcome to the 21st century.

"You do get some perspective and sense for how things are changing," said Abbot John Klassen '71, '77 SOT, OSB, who took his vows in 1972 and is in his 18th year as leader of Saint John's Abbey.

"We have so many new people coming in," Abbot John said. "We need to help them understand, to make explicit what up to now has been implicit – what was in the water before. We need to give greater expression to it."

It used to happen naturally. Now there have to be more intentional, deliberate and proactive means of carrying forth the Benedictine spirit into the future and into a world that desperately needs it.

How does this happen? With the help of two programs – the **Benedictine Volunteer Corps (BVC)** and **Benedictine Institute** – that didn't exist when the century began.

"It's more of a diverse distribution of the message," said Br. Paul Richards '78, OSB, founder and director of the BVC since its inception.

"I think they're alternative means, but they're trying to do justice to the same message," Narloch said. "It's sort of an alternative way of living, an alternative way of approaching the world."

These innovative programs rely on lay people – SJU students,



Saint John's and Saint Benedict students share a spiritual moment in the Stella Maris Chapel on the shore of Lake Sagatagan. Distribution of the Benedictine message has been diversified in the 21st century by the formation of the Benedictine Volunteer Corps and Benedictine Institute.

faculty and staff – to provide vibrant new direction as supplemental messengers for Benedictine thought in a world with fewer monastics.

They're helping it stay in the water.

"That is the metaphor that operates in my mind," Abbot John said. "It's fresh and transformative."

"The more people who adopt this kind of perspective, I think it can help change a culture," Narloch said.

"It's the same life philosophy that we're trying to communicate. It's just a different conduit."

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL BVC

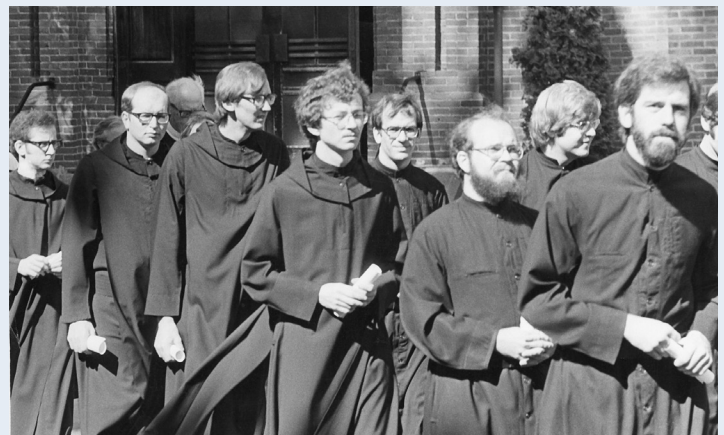
Concepts of stewardship, community and hospitality helped form the foundation of the Benedictine Volunteer Corps, which became a reality in 2002 partly due to shrinking monastic numbers.

"We used to send monks out into the world to be the missionaries," Br. Paul said. "Now we're sending graduates of the university to work in Benedictine monasteries."

"In many ways, it's an even better deliverable. It's a better immersion into what Benedictine life is. They have to own it and do it."

Since 2002 there have been 176 BVC members (nearly all Johnnies) who served in 18 countries and 26 monastic communities. The current BVC class includes 19 volunteers at nine sites, and an additional two sites are planned for the 2018-19 class.

The experience has been transformational – for people served in those communities, and for BVC volunteers themselves.



The monastic community at Saint John's was considerably larger in 1972, when its young members included Br. Dietrich Reinhart '71, OSB (center) and Abbot John Klassen '71, '77 SOT, OSB (to the left).



It changes you.

“I don’t see how it couldn’t,” said Jacob Berns ’14, who volunteered in Rome during his 2015-16 BVC experience and is now a novice preparing to enter Saint John’s Abbey. “Part of the genius of Paul Richards’ concept is building the relationship between abbeys, but also utilizing that relationship to give these men that experience.”

“It was a big turning point for me,” said J.D. Quinby ’14, who spent the 2014-15 school year teaching in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. “The inclusive and compassionate values that (Benedictines) have – I really wanted to become that type of person, and live my life based on those values.”

“One of Br. Paul’s lines – he has plenty of ‘em – is ‘Go out and do good work,’ ” added Mike McCarty ’12, who spent the 2012-13 BVC term teaching in the Mathare slum in Nairobi, Kenya. “What I really loved was the ability to go out and see a need and try to help as best I could.”

BVC volunteers make a difference in their selected communities, and their experience makes a difference with them.

“I think our students are asking, ‘OK, if you say this is what you believe, where’s the beef?’ ” Abbot John said. “How does this really make a difference in the way you live your day-to-day life?”

“I’ve become a more thoughtful person,” said Quinby, now a digital planner at Haworth Media in Minneapolis. “I have a better moral compass. I’m able to find

more purpose in everything I do now.”

“Having a sense of community, a sense of belonging, is really important to my overall mental health and well-being,” said McCarty, whose company, EDGE Fall Protection, LLC, operates out of Minneapolis. “That was definitely strengthened by Saint John’s and the Benedictine Volunteer Corps.”

“I had actually been thinking maybe monastic life isn’t for me, and I was starting to look in other directions,” Berns said. “Living that life for myself helped cross some things off my list of why I can’t be a monk.”

With everyone involved, there’s a common thread – reinforcing Benedictine values.

“There’s something really inspiring about the individuals,” Abbot John said. “That’s good. That’s a bingo.”

CATCHING THE SPIRIT

The Benedictine Institute, formed in 2009, was the brainchild of the late Br. Dietrich Reinhart ’71, OSB.

“It was always his dream to have something like this,” said Gloria “Chick” Hardy, the Benedictine Institute’s recently-retired assistant director, “and it was his plan and goal to be at the leadership of that.

“This whole Benedictine thing is a lifestyle, not a list,” Hardy said. “I always say it’s better caught than taught, and better felt than telt.”

The Benedictine Institute concept: Strengthen and promote the Benedictine character of Saint John’s in fresh and innovative ways.

“Essentially, it’s to educate employees and students and people affiliated with these campuses as to what the Benedictine perspective is,” Narloch said.

“How do we keep this presence there

Top left: Jacob Berns ’14 served in Rome during his Benedictine Volunteer Corps stint in 2015-16. He’s now a novice preparing to enter Saint John’s Abbey.

Left: Mike McCarty ’12 taught and worked in the Mathare slum in Nairobi, Kenya during his BVC service in 2012-13, and relished his opportunity to make a positive impact.





Benedictine Institute director Rodger Narloch (right) and recently retired assistant director Gloria “Chick” Hardy understand the value of educating faculty and employees about the Benedictine perspective, as well as the benefits of passing that perspective on to the student body.

if (monastics) are not the ones delivering it? Part of it is to educate the lay people.”

Those faculty and staff members, in turn, help embed Benedictine hallmarks in the student experience. It’s just another avenue for messages that traditionally have been imparted by monks.

“The Benedictine Institute is helping educate lay folks who are now taking on a lot of these roles that monastics had before,” Narloch said, “to help them understand and hopefully fully get to value this perspective so that it can influence their work and that culture so it isn’t lost.

“Most of our programming isn’t targeted at the students themselves,” Narloch said. “The idea is to help employees understand and integrate the Benedictine mission of these places into their perspective and into their work.”

Those hallmarks also have been incorporated into students’ day-to-day lives through programs like the Men’s Spirituality Group and Benedictine Living Communities, concepts that currently are being reinvented.

“This is very much a process of listening with your heart,” Narloch said. “The whole idea of welcoming people regardless of where they’re at or what they’re thinking is very Benedictine in and of itself.”

BUILDING ON THE CONCEPTS

There remains a very tangible need for monastics to provide a foundation for everything else.

“Without the previous generation, meaning the monastic communities, all the rest of this would be irrelevant,” Narloch said. “It wouldn’t be here.”

“You can talk about Benedictine values all you want. They’re great values, and they’re humanistic values,” Br. Paul said. “But if there aren’t men and women living the Benedictine life, the Benedictine life doesn’t exist.”

“Without these monks living that lifestyle, being their good example to others,” Berns added, “I’m not sure it would hold together.”

The mortar for those bricks now comes not only from monastics, but also from students and instructors and staff, from Benedictine Volunteer Corps and Benedictine Institute connections that provide more points of entry.

It remains a universal message. There simply are new, innovative ways to get it into the mainstream.

“The Rule of Benedict itself – in many ways, its values and spirituality – tends to be accessible across a broad range of people,” Abbot John said.

There now are more ways of getting it into the water, more reasons for hope as the 21st century unfolds.

“Yes, it has been in the water – and to a large part, I think it still is,” Narloch said.

“If we’re a little more intentional about naming it or seeing it, we can then be more intentional about making sure it stays in the water.”

Dave DeLand, editorial and content director for SJU Institutional Advancement, is an award-winning writer, guest lecturer at Saint John’s University and former columnist for the St. Cloud Times.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON BENEDICT'S WORLD OF MANY COLORS

By Patrick Henry

"There will always be monastics, for there is, though it may be unrecognized, a monastic in everyone."

So wrote a student in a course I taught 40 years ago. More recently, a friend told me of a student who wrote, "I see the world in black and white. Benedictines see the world in many colors."

Since 1975 it has been my good fortune to live close to the monks of Saint John's Abbey and the sisters of Saint Benedict's Monastery. I have learned that those two students were right.

A monastic in everyone? Seems preposterous – but only if you've been tricked into thinking that monks have "forsaken the world."

Yes, they live apart. They pray more than most of us. They dress funny. But once you get to know them – as students at Saint John's have for more than a century and a half – you know that monks have chosen this way of life "for the sake of the world."

The Rule of Saint Benedict, tested and found workable for 1,500 years, won't let monks flee the ordinary into some abstract spiritual realm remote from what the rest of us inhabit.

No one, not even the abbot, is excused from kitchen service. Guests (the monastery is never without them) are to be received as if they are Christ.

And the secret to monasticism's persistence through a millennium and a half: Benedict's skepticism of any claim to perfection.

He says the most any monk can claim at the end of his life is to have made



a good beginning. The monastic in everyone – in you, in me – is not an accomplishment. It's a quest.

Seeing the world in many colors? The key is Benedict's characterization of the abbot's responsibility: "directing souls and serving a variety of temperaments ... accommodating and adapting himself to each one's character and intelligence."

The monastery is an experimental, exploratory place where the full range of human personality can develop and flourish. The monastic habit is not "one size fits all."

The inner life of the monastery fashions a community that looks outward. This has been true for a long time.

The 20 volumes of Ellis Peters' *Cadfael Chronicles* – novels about 12th-century herbalist and amateur detective Brother Cadfael – portray a society in which the monastery's wall is a permeable membrane. Inside and outside, sacred and secular, are not sharply separated.

This came alive for me the first time I saw the lighting of the Christmas tree in the Great Hall at Saint John's. Everybody from the surrounding territory showed up.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, this ancient tradition of monastic welcome has come to fresh expression in ecumenical and interfaith relations.

In the 20th century, with the founding of the World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church's Second Vatican

Council, the centuries-old splintering of the Christian community was reversed. The ecumenical movement's search for unity has become, increasingly, the recognition of the unity that's already there.

Saint John's Benedictines in particular have been ecumenical dynamos.

Fr. Kilian McDonnell '49, '51 SOT, OSB (who turned 96 in September), founder of the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, learned during his doctoral work in Germany that overcoming Christian divisions requires living together even more than reading one another's books.

In 20 years as the Institute's executive director, I heard countless expressions of amazed gratitude for Benedictine hospitality. Here's one: "The Benedictines have been living in this rhythm of work, study and prayer for 1,500 years. This is no temporary fashion of our times, to be abandoned when the next fad comes along. I am joining in the rhythm of their prayers for a brief time."

Benedictines, more than most Christians, are capable of rootedness and far-ranging adventure at the same time.

In one of his poems, Fr. Kilian gives a snapshot of this ironic ability, an image that could come only from more than half a century of seeking God after the monastic manner of life: "All our truths need bungee cords."

Adherents of the Rule expect to learn new things from just about everybody, even from those more novice than they. Benedict instructs the abbot to pay particular attention to the youngest in the community.

Benedictines have taken the lead in dialogues with Buddhists, Jews, Muslims. Monastic Interreligious Dialogue – which Saint John's Fr. William Skudlarek '59, '64 SOT, OSB,

serves as secretary general – is like a particle accelerator in which forces interact to reveal primordial conditions, some fundamental features of human nature and human community.

It's not just ecumenism and interfaith relations that embody the contemporary worth of Benedictine tradition. In 1990 Saint John's declared unmistakably that Benedictine values can be expressed in the world of commerce.

Saint John's gave its highest honor, the Pax Christi Award, to Bob Piper, who had led Piper Jaffray to the forefront both of investments and of public service. Bob was chair of the Collegeville Institute's board, and my boss.

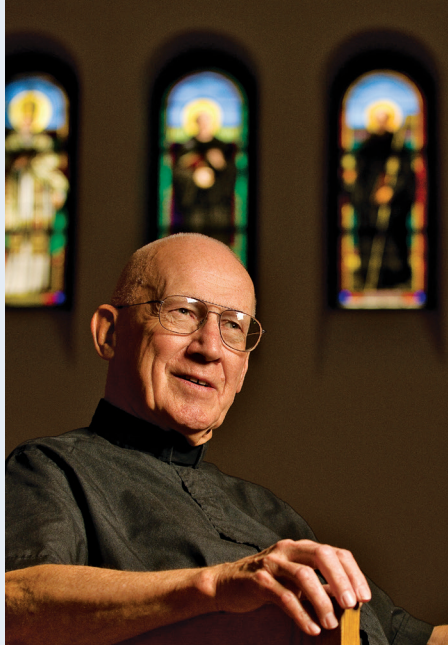
Bob replied in a way that reflects the monastic in everyone and seeing the world in many colors:

"I gratefully accept this award for myself, but even more, on behalf of all those heirs of Saint Benedict whose days are spent in a world called by such picturesque names as 'dog-eat-dog,' 'cut-throat,' 'rat race.'

"I thank Saint John's for being the sort of place it is – if it weren't for monasteries, the vision of a priorities-straight, ordered life might vanish from the earth.

"I commend Saint John's for recognizing that others, living in the heart of the city far removed from Lake Sagatagan (and far from Lake Wobegon), can take their bearings from that same vision."

Patrick Henry was professor of religion at Swarthmore College (1967-84) and served as executive director of the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research (1984-2004). In 1976 he became one of the first Protestant oblates of Saint John's Abbey. He is father of Brendan Henry, SJU '03.



REFLECTIONS ON 7 DECADES OF SPIRITUAL CHANGE

By Fr. Don Talafous '48, '52 SOT, OSB

Two scenes from my early years at Saint John's University in the 1940s will provide a necessary background for the transformation that has occurred over my 74 years here.

- Sunday morning Mass for the local parish and the Abbey community was still in Latin. The sermon to the parish congregation was in German. Men sat on one side of the church, women on the other. As at every Catholic church, the priest presided at Mass with his back to the parishioners.
- The elevator near the student dining room was where it is now, but it was operated by pulling on a rope.

Changes in monastery life are inseparable for me from the refreshing changes that resulted from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and all its subsequent ramifications.

The switch in language from Latin to English for those called the choir monks in the Mass and in the Divine Office hastened the union of the choir monks and the brothers.

Prior to this, the brothers did their daily choral prayer in English and the others – destined for the priesthood – in Latin. Even the new church building provided for separate blocks of seating for the two groups. The two groups soon formed

one body as they prayed the daily round of Psalms and scripture in English.

An inevitable result of this amalgamation was apparent in the presidency of the University. Br. Dietrich Reinhart held the office for 18 years in a stellar presidential term.

As with almost every religious association in the Catholic Church, the late 1960s saw a dwindling in numbers at Saint John's Abbey – from a peak of over 400 to the current number of 120.

This diminishing number inevitably required a very painful withdrawal by the Abbey from some of its numerous missions and parishes. That left an ongoing concern about preserving monastic life and passing it on.

The Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research and the Benedictine Volunteer Corps are two ways in which the monastery extends its ethos and spirit into venues around the world where lay Catholic graduates of the University embody and transmit that spirit.

Lay groups of alumni have taken the initiative in passing on the Benedictine charism. That's the kind of initiative to which the Second Vatican Council gave decided impetus.

Important in its own way is the evolution from rope elevators to much more sophisticated machinery and technology, as well as many more buildings where the interior changes talked about earlier have been realized and made concrete (no pun intended).

The Saint John's Bible is a good example of the union of art, technology and scriptural savvy.

Fr. Don Talafous '48, '52 SOT, OSB, has been a student, professor, chaplain and faculty resident at Saint John's. He works in Alumni Relations, has authored several books and writes Daily Reflections saintjohnsabbey.org/reflection