

Emily's Study Abroad in Rome Experience

There is no better way to start your day than waking up at 5am, hopping on a bus at 6am, and attending mass at St. Peter's at 7am, followed by drinking a cup of cappuccino and eating 30 cent pastries while enjoying the beautiful sunrise and awakening of the city of Rome. That was my normal life during my semester in Rome, and I could not have been more pleased with my time spent experiencing a new culture while studying abroad through the Italy Program. The opportunities I've had, things I've learned, and the growth I've gained spiritually, I will have for the rest of my life, and it is truly a blessing.

From the first time I met the director of the Rome program, Mr. Assaf, at the airport, when he bought all the arriving students cappuccinos, I knew it was going to be a great upcoming three months. Little did I know at the time that was only one of the many cappuccinos I would be treated to all semester. Stepping outside the airport, everything became real, and I realized I was beginning a journey of a lifetime.

Many people back home were asking me, "So are you taking classes over there?" By looking at my pictures on Facebook, I see how that would be a question; seeing pictures of beautiful Churches, scenery, and architecture, it looked like I was just touring the city. But in fact, four days a week I would attend class with the rest of the 25 students in the program. Dr. Connell would teach us Humanities and Poetics on Monday and Wednesdays. Later Monday night, Msgr. Soseman taught us theology with a focus on St. Paul. Tuesdays and Thursdays were my favorite days. After going to mass at St. Peter's, we would meet Dr. Connell somewhere around Rome and go on tour to different Churches and historical sights and learn about the art and architecture. There is no better way to learn about that than actually experience and live it first hand. This is where my pictures came from, which made people question, are you just in Rome to see different things or are you actually learning? That was the beauty of it; I was experiencing all the culture and different sites in Rome, but also learned about the history of each place during my classes.

Although Rome is a beautiful city, living at the Villa was a wonderful oasis from all the hectic city life. The dorms felt more like a house, giving it a homey, community feel. The food was delicious, cooked by our own Italian chefs every day. It was fun trying to communicate with them when it was our turn to get the food from the kitchen and serve it to our peers. All the meals we ate together, which is another way we all bonded so well during the semester. It felt like one big happy family eating at a giant dinner table each day. I think I ate enough pasta for my lifetime, but it never got old because it was so good. Living at the Villa also provided us the opportunity to help the monks with their annual olive harvesting. Picking and whacking the olives off the trees was hard work, but it paid off a few weeks later when Mr. Assaf handed a jar of Italian olive oil to those who helped harvest the olives that day.

Besides taking classes, eating delicious food cooked by Italian chefs everyday, touring the city of Rome, and experiencing Italian culture, I had the most amazing opportunity to intern with EWTN Global Catholic Television Network at the Vatican! I am beyond thankful for this opportunity to work with a prestigious organization through Catholic News Agency and the experiences I had that came with it. Before I came to Rome, I heard about possible internship opportunities at the Vatican, but I had no idea they were this great. Let me just list a few of the opportunities I had through my internship.

1. I was the photographer for the news station, and had special privilege to sit in front of the first pew at St. Peters, during the Ordination of Deacons Mass. Afterwards, I attended a special reception at the Pontifical North American College and met some of the ordained deacons, priests, and other people from the Catholic News Agency.
2. I interviewed a representative of the Human Life International Organization, asking him questions about their work and future goals, while he was being filmed. I experienced the work a broadcast journalist would do and felt like Katie Couric, making it a great experience.

3. Met Timothy Cardinal Dolan and sat 3 feet away from him while he recorded an episode for his radio show. Afterwards, I recorded a question of my own to be asked on a future show.
4. Worked with the editor of the Catholic News Agency in Denver and stood on top of the colonnade at St. Peter's taking pictures of the Canonization Mass for the seven canonized saints. Amazing view of over 80,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square, and perfect view of the Pope and hundreds of Cardinals, Bishops, and Priests who joined him on the altar this special day.
5. Gained real life experience working in a media office setting by transcribing interviews on the computer, uploading pictures, and assisting with video editing.
6. Photographed for a private Mass at St. Peter's Basilica and stood one foot away from Pope Benedict XVI.
7. Attended a private reception in celebration of the upcoming North and South American Conference at the Vatican. Also attended a few segments of the conference.
8. Had the ability to meet people and network with them so hopefully that will lead to future opportunities! (Might even intern with the Catholic News Agency or for a show through CNA in Washington D.C. someday)

Overall, my experience interning at EWTN has been one of the greatest opportunities I've ever had and I hope to use what I've learned to apply in my future, hopefully working for an organization like this. It's been a blessing finding something that combines everything I'm interested in-Communications, Business, and Catholic Studies.

Other than the skills and real life experience I gained through my internship, I also grew tremendously in my faith this semester. Before I came, I was excited about coming to Rome, for it being the center of the Catholic Church, but I did not know how much it would impact my life in a positive way. I cannot count how many times I attended mass, certainly way more times than I ever would in America. But it became a norm to go to daily mass. It was a lifestyle, and I loved it. Even though mass was usually in Italian or Latin, (or Spanish, Polish, Hungarian, German, or occasionally English) I was still able to receive the Eucharist each time. That is the beauty of the Catholic Church. It is universal; and it was a privilege to be able to experience that here in Rome.

Another way I was able to grow in my faith was on the several pilgrimages our group took. The first pilgrimage was around all seven-pilgrimage basilicas in Rome. The majority of our group left the Villa at 6am and didn't return back until 8pm. 14 hours of walking, praying, singing, and spreading the love of God around the city. It was a day I will never forget. Other pilgrimages our group went on were to Assisi, Poland, North Italy, including Venice, Milan, Bergamo, and Padua. I was also fortunate enough to have the opportunity to travel to the Amalfi Coast and London, England.

Although there were far more positive memorable moments, there were also a few challenges, which turned out to help me on my journey. One prime example that happened to me personally was when I got an eye ulcer, and was unable to wear my contacts for a month while I was there. Mr. Assaf brought me to the eye doctor countless times, and I'm thankful I was able to receive the help I needed. This instance allowed me to experience a little bit how the medical system works in a foreign country, making me appreciate the system we have in America. Besides that, I am thankful that I was able to receive the help I needed to get better and that the program director cared enough for his students to make sure they received the help they needed, (as other students had different medical issues as well.) Even though it was annoying at the time, it was part of God's plan making me a stronger person, learning to be patient and trust in Him. After a few weeks of medical care, I was back to normal.

My entire semester abroad through this program truly changed my life. My outlook on the world has been broadened; I have a better appreciation of where I come from, and my faith. I also learned many valuable life lessons. One is to seize every opportunity given to you. My time last semester went by extremely fast and I was glad I took advantage of all the great opportunities available to make the most of my experience. I also learned that God has a greater plan than I

could ever imagine, and most of the time things will not go the way I planned them, but how God planned them; and it's always for the better.

I also learned to give back. One of the last nights in Rome, a group who were inspired by some Franciscan Friars we met, went on a "Jesus run" around the city. We made soup and bought some snacks at the store and delivered them to homeless people we saw on the streets in the city. We also gave them blankets and coats if we saw they were cold, which most of them were. This was one of the most humbling experiences I've ever had. I experienced what poverty looks like first hand, the poorest of the poor were right in front of my eyes. I wish we could do more to help them, but it's the little things that make the biggest difference. For instance when we gave this one man soup and a blanket, he began crying of joy, and when we started singing to him, he joined in with us. God bless their souls.

I will never forget my last night in Rome. First my boss took some other people at my internship and myself out to eat at Pope Benedict XVI's favorite restaurant (which is the same place I ate on my first day of internship). Then Annie, my fellow internship buddy, and I witnessed the lighting of the Christmas tree in St. Peter's Square. Afterwards, to make the whole semester come full circle, Mr. Assaf took us out for drinks to reminisce on the entire past three months, and to look forward to the future to live with the fire we gained here in Rome and bring it back to the United States. The last look at St. Peter's Basilica I will have in my memory for a long time, until I hopefully go back again someday. It is hard to explain to someone truly what it meant being at the center of the Church over the semester. This is where the words of St. Francis (our group's saint) come into play "Preach the gospel at all times, use words when necessary."

One last note, I transcribed an interview at my internship one day.

These words by a priest at the Vatican really stuck out to me, and they perfectly describe my experience in Rome.

"Coming to Rome broadens horizons. You meet Catholics from all over the world. You get in contact with the center of the Church, with the history of this extraordinary city. It changes you. It makes you a better human being, and it makes you a better Catholic."

I could not have imagined or asked for a better experience during my semester in Rome and I'm excited to share my experiences and faith with others.

Emily Hazelbach