

Day 1: Today, we arrived at the monastery. When we arrived, we were greeted by a couple of nuns and then taken to the coffee room. I was amazed by how clean and “modern” the monastery looked. There are parts of the monastery that look very old and rundown but parts that are very new. All of this, the new and old, is surrounded by green hills—green hills that remind me of the Microsoft Windows default computer wallpaper. I also wonder how this monastery was built. It seems so in sync with its surroundings, like almost perfectly placed. After the service was over, I helped clean up the church. One nun asked me if I wanted to vacuum the church, and I agreed. It was a weird cleaning up a church. Cleaning is such a mundane task and the church is such a sacred space. Earlier when I was at the service, I was really careful about my presence in the church. Since we were not orthodox, we couldn’t go to the main hall but had to sit in another room. I also had to be careful in the way I was sitting, making sure I was not crossing my legs. However, when I was cleaning, the place felt completely different. I was throwing the carpets to the side, vacuuming every corner of the church, going through each room/section of the church.

Day 2 & Day 3:

Every section of the monastery is so beautiful. I woke up early before anyone else was up. I walked outside to find the shower room but I got lost, so I just sat near the cobblestones that faced the church. The silence in the monastery is a different sort of silence that I have ever experienced. I cannot describe it, but it felt like everything was in harmony. I sat there just before the sun rose above the hills and just before the wind stopped. Later, we had dinner outside, and I sat on the bench which was basically the wall. The person sitting across from me could see the trees behind me and the beautiful green hills. This feels so unreal. I wish we could have meals outside like this back home. The food was also nothing less than perfect. Overall, a wonderful beginning.

Day 4: I’ve decided to fast while I’m at the monastery. At first, I thought that I wouldn’t, simply because it’s really hard to fast if I’m not able to cook and go out and buy things I normally eat. However, my friend Ariana decided to fast, and I went along with her. Since I felt a spiritual connection with the monastery, I thought fasting here would give me a different spiritual experience. A lot of the times when I’m fasting at home, I stay inside and usually read or watch movies. This would test my strength and my will to fast. The first day of fasting was alright. It’s really fascinating how fasting disciplines you. It makes me think about time a lot. I also tend to pray more when I’m fasting. In the same way, a lot of the nuns that I have met are also very disciplined. They are very conscious of their time and how they’re spending it. Richard also did his presentation today on fasting, and there was such a nice discussion that followed. For a minute, I was thinking about how in a sense we are all fasting all the time. Everyone has temptations or things that they want to do but simply shouldn’t or can’t.

Day 5 & 6: I’m getting to know other students on this trip better. I think the girls really bonded over a discussion about guys, and it’s nice to connect with other graduate students on topics beyond academics. The monastery days are coming to an end, but I’m barely getting into a routine. One of the best moments on this trip happened today! I saw a nun trying to fix a flowerpot and Adam was helping her. After asking Adam if I could join, I started to help with putting flowers in the pot. It was so nice to clean up the monastery in both of their company. Even though the nun could not speak English really well, she would

say little things here and there. Most of our conversation took place with laughter and smiles. It worked out perfectly. After filling up pots with flowers, Adam and I helped her mow a small plot of land. If I was in charge of mowing the lawn, I would just take the lawnmower and simply do it under 10 minutes. However, the nuns really do everything as best as they can. Everything is done through a process, one by one. So the lawn ended up taking more than half an hour. The nun was really nice and gave me a flower at the end. The flower has a name related to dogs because when you press the flower, the petals open as if a mouth was opening. I was really humbled by the gift. After that, I followed her as she watered all the plants. What was more impressive than the number of plants in the monastery was how she knew the name of every single plant. She told me not only the names but also the characteristics of each plant and how often to water it. I thought she knew very little English but it turned out that she was just very nervous about speaking it. I was so impressed by how much English she knew just by reading books on her own. I was also really happy that I made her comfortable enough for her to practice her English with me! We promised that we would continue to send each other emails so she could practice more!