Summer study-abroad program blends structural engineering, theology and Augustinian mission into an unforgettable experience for faculty and students.

By Suzanne Wentzel

C ivil engineers looking to study historical structures can't go wrong with Italy. From arches and aqueducts to catacombs and domes, the country brims with soaring, spanning, leaning, sinking and crumbling monuments of human ingenuity.

But it's also famous for structures made not from bricks and mortar but from "living stones." One of the sturdiest is the community that bears the name of a man forever linked with Italy: Augustine. It was here that he was baptized; here that his mother, Monica, died; here that the hermits who followed his monastic rule came to be known as the Order of St. Augustine.

And in June 2012, it was here that a group of engineering students witnessed the convergence of their academic discipline and Augustinian heritage into one unforgettable Villanova experience. The students not only examined the structural characteristics of Italy's finest edifices. They also discovered how it feels to live as an Augustinian community thousands of miles from campus.

Match made in heaven

This unique opportunity was the fruit of a University-wide effort that began with David Dinehart, PhD, professor and assistant chair, Civil and Environmental Engineering. Dr. Dinehart has a habit of finding ways to pair engineering and the University's mission. In 2000, he and fellow faculty created a relationship with an orphanage in Honduras, and for 10 years, Villanova students designed and helped to build a school, chapel and other structures to meet the children's needs. Three years ago, Dr. Dinehart and his students launched NovaCANE, an outreach program that gets middle schoolers excited about engineering.

In 2010, he hit upon an idea that incorporated not only Villanova's Augustinian heritage but also its robust study-abroad program. To realize his vision, Dr. Dinehart needed the help and expertise of two partners. The first was the Rev. Joseph Farrell, OSA, STD, associate vice president, Mission and Ministry.
Father Farrell had done his doctoral studies in Rome and had been leading Augustinian pilgrimages in Italy for five years. Dr. Dinehart made his pitch: What if Villanovans were to create a summer study in Tuscany that combined a 3-credit technical elective on Italian engineering and architecture with a 3-credit theology course on the history of Augustinian thought and the Augustinian Order? Father Farrell’s reaction was unequivocal: Sweet.

That same year, while he was in Italy for a conference on timber engineering, Dr. Dinehart scouted one of the venues that could serve as a base for the summer study: the Augustinian monastery in San Gimignano. After he met the friars and toured the medieval building, which now serves as an international house of prayer and pilgrimage, any doubts about its suitability as a learning center and residence for the students vanished. “The location was so beautiful, and the town so quintessentially Tuscan, that it was almost too perfect—better than I ever imagined!”

Having identified the what, where and why, Dr. Dinehart and Father Farrell needed to figure out the how. Enter the final partner: the Office of International Studies (OIS), which oversees all for-credit international experiences and supports faculty in creating and implementing summer programs.

As soon as OIS staff heard the plan, their faces lit up. In recent years they had been working with College of Engineering faculty to make it easier for their students to study abroad. The proposal on the table was the latest testimony to the success of that collaboration.

But the Tuscany proposal wasn’t just exciting. It was ground-breaking. “Not only was it the first Villanova summer program to offer engineering, but it tied that discipline to the most fun—creating and implementing summer programs.”

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For Kayla Spitzer ’14, the experiential learning was one of its eerie, labyrinthine underground. They took photos, documented deformations and noted the thicknesses, lengths and locations of cracks. Their report will provide baseline data for subsequent trips.

Other excursions took them farther afield. Having read Brunelleschi’s Dome, the students traveled to Florence’s famed Basilica of Santa Maria del Fiore (known popularly as the Duomo) to behold this architectural wonder. “From an engineering perspective, I thought the dome was amazing,” says Michael Battaglia ’13. “It was great to study the history of the engineering behind it and then be able not only to see it but to climb up and walk between the inner and outer shells.”

Students were just as enthusiastic about their theology classes—as was Dr. Dinehart, who sat in on most of them. After all, the locale and conditions for learning about Augustine, his rule for community living and its impact on the 13th-century Tuscan hermits couldn’t have been more ideal. But what completed the picture was Father Farrell himself. “Because of his background and experience, he was able to tie everything together and make it so interesting,” says Sarah Walker ’14. “He is passionate about theology and was able to get us access to the coolest places.”

Father Farrell led them to the overgrown ruins of an original Tuscan hermitage (reached via a Roman bridge mentioned in Dante’s Purgatorio) and gained them admittance to an Augustinian cloister. There they joined in midday prayer with the sisters and received a private tour of the building’s frescoes. And thanks to Father Farrell, the guide at Florence’s Basilica of Santa Maria del Santo Spirito gave students an up-close view of a wooden crucifix sculpted by Michelangelo.

“Christians do not make a house of God until they are one in charity. The timber and stone must fit together in an orderly plan, must be joined in perfect harmony and must give each other the support, as it were, of love.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE, SERMON 336
Above: Students spend a free weekend in the coastal region of the Cinque Terre. Below: After learning about the retrofit techniques used to stabilize the Leaning Tower of Pisa, students visit what is one of the world’s most famous engineering failures.

through their classes, travels and, above all, extended stay in San Gimignano, students were exposed to a new experience of life. Through their classes, travels and, above all, extended stay in San Gimignano, students were exposed to a new experience of life with friars—embrace the order’s communal tradition of meeting, eating and praying together every day. “Since it was important to the first hermits to have a common space for these activities,” Father Farrell says, “it should be important to anyone trying to learn and live this way of life.”

This intentional daily routine created an overwhelming sense of community within the group. “I especially loved evening prayer,” says Kayla. “We would all sit on the tower at sunset, surrounded by rolling hills, thinking about how fortunate we were to be there.”

Such Augustinian moments blur the artificial boundaries that often delimit theology and engineering—or any other set of code words for faith and reason. Fortunately, Villanovans are committed to a model of education that strives to integrate the two, and Dr. Dinehart was happy to do his part in Italy to promote that integration. “From the students’ viewpoint, I think having their engineering professor pray with them, share experiences with them and talk about how important faith is gave the theology piece even more credibility.”

Rome, then home

Before returning to the States, the travelers spent three days in Rome. The grand finale planned by Dr. Dinehart and Father Farrell featured the Eternal City’s most spectacular engineering and spiritual attractions, including the Pantheon, the Colosseum, the Sistine Chapel and St. Peter’s Basilica.

Once again, the students had Father Farrell to thank for their entrance to certain sites and events. They got into a special Mass at St. Peter’s at which Pope Benedict XVI conferred the pallium, a white woolen band symbolizing pastoral responsibility, on 44 archbishops from around the world, including Philadelphia’s Most Rev. Charles Chaput, OFM Cap. Afterward, they were able to tour the Vatican Necropolis and see the tomb of St. Peter. They also visited Father Farrell’s former residence, St. Monica College, the order’s international house of studies near St. Peter’s Square.

The students couldn’t get enough. Even on the final day, when Dr. Dinehart and Father Farrell told them they were free to do what they wanted, all eight chose to go with the two men to see, yes, more churches.

Once home, the students gave this inaugural program rave reviews. Organizers hope that the next installment will take place in 2014. In the meantime, they are grateful to have accomplished what they set out to do: bring together different offices and disciplines on campus into one shared experience. But they did something more, Father Farrell has come to realize. They helped to clarify and strengthen the University’s distinctive identity.

TRY AS HE MIGHT, the man now remembered as Blessed Agostino Novello, OSA, could not avoid having greatness thrust upon him. Born in Sicily of Spanish noble lineage, Matteo Di Termini seemed destined for fame and glory. After studying civil and canon law at the University of Bologna, he distinguished himself as a brilliant and learned lawyer, rising through the ranks of the Sicilian magistracy to become a counselor to the king.

But after being left for dead on the battlefield in 1266, Matteo had a change of heart. He renounced worldly honor, became a lay brother in the Order of St. Augustine, and entered a Tuscan convent—having decided not to mention his professional past. With a new name and a new vocation, Agostino looked forward to loving God and neighbor in pious obscurity.

But his secret did not last. A property dispute prompted him to write a document defending his confreres’ rights, and his expert legal argument betrayed him. His superiors knew a good thing when they saw it. Contrary to his wishes, Agostino was ordained and, over time, appointed confessor to Pope Nicholas IV and named general of the Augustinian Order. In his retirement, he returned to the convent, where he devoted himself to prayer and good works of extraordinary measure. He was beatified in 1761.

While in Siena, the students visited the Pinacoteca Nazionale and saw painter Simone Martini’s 14th-century altarpiece honoring Agostino. But he also is memorialized on Villanova’s campus. His stained-glass depiction in the Law School Chapel may be a gentle reminder to future attorneys of just how fine is the line between humility and hiding one’s light under a bushel.