

Sisters Keep Students Connected with Distance Learning

By Donna O'Loughlin, Coordinator of Outreach Events

In homes with school-age children and teenagers, the COVID-19 confinement is keenly felt. Catholic school teachers—like Sisters Jane Marie Bradish, Margaret Sue Broker, Sylvia Leonardi, and Mary Ann Meyer—now upload essential materials to online platforms to continue their students' education in the virtual realm.

Our sisters' comfort with technology ranges from proficient to advanced, but all are doing their best to provide a satisfying (and even fun) experience for their students. The pressure is great to prepare lesson plans, activities, and in some cases the curriculum itself well in advance of the online posting deadline.

Sister Mary Ann, spirituality instructor at Chicago's Resurrection High School, describes her new normal: "I post a faculty organizational plan each day, which contains class objectives and detailed instructions about the day's work. Students submit assignments electronically. I am required to be available via email, discussion boards, or conferences for my students during the time in which their class is scheduled to meet."

Sister Mary Ann checks in with her students using Zoom video conferencing at least once a week. "I have the option of holding part of class on Zoom during the assigned class time," she said. "I also provide notes with voiceover, so they are getting input along with the notes. I normally begin my day at 7 a.m. Through the day, I am 'Zooming' with students, emailing, grading, and planning. At 2:30 p.m., I Zoom with an administrator to address any issues or concerns that may arise."

Sister Sylvia of Kenosha, Wisconsin, teaches preschool through grade 5 at St. Joseph Catholic Academy and has her own set of challenges: "I teach 22 classes. Within a week's time, about 370 students come into my 'classroom.' As a meditation teacher and campus minister, I create my own curriculum based on the liturgical Sundays or feast days. Audio and visual resources are used. Constant research must take place before selecting an online activity."

Video conferencing has helped her students stay connected, Sister Sylvia said. "I record Bible stories, along with faith projects, to be sent virtually by homeroom teachers. Through Zoom, my principal and I record daily prayer and petitions, announcements, the Pledge of Allegiance, and something that maintains a sense of family. This daily 20-minute start to the day can bring hope, trust, and peace."

Sister Margaret Sue of Walls, Mississippi, has her hands full teaching primary library and pre-kindergarten through second-grade religion classes at Sacred Heart School. "Our teachers hand in lesson plans every week, and keep our regular 7:05 a.m. - 3:05 p.m. work schedule. We are at our computers and phones 8:00 - 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. to help students and parents. But our days go far beyond dismissal time."

Sister's day is packed with activity and technology. "After breakfast and prayer, I videotape religion classes or library storybooks," she said. "While those are uploading, I plan the next class, gather materials, outline the lesson, and gather props and visuals. When the videos are uploaded, I watch and edit them, and send links to homeroom teachers. Then I check emails.

"This schedule repeats itself until bedtime," she said. "If a video breaks down, I email my patient tech person, who walks me through the glitches and calms me down."

At Pius XI Catholic High School in Milwaukee, Sister Jane Marie works as both teacher and administrator. She mentioned the school's alacrity at switching to a virtual environment and tweaking as needed. "On March 16, staff gathered to plan, decide about curriculum—what is essential and what is bonus material. On March 17, we became what I call 'Pius XI Virtual.'

"Students all have school-issued devices, but not everyone had internet access," Sister Jane Marie said. "Thankfully, service providers stepped up and offered free installation and 60 days of free service. Teachers now give presentations in new and varied ways. Zoom, Google Hangouts, Edpuzzle, Flipgrid, and Screencasting have replaced chalkboards and whiteboards, small group discussions, lectures, and the Socratic method."

Sister Jane Marie said that after a day or two, teachers discovered the need to balance virtual school with the home reality of students and their families. "Many of our students became childcare providers for younger siblings," Sister said. "Also, reading or viewing lessons online is much different from the dynamic interaction we are all used to; it takes much longer. Now, a month in, things are better than expected. I post lessons on Monday, hold virtual office hours, and follow up with emails and calls to students and parents."

Lack of digital access was an even more pervasive problem for many of Sister Margaret Sue's families. "After doing a technology survey, we knew that of those families who returned the survey, 50 percent had no scanners, more than 25 percent had no printers, and some had only one device usable for distance learning," she said. "One family has five children enrolled in our school and only the mother's cell phone. Most of our staff also have no scanner at home. From home, I cannot run copies nor scan material that would be great to use. I have to figure out how best to share it. To a great extent, storytelling suits the situation."

Sister Mary Ann volunteered that the cyber-infrastructure is also tested. "Now that many schools are using e-learning, the sheer volume of users leads to stoppages and issues. Sometimes students cannot access their assignments or submit them properly. Sometimes the conference functions do not work properly.

“I find e-learning to be much more exhausting than actually being in class with my students, and it is not nearly as fun,” she said. “It requires an incredible amount of planning and organization, along with great patience and flexibility.”

To lighten the experience, staff find creative opportunities to engage students. Sister Mary Ann said, “We held a virtual spirit week with a different theme each day, as well as a virtual dance party and video contests. I am holding a lip sync contest for my seniors. We have also started having students video the morning prayer each day rather than having only a written prayer on email.”

Sister Margaret Sue said cyber Easter festivities were planned for the youngsters at her school. “Egg hunts were set up on the school’s Facebook page, with a picture of staff holding an Easter sign wishing all a happy Easter. Also, staff were asked to send a picture of themselves as a child to contribute to a guessing game for students.”

Sister Jane Marie shared her thoughts on the coming months. “We need to figure out how to honor end-of-year traditions, like our Relay for Life cancer fundraiser, prom, senior picnic, graduation, and end-of-year Masses. These may seem like very simple concerns, but they are important to our school community.”

Sister Sylvia also acknowledged the need to uphold the spirit of a school community, and offered this prayer:

“Missing one another brings to light the experience of family achieved within the classroom. Although compassion is truly felt as the students see each other on Zoom, the twinkle in their eyes or the sad tear is not visible. It is truly a time of growth, trust, and compassion. We will truly treasure our school families next time we are together again on our campus. Until then, Father, continue to be with us at all our different locations. Amen.”