

# St. Anthony Indian Mission

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February 2021



From the desk of Fr. Patrick McGuire

Greetings from the Zuni Pueblo! Although two thirds of our students are still learning at home, there is a gradual trickle of students back into classroom learning. This month an additional seven youngsters returned to "in person teaching." It doesn't sound like much, but it makes a tremendous difference to the atmosphere in our classrooms and generally around the campus.

Back in pre-covid days, we would experience the arrival and departure of the school bus, accompanied by the excited hullabaloo of youngsters chattering and laughing about everything from basketball to "too much homework." That of course does not happen at the moment. Each morning sees a small group of students being dropped off who then, especially the youngest, rush through the gates to reach their classrooms for temperature checks and safe entry into their "bubble" of friends. In the evening there is a very orderly departure as each grade lines up and waits for their parents to appear before they are allowed to leave the school grounds. At first I found that to be a sad time as I stood with Sr. Marsha and the teachers waving them off. But it's hard to dampen the children's spirits, and the air of excitement and anticipation has returned with a fair amount of laughter, albeit from behind masks.

So while our "in-person" numbers have been reduced, the spirit of joy around St. Anthony's most certainly has not. As I wander about the grounds in the course of the day my heart gets uplifted as I see students come out of their classrooms for a breath of fresh air. Last week I was startled from my ruminations at the sound of the 2nd graders from the other side of the school yard waving and calling out, "Fr. Pat, Fr. Pat!". I have so little "one to one" contact now that I thought I might have become little more than an obscure memory. Thankfully that is not the case.



I believe that the dissemination of the Covid-19 vaccine on the Pueblo is building confidence within the community. Although all our faculty and staff have received the first inoculation, it will take some time for the whole community to be fully treated. But I do believe that it is already having a positive effect. Although personally I believe the restrictions will continue for some time, I can foresee the new school year (which is not so far off!) returning us to a more normal manner of schooling.

We began our Lenten observance this month, which has always been a significant part of our life here at St. Anthony's. In the past, every child was encouraged to "do something for Lent" and generally everyone did. The junior high would invariably take up some project to help those in need. I feel that in 2020 we were somehow cheated of our Lent and Easter with the arrival of that pesky virus. At St. Anthony's we all feel Lent is too important a time to be lost, and so we are working on ways to involve all the students -- either in class or at home -- to make their own version of Lent.

Of course it all begins with Ash Wednesday and the crossing of our foreheads with the blessed ashes. This is to remind us of our own mortality and to initiate a period of penance as a preparation for Holy Week and the great feast of Easter. Many people, including non-Catholics and those who normally would not receive the Sacraments, find "receiving their ashes" a significant and important part of their year. So we thought long and hard this year as to how we could make sure that everyone received their ashes while at the same time maintain the distancing protocols. Finally we decided on a procedure using individual cotton balls, dipped in the blessed ashes and discarded after each person, so that there was no direct contact between persons or among the recipients. During the "live streamed" Mass to classrooms, the teachers administered ashes to the students while the priests administered to those in church.

Of course this form of "remote schooling" has many drawbacks. One area of particular concern for me is the Zuni language and culture class. Learning a language needs conversational use while arts and crafts need practice and guidance. I do believe that our students have an amazing facility for art but it does need development. I was astounded last week when the parent of a 7th grader showed me a painting that her son had done. (Though reproduction doesn't do it justice, I include a picture of it here.) As for the younger set, the 4th graders left school last Friday -- each with a magnificent mini-snowman made from white fans and Popsicle sticks. All praise to our teachers for their skill in drawing out the latent talents within our precious students!



On more mundane matters, the preparation for our re-accreditation continues among the faculty as they prepare self-assessment reports. It is turning into a truly worthwhile exercise. As each group meets to finalize their papers, discussion and debate arise and new ideas and techniques for teaching are put forward to the obvious benefit of the whole faculty. I never cease to be thankful for their dedication.

The level of commitment among the whole staff continues to inspire me. The ladies in the canteen prepare meals to be delivered to classrooms and for parents picking them up for students at home. Audrey, the assistant cook, battles on in the absence of Birgitta, the principal cook, who after an out of state family emergency has had to self-isolate for two weeks. Mike gets summoned here and there -- from repairing a broken water pipe to trouble-shooting both students' and teachers' computers, without ever a grumble. Priscilla spends as many hours working at home as she does in the office where she is training Virginia in a whole new range of computer skills. And of course there is Lulita, our administration assistant, who is always coming to the rescue and expertly performing some much-needed task. I could go on at length. But if I were asked to describe our staff it would be with the words -- dedication and laughter.

And so it goes. During these most unusual times, each day brings new challenges. Challenges indeed, but all are so very worthwhile. Thank you again for making it all possible!

Sincerely,

Fr. Patrick McGuire