

St. Anthony Indian Mission

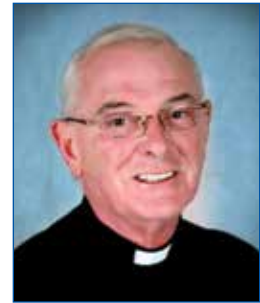
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From the desk of Fr. Patrick McGuire

"On the road again." The old song keeps running through my mind as school resumes once more for another year. Given our busy summer schedule (as I wrote about in my last letter), it almost seems as if we never had an end to the last school year! So that as we slip into another school year, it seems to be simply the next step on the same journey.

Nevertheless, as classrooms and playgrounds filled up we had a burst of excitement and laughter. The kids were ready and anxious to get going and propelled the staff and faculty along with them. I just wish I had their energy!

One thing I always enjoy is when students who have not seen each other for weeks reconnect and start swapping stories of summer exploits. I noticed a couple of boys recounting fishing adventures with hand gestures and "ohhs and wows" galore. Just eavesdropping was a week's entertainment.

Playing around with students in the cafeteria last year, we invented a "High Five" jump to hit my outstretched hand. I think I will need to wear lifts in my shoes as the youngsters have grown so much taller! I sat down with the kindergartners at lunch the other day, and they broke into the alphabet song. So I moved to the 5th graders and asked them if they knew the song, and they began singing it to the applause of the kindergartners. Soon each table joined in -- even the older students. (Just another Fr. Pat "Mad Moment". Another such moment is our attempt to grow a lawn in New Mexico -- incredibly, it is coming along!)



Our big news this year is that our new principal has taken up the reins, much to my relief. The first All School Mass had that beautiful moment where the faculty pledge to do their best for the students, and I have all the students raise their hands in blessing for their teachers.

As we begin the new year, Ms. Carol has continued my innovation of grade group meetings with teachers and has had informative discussions about the requirements of each student. After her first tour of classes, she was quite impressed with the faculty, observing: "they actually teach!"

After meeting with the faculty and discussing their own formation, together they have decided on a program of in-service meetings on the "science of reading". It is much more involved than at first I had expected. Ms. Carol and I had a discussion on how the students perceive and understand texts as they grow in their own culture and study in English. Her experience in working with the Bureau of Indian Education schools is paying dividends for our students. In my early days we discussed the students' challenges in having lessons in English while mainly speaking Zuni at home. We made great advances in that area, and now Ms. Carol is taking it to a new level.

Our enrollment is down a bit this year, mainly because of larger graduating classes and fewer children entering school. (I gather that this is the case throughout local area schools.) My accounting mind tells me that this means an increase in the cost of educating each student. So far, we have managed to keep annual tuition fees below what most private schools charge for one month. Still, it is for me to handle that without reducing the services offered for the students. (My Scottish blood helps in that regard! Waste nothing!)

As a small private school, we are more flexible than most. One of our students recently developed a mobility problem preventing her movement around the campus. We set her up on the ground floor 7th grade classroom while live-streaming lessons from the 6th and 8th grade classes upstairs. Thanks to our wonderful teachers, it is working well.

This experiment had a fortuitous side effect. We accepted another student, who for several reasons could not be present full-time in the classroom and had missed six months of schooling last year; this resulted in his being at various levels in different subjects. With the generous cooperation of the teachers, we are now able to live-stream lessons to that student. There are times when he will be present in the classroom, but mostly he studies at home under the careful watch of his grandparents. Ms. Carol monitors his progress and works with the teachers to boost his grade levels.



My thinking on this stems from our foundational charism. We were established to provide quality education for the children of Zuni and have been doing so for over a century. If today this means being more innovative, then we need to rise to the challenge and be faithful to our charism.

Extra-curricular activities are also underway. Cross-country training has started. I am exhausted just watching the young athletes return from two or three mile runs. They love it and want more!

Recently, we took a busload of 40 students to the fair at St. John's Arizona (a neighboring town about 90 minutes away.) They had a terrific time, with animal shows, games, and too much candy. Two parents whom I later met in the supermarket commented on how well it went. The other outing was at El Morro National Monument (only 30 minutes away). Camel Day commemorates an 1857 Army Camel Expedition that passed through El Morro on its way to California. It was a fun day for both children and adults; next letter I will recount the students' thoughts on their introduction to camels!

As I write to you today it is 9/11. Before breakfast each morning the students stand before the flag, pledge allegiance and offer Morning Prayer. Today, the whole School added a very beautiful prayer for the victims, rescue workers, and all who suffered on that tragic day. To our children, it was another moment in history. Yet as I watched, I saw young heads bowed in sincere prayer. It was very moving, and I simply prayed that our children would always be safe in mind, spirit, heart and body.

Thank you for making St. Anthony's possible and a wonderful place for our young people to grow!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Fr. Pat-".

Fr. Patrick McGuire