



THE DISTRICT OF INDIA

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THE DISTRICT UPDATES

New Novices



From left Sushil Minz, Sunil Lakra, Fr. Jinu Muthukattil, Amit Dungdung, Binod Kerketta and Dilip Tirkey.

On August 8, four first-year novices— Amit Dungdung, Binod Kerketta, Sunil Lakra, and Sushil Minz —made their promises and entry into the novitiate program during a special prayer service. About twenty-one Marianist Brothers and Sisters witnessed the promises of the first-year novices. The promise day celebration was highlighted with a festive meal. Let us wish them blessings and prayers as they continue to discern their Marianist call.

August 15

On August 15, the Catholic Church celebrated the Assumption of Mother Mary. The communities across the District highlighted the feast with liturgical celebrations. In India, the day has eminent significance because it marks the country's 74th Independence Day. Although the pandemic has dampened the grand flag hoistings, cultural programs, competitions, and parades, the spirit of Independence celebration persisted in virtual platforms.



Bro. Paulus Lakra along with the Brothers and the REDS staff gathered in Gyan Deep for the flag hoisting.

The District educational institutions hosted flag hoistings in small groups, keeping in mind the new Covid norms. Bro. Saju Chittadiyil, the headmaster of St. Joseph Chaminade Academy, organized a live telecast of the flag hoisting for the students and their parents. The Fidel Nilaya community organized the flag hoisting along with the Prabhat Tara School staff and St. Mary's School staff; Fr. James Dungdung was the chief guest of the day. Bro. Sukirt Tirkey, the Assistant for Education, participated with REDS Bengaluru at their flag hoisting.



New Measures with Hope



The ongoing pandemic has introduced many new measures into our day-to-day lives, just as Blessed Fr. William Joseph Chaminade, the Marianist founder, needed several creative and pragmatic measures to deal with the crisis of his time. His new measures brought hope to many who longed for better lives. In the District, our educational institutions are finding ways and means to help the children continue their education during this pandemic crisis.

Bro. Sanjay Ekka, the headmaster of Prabhat Tara High School, and his teachers are trying hard to reach out to the rural students, regardless of their technological disadvantages and limited resources. He has taught nearly ten years in classrooms and the UD Deepahalli Program. He has serviced as headmaster of the District's rural schools. Apart from this, he has twice assisted the District Administration's Office of Education. He shared with us some of the common questions that arose during this pandemic about how Prabhat Tara High School is committed to helping its rural students continue their education.

How are you assisting the students to continue their education at Prabhat Tara High School during this pandemic situation?

On June 28, the school staff met to discuss the possibility of offering online classes to the students. We spent a good deal of time deliberating the pros and cons of synchronous teaching and asynchronous teaching. All the teachers chose the mode of asynchronous, because the rural students will benefit more through this method and they can access their class material in a place with better network connectivity. Rural areas have poor internet connection, which makes synchronous learning impossible. However, many young boys and girls in the rural areas are accustomed to various social apps. Specifically, WhatsApp is a commonly used social media app which seems to be the best solution at this moment of crisis.

Do all the students at your school own a mobile phone/laptop?

Not all the students at my school own a mobile phone and their financial situation would not allow them to have a laptop. In the beginning only 50% of the students submitted their WhatsApp contact numbers to me, but as we started sending the class materials to the students, slowly the number of students rose to 85%. Probably many of them might be using their parents' or their siblings' smartphone for accessing their class materials. Because of this, some students can access smartphones only in evening hours.

What tools do you use for online teaching?

We use WhatsApp to send the learning materials to the students, and they do their assignments based upon these materials. We have created four WhatsApp groups for the asynchronous teaching for students of the 10th, 9th, 8th, and 7th standards. On July 3, the students received the first guidelines about the asynchronous teaching materials. The teachers regularly prepare their teaching materials and hand them to me, and I upload them to their respective WhatsApp groups.

How about the students who do not have the access to cell phones?

We have made available Xerox copies of the learning materials for the students who do not have cell phones. In this way no students are left out, even if they do not own a smartphone. Students are constantly asked for their feedback about the class materials and to present that feedback along with their assignments on assigned dates.

What is your advice to the students during this pandemic?

So far, I have sent fifteen communications to the students with regard to the asynchronous classes: how to take care of themselves during Covid-19, the importance of education, their responsibilities as students, and so forth. I constantly encourage and motivate the students to study at home at least 3-4 hours daily, which includes both asynchronous class materials and the textbooks.

How do you evaluate the progress of the students?

From August 8-18, we held a test for the students. It was an open book exam. I posted the questions on WhatsApp groups by 9:20 a.m. and the students were expected to write their tests in papers/notebooks, then take pictures of their answer sheets, and send them by WhatsApp to their respective teachers by 12:00 noon. The exams were conducted for 25 marks. Sadly, some students could not complete the tests on time because they could not afford smartphones.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of asynchronous learning in a rural setup?

Advantages – It seems like the students are excited about learning from classes through cell phones. These students fall under the Z-generation who are more curious about smartphones and digital activities like watching TV, YouTube, digital communication, etc. So, they are interested in learning online.

Disadvantages – Nearly 35% of the students do not have access to smartphones. The rural areas lack good internet facilities and the network is not durable. Some students do not have enough money to recharge their smartphones' data packages. Therefore, these kinds of classes are burdensome for some students. In a rural area, a family might own a cell phone which is used by the father or mother, and the same cell phone by children for their online classes. All these reasons make children unable to complete all their classwork in due time. In my case, two senior teachers are not users of smartphones. They are digitally illiterate. Another major issue is the internet network is so weak in the school itself, which slows down the process of our teaching efforts.



Prabhat Tara High School Students (file pictures).

How does the current pandemic affect teachers and teaching?

From March 17 onwards, regular schooling has stopped in India. Many teachers' livelihood is based upon teaching. The ongoing pandemic crisis closed many schools and the school administrations are not able to pay their teachers. Many schools in the rural area struggle to operate because they lack income. Many schools are actively involved in online teaching to their students. It is a very new concept and there was no training for the teachers to teach that way. Many teachers, especially senior teachers in the rural areas, are not familiar with smartphones or using technology to teach.

How are your teachers coping with the current asynchronous teaching?

My experience is that the teachers are struggling, but they are working hard to prepare the materials for the students. It is difficult for them to follow the intellectual growth of the students, because they lack real-time interaction. The only communication between the teachers and the students takes place through the social media app, which makes it difficult for the students to get a detailed explanation from the teachers, especially in subjects like math and science.

Do you recommend school learning through a social media app?

I do not recommend school learning through social media apps, because the students are going to lack real-time interaction, peer group activities, and chances to develop team spirit and leadership qualities. Above all, online classes will not give a holistic formation to children. To have a meaningful holistic formation, children need co-curricular activities such as sports, games, cultural activities, educational tours, and many more physical activities. But in this digital age one cannot do away with digital literacy. Schools must integrate some digital literacy into their curriculum because it is important for the future.

How do you assist your fellow teachers?

I took a leading role in organizing the online classes. I plan with the teachers and support them, especially the senior teachers who do not use smartphones. I help them organize their class materials. I give them some tips for how to make teaching materials, to prepare test questions, to record the students' answer sheets, etc.

What is the reaction of the parents?

So far, I have not heard from parents, but some might find it difficult because they lack the finances for purchasing a smartphone, or paying for the cell phone internet expenses of their children. Some parents might be getting frustrated because some students tend to spend more time on smartphones for games, music, watching movies, etc. rather than concentrating on their study materials.



Students perform during a school day celebration (file picture).

Blessing from Blessed Jakob Gapp

Bro. Renny Markose was overjoyed about his return to India after three years of theological studies in Rome. Originally, he booked his flight on June 20, because by then the Covid situation in Italy was much better,



so airlines began to operate flights between most of the European countries. However, since India had not opened its airports for international arrivals yet, his airline cancelled the flight. Thereafter, he booked tickets to travel home several times, but all those were unsuccessful due to the pandemic crisis. He then heard that there were more flights in operation between France and India under a special mission, so he decided to move to a Marianist Community in Antony, Paris. He then booked a flight from Paris to Bengaluru on July 15, which was the earliest the airlines were offering a flight to India. While waiting for his flight in the Marianist community in Paris, he opted to refresh his French, and a French Brother generously offered him instruction. During this time, he received disappointing news from the airlines that his July 15 flight was also cancelled, so his waiting continued while patiently learning French in Paris.

After constantly listening to various news, and browsing through the websites of both Indian and French governments, he finally discovered that beginning July 29 weekly flights would operate between India and France. He informed Fr. Sudhir Kujur, the District Superior, who quickly booked a ticket for him on the first flight that day. These days, one needs to have various papers to deal with airlines, airports, and local state governments. On July 29, as he arrived at the airport in Paris, he saw several people in a long queue in tears because they were denied entry onto the plane. They did not have proper documents even though they had

plane tickets. He prayed earnestly along the way and he was elated when he finally set his foot onto the plane.

Upon his arrival at Bengaluru, he was quarantined for seven days in a hotel, then another seven days in a Marianist community. During the quarantine, he started to write a biography of Blessed Jakob Gapp in Malayalam, his native language. On August 13, the feast day of Blessed Jakob Gapp, he completed both the text of the book and his quarantine, which he considered a big favor from Jakob Gapp himself. He hopes to publish his writing by the end of the year.

Prayer Requests

Let's pray for the world that continues to be affected by the Coronavirus pandemic. May God heal those who are infected. May God bless those working to heal the sick. May God give us the strength to overcome this pandemic. May God help us to remain steadfast in His love. May He grant eternal peace to those who have lost their lives to this virus.

Please pray for the Brothers who celebrate their birthdays during the month of September:

- 06 Pananthanam, Jerin J.
- 07 Tete, Ananias
- 09 Kerketta, Naiman
- 12 Varaprasad, Nittamaria*
- C., Raj Mohan*
- 13 Kiro, Roshan
- 18 A., Arockia Doss
Ravulapalli, Showraiah
- 27 A., Arockia Doss (Mullai)
Muthukattil, Jinu*
- 29 Kullu, Birendra*

