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THE SISTERS OF THE SACRED HEART EMBRACE THE DIGITAL AGE WITH VIRTUAL RETREATS AND MINISTRY PROGRAMS. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF THE SACRED HEART

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

WHEN LOCKDOWN STRUCK, THE SISTERS OF THE SACRED HEART HAD TO MAKE SOME HARD DECISIONS

BY GREG MELLEEN

ON A SUNDRENCHED, postcard of a spring day, the only thing missing on the manicured grounds of the Heart of Jesus Retreat Center in Santa Ana is the bustle of children.

Since 1978, when the Sisters of the Society Devoted to the Sacred Heart began offering educational retreats, the three-acre parcel in Southwest Santa Ana had grown into a beehive of activity with 10,000 - 12,000 visitors annually. Then the COVID-19 pandemic came along and rendered the site silent.

Sister Paula Sawhill remembers the eerie quiet that descended after the Retreat Center had to shutter operations.

"Do we live in a cloister now?" she recalls asking herself.

In previous years, children from schools across Southern California took day trips to the grounds donated by the ranching and farming Borchard family. On campus, the children spent a day attending presentations by the sisters, eating snacks, singing, praying, taking part in crafts and having play time.

It was a chance to "encounter and spend a day with Jesus," according to the Retreat Center's literature.

Although, for now, the children are no longer physically present, the work goes on and the sisters remain as busy as ever. Like many Catholics, the Sacred Heart Sisters, as they're commonly called, have used the virus as an agent



FAMILIES TUNE IN FOR A VIRTUAL RETREAT WITH THE SISTERS OF THE SACRED HEART. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF THE SACRED HEART.

for change. Modern technology is transforming what it means for Catholics to meet, or, in their case, retreat.

With Zoom, Flipgrid, Mentimeter and other technologies and apps, the sisters have ventured into the digital world and stayed connected with audiences. And because there are no geographical limits on the internet, the sisters have reached previously unavailable families.

This is particularly true in the case of the after-school Kids Clubs which, until April last year, had been held on-site.

"That's where our borders have expanded," said Sister Gabrielle Vogl, director of the Center.

Since going online, families who couldn't make the trek to Santa Ana have joined. Even families from Canada and Georgia have joined.

This year, although they have only had 2,667 attendees for the school year, the sisters have created and played host to 73 virtual meetings, including retreats for Advent, Lent and catechism. There were also a series of lessons for second graders preparing for First Holy Communion and vocational retreats for fourth graders.

Not that it has been an entirely smooth process and the sisters admit to more than a few technological "flops" along the way.

Collectively, a team of six sisters, Paula, Gabrielle, Charis Kwon, Andrea Chiang and Susan Baschke create the online activities for kids, while Grace Yip oversees content for adults.

Activities are held in conjunction with schools. Sessions are interactive

and mimic the actual experience as nearly as possible, down to the donuts and juice in the morning. Although some presentations are prerecorded, the sisters are available for live interaction with the kids onscreen.

"You have to keep it fun and interactive," says Sister Gabrielle, who leads crafts projects. "It's fun, but when it's second graders it can be a little unpredictable."

She tells of a project where puppets were being constructed for a lesson about the prodigal son. While one girl was engrossed in the lesson, her 5-year-old sister was offscreen mimicking her sister and putting her own spin on the story.

Since going digital, the weekly af-

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THE SISTERS SHARE A VIRTUAL GREETING. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF THE SACRED HEART.

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ter-school Kids Club for third through eighth graders has turned into the biggest draw. Through mid-March, the Kids Club had held 31 meetings with 749 kids, 31 youth and 113 adults, accounting for 46 percent of the participants in the activities provided by the sisters.

“It’s taken a lot of energy,” Sister Gabrielle says of the digital transformation. “It may only be an hour long, but a lot of work goes into each production.”

The Retreat Center occupies a portion of the old ranch and lima bean fields once owned by the Borchards, and have been going strong ever since the first retreat was held in a converted garage. Since the opening, a 5,000-square foot chapel and a conference building that can accommodate up to 395 have been added.

The Sisters of the Society Devoted to the Sacred Heart were founded by Sister Ida Peterfy, who escaped Nazism

and communism in her native Hungary.

In addition to the retreats and online work, the sisters are deeply involved in prayer and prayer requests, which have taken on greater meaning and gravity in the past year.

“We’re still listening to prayer intentions,” Sister Paula said.

During the pandemic, the magnitude of requests have predictably become more intense and the sisters spend added time on the phone with those suffering or in need of added prayer.

But there is nothing quite like the work the sisters do with the kids, even if it is in a digital world.

“The Zoom meetings did bring back some of that energy and chaos,” Sister Gabrielle said. “We look forward to the day when we’re open again.”

Information on retreats and classes available at 714-557-4538 or by email at retreatcenter@sacredheartsisters.com. ✝