



So much has happened since I arrived back at Matoloko Seminary from my studies at Divine Word College in August. When I first returned to my small room attached to a large dormitory, I was one of four priests in this wing. It was very quiet because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dormitory that is usually bustling with hundreds of teenage seminarians was empty.

I spent the first two weeks in self-quarantine in my room. I tried to recreate some of the comforts I had in my room in Epworth, Iowa. I especially missed the hot water shower because Mataloko has a cool, mountain climate. So I bought a kettle in order to have warm water for my bath. Indonesian bathrooms are far different from American bathrooms. Usually in Indonesia, we fill a traditional tiled tub called a bak mandi with cold water and use a ladle called a gayung to shower. In my case, the tiled bak mandi is actually a big plastic container.

While I was away in America, the walls in my room molded due to the foggy climate here and the bathroom tiles needed a good scrub. I organized the wardrobe and added shelves, which took me a few days because I had so many books, gifts, cards, letters and memories to unpack from all of the friends I made while in Epworth.

Teaching online

Immediately after the quarantine, I started teaching in a “new normal.” There were no students in the classrooms. Instead, I sat in front of my laptop creating teaching materials I could send to my 225 junior high students through Google Classroom. Mataloko Seminary also

has a senior high school, so all together there are 606 seminarians. I felt like a fish out of water. I had no idea how to create learning materials using this method. Fr. Nani Songkares, a very experienced senior high school English teacher, took me under his wing. He constantly encouraged me to create interesting educational videos. Since our students were at home, Fr. Nani and I collaborated to produce videos related to basic skills, such as self-introductions. Through these videos, I was able to get to know all of my students by name and see their faces. By the end of the semester, we created 18 videos. Each one took several hours to produce.

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Most students do not have internet in their homes, so they had to use internet facilities at their parish priest’s house or look for other internet facilities on hills or higher places. The process of connecting to the internet was extremely time consuming. It made me miss the facilities at Divine Word College.

The search for locations with stronger internet signals to access the learning materials and submit their homework was further complicated by COVID-19 restrictions. Unfortunately, around 20 students were not able to access the online learning materials at all. In order to encourage students to learn and return their assignments on time, I sent reminders via WhatsApp groups and called each student and their parents personally. Now, we have all become good friends.

Adjusting to new guidelines

In early December 2020, the government restrictions were eased. The 606 seminarians returned to the seminary in

three batches. This created another level of “new normal” for me. I was responsible for 104 students from the first group, who returned to live in the dormitories and started their studies face-to-face, but I still had 121 students learning online. I felt constantly pulled in two directions. This lasted until late December 2020 when the remaining students returned to the seminary to live in their dormitories. I was really happy to go back to in-person teaching. Sadly, on February 1, one of our staff, Fr. Bene Daghi, passed away from COVID-19. His death pushed us to create another “new normal.” All of the lay teachers were sent home. All of the students started going to class wearing masks and doing self-study. Everyone who helped Fr. Bene during his sickness, including myself, was required to do a strict self-quarantine following his death. Since we were in close contact with him during the sacrament of anointing of the sick, we had to celebrate Mass privately during our quarantine period. I celebrated Mass on a small alter table next to my bed.

Nurturing religious vocations

After the quarantine, I worked with three other priests and two men in temporary vows to supervise 281 senior high school students living in the dormitories attached to our rooms. We taught them life skills and each day, one of us would oversee the students’ daily activities, which were done under the virtue of the five S’s: Sanctitas or holiness, Scientia or knowledge, Sapientia or wisdom, Sanitas or health, and Socialitas or social. We try to help students understand that everything they do has a reason and a purpose.

We have some activities designed to maintain and increase students’ calls to the seminarian life. They include daily writing meditation, Masses in groups celebrated in Bahasa Indonesia and English, self-reflection, Bible sharing, recollection, retreat, self-evaluation, fraternal evaluation, personal meetings with each formator, book summaries, academic seminars and Masses for opening and closing the semester.

Sharing language and culture

In January, 67 senior high school students joined English Club and I was invited to share about my experience of

studying at DWC. First, I told the students about my struggle to get an American Visa and how I had to go through the interview process five times. Then I showed them pictures of the most amazing places I saw – Divine Word properties in Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Washington D.C., New Jersey and California. I followed it up with panoramas of big cities like New York City, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas.

I could see in their eyes that the students were eager to know about the experiences I had in the USA. They asked what they would need to enter the USA, how Indonesian SVD missionaries can work happily and successfully in such a modern country and how to deal with culture shock. After that, I could see that they were more motivated to learn English. I told them I wouldn’t have gone to the United States if I didn’t take my English studies seriously. “I take every moment to improve my English, including when teaching you,” I reminded them. “Every single time I teach you I learn again. And as I am talking with you now, I am learning.”

My English also improved because all the people around me are like “wingless angels” helping me improve since I started learning the language in 1993. I truly owe a debt of gratitude to the SVD family, the students, friends and all of the teachers and professors in Indonesia, Langata College, Kenya, and Divine Word College. After coming back from Epworth, I found that my English is far better and I can express myself freely without thinking much about what to say.

Thanks to Fr. Quang Duc Dinh, SVD, Provincial of the Chicago Province, DWC President Fr. Tom Ascheman and all of the staff and professors at the college, as well as my classmates. And to all of the benefactors for your countless generosity, which made it possible for me to stay and study at DWC. Also, my thank you goes to Fr. Lukas Jua, SVD, the Provincial of Ende Province, who allowed me to study English at DWC. All of you have made me who I am now. I keep all of you in my daily prayers. May God pour down His Holy Spirit upon every one of you and let you reach your dreams for the better life of everybody.

