

Pre-Novices Bond From A Safe Distance

*For men in formation, the final year of studies at Divine Word College marks an important milestone. Known as the **pre-novitiate program**, it's designed to prepare students for the experience they'll have together the following year if they're accepted to novitiate.*

Candidates live together in the Arkfeld House, just a short walk from the main building on campus. This year, things look a little different for the pre-novices as they attempt to build personal connections while abiding by the college's safety guidelines to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19.

"Because of COVID, we try to limit some of our activities that involve meeting or gathering," said Formator Fr. Sonny DeClass, SVD, who oversees the program. Still, it's his job to help the men develop connections.

"We build community life among us, knowing each other closely and nurturing our spiritual relationship with Jesus," he said. "The pre-novices have to bear in mind that one of the characteristics of religious life is community life, living together." Wisno Elie is on track to complete his coursework this winter, so he's had the

unique experience of spending three semesters in the Arkfeld House. After graduation, he plans to study theology at the Theologate in Chicago for the remainder of the academic year before rejoining the other pre-novices next August to embark on the novitiate year together.

Having experienced the pre-novitiate program last year, Wisno described this year as "completely different." In the past, the groups met in a small chapel inside their house for shared meditation before Mass. Since the intimate space doesn't allow for social distancing, this year they gather in larger spaces in the main building.

Wisno said he misses crowding around the dining table with his classmates to discuss topics like philosophy and theology over daily meals. He also longs to greet his friends with handshakes and hugs, as is

customary in his Haitian culture. Despite many new restrictions, the pre-novices have found creative ways to build their fraternal connections while maintaining social distance, like Bible sharing, morning prayer, formation meetings and adoration.

"It's hard. I wanted to enjoy my last semester more by being closer with people," Wisno said. "It's something that we did not expect, but this is life."

These unexpected challenges present a unique opportunity for personal growth. Wisno said he and the other students are learning to adapt to uncomfortable and sometimes difficult circumstances, and those are skills that will serve them well as Divine Word Missionaries. "I think the group has a positive spirit," Fr. Sonny said. "And I can see that they all bond together, work together and support each other."



Top: Phuc Truong, Hoang Do, Tung Vu, Wisno Elie, Nam Nguyen

Bottom: Truong An Nguyen, Tuan Hoang Nguyen, Formator Fr. Sonny DeClass, SVD and Friday Onoja