

# Did you know?

by the Venezuelan Mission of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis



## School Days, School Days

No school buses are running this week here in San Felix, Venezuela. It's not just that classes have been suspended due to the coronavirus as in Minnesota. There are no school buses here. Everyone walks. Moms and dads walk younger kids to school in the morning and return for them after classes. High school students commonly walk a mile or more. On a typical school morning, streets are a sea of uniforms. Every school, public or private, has uniform pants, skirts and shirts, many emblazoned with their logo. You can tell where each child attends by their uniform, but whether a given child is from the wealthiest or the poorest family at their school, you can't tell. They all take pride in their appearance, and moms from even the poorest families make sure their kids leave the house well-groomed, uniforms washed and neatly pressed.



To hold down construction costs, most elementary schools here have double shifts with one group of students and teachers in the morning and another in the afternoon. In 1999 Venezuela initiated a program called "Escuelas Bolivarianas" to enhance students' education with all-day (7:30am to 3pm) sessions, a more interactive and creative learning approach with basic subjects oriented to weekly themes, and cultural emphasis with classes in music and dance. A school in one of our poorer barrios was one of some 500 selected from around the

country. All students received tablet computers. A nutritious breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack were provided every day. The hope was that, in time, all elementary schools would become Escuelas Bolivarianas.

The faltering Venezuelan economy in recent years has taken a heavy toll on education. The last time students received tablets was six years ago. Food supplies are so limited that students receive a snack at best, nothing more than rice with some flavoring or an arepa (cornmeal patty) with chicha (a rice beverage). With no meal provided, the school day now ends before noon. Schools receive no government support for equipment or maintaining facilities, tasks now left up to parents. Teachers receive less pay in a month than a 16-year old in Minnesota makes in one hour at McDonald's. Many teachers have quit. One elementary school here has lost over half its teaching staff with no teachers left in some grades. As you can imagine, those who have stayed are some pretty dedicated teachers for whom educating children is more of a vocation than a job.

How is "distance learning" working out in your area? It's pretty amazing what modern technology has made possible. I have heard that many teachers in Minnesota have gotten very creative teaching all the subjects, even art, music and physical education, facilitating class meetings and small groups, and keeping in personal contact with parents and students online. Thank God students' education can continue in this way. Schools here are trying to provide direction for students as well, but very few students have access to the internet. Parents go to school to copy down homework assignments posted by teachers and turn in the assignments from the previous week. Kids are spending lots of hours on their school work. I don't know if they're working harder being at home, but their parents and grandparents, now homeschool teachers, certainly are!

Public schools here aren't as strict about separation of church and state as in the United States. Fr. Greg and I were invited to do graduation Masses and beginning of the year prayer services at all the elementary and high schools. Before in-school classes were suspended, I was regularly visiting classrooms at several schools, by invitation of principals and teachers, with a brief lesson applying faith to their lives. Students were so respectful and their participation was amazing. If I asked a question, they all responded. If I lead a song, they all sang. If I emphasized something in a song with hand gestures, they would all begin copying my gestures without my prompting. If I paused for a moment while saying a prayer, they usually began echoing the words. As much as kids probably miss being at school with their friends at this time, I miss the contact with them as well. I look forward to the days past social distancing and distance learning returning to normal school life again.

### Points to ponder

How have the benefits of modern technology been a blessing for you during this time?

On the other hand, how has this time provided the incentive for a simpler, more traditional way of life?

*The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at [ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org](mailto:ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org) or 651-368-7324.*