

Pandemic prompts FOCUS to take missionary efforts, outreach online

DENVER (CNS) – As the coronavirus has caused normal gatherings for prayer, sacraments and fellowship to be suspended or sharply limited across the U.S., the Fellowship of Catholic University Students has temporarily shifted its mission and outreach to support students, chaplains, alumni and benefactors online.

“We’re hosting online Bible studies and use a video platform to pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet every day at 3 p.m.,” said Belen Loza, a missionary at Columbia University, in describing some examples of how FOCUS missionaries have maintained prayer and fellowship with students virtually.

“We’re not able to meet with students in the dining hall for a meal or grab coffee with them, but it hasn’t changed our mission to reach out to them, to spend time with them, to pray with them,” she said in a statement.

In mid-March, FOCUS as an organization made the transition from in-person Bible studies and discipleship to digital outreach through online platforms.

The FOCUS Digital Campus – <https://focusoncampus.org/campus/digital-campus> – includes a team of missionaries who typically provide Bible study resources, discipleship and mentoring to students on non-FOCUS campuses. The “campus” recently hosted multiple live online training sessions to guide on-campus missionaries through its resources and equip them on how to continue conducting Bible studies, discipleship and meetings with students through video chats and other virtual venues.

FOCUS said its missionaries have continued to connect with students and provide the space for them to have community with peers, discuss concerns about present circumstances, reflect on the Scriptures and share personal prayer requests.

“As a kind of stupor descended upon Cambridge (Massachusetts), the Harvard Catholic Center through the Harvard FOCUS missionary team responded immediately,” Father Eric Cadin, of the Archdiocese of Boston, said after the campus closed.

Team members “organized a powerful farewell for the seniors and set up meetings nonstop with their students and disciples,” the priest said. “Peter Nguyen, the FOCUS team director, and the other missionaries began to pray immediately.

“Within minutes, a disposition of confusion and chaos transformed into rejoicing in anticipation of what extraordinary, new and awesome thing Jesus was going to do in this time.”

FOCUS missionaries have reported highly positive responses from students to the digital outreach, according to a news release.

“Although the COVID-19 shutdown has been very difficult at times, we’ve seen many fruitful moments,” said Katt Janelle, team director at the University of Southern California. “One student said ‘yes’ to the Gospel and making Jesus the center of her life (over Zoom)!”

To serve alumni, benefactors, partners and other groups, FOCUS created a page of resources for those isolated by the COVID-19 pandemic – <https://focusoncampus.org/covid>. The page includes links for livestreamed Masses; weekly video reflections from FOCUS national chaplains; a prayer request submission link; and recommendations for blog posts, video/audio recordings, books, movies and podcasts “for those seeking to pursue personal formation and faith-centered leisure.”

Other online efforts include virtual alumni gatherings; a webinar with FOCUS leadership to discuss “the present moment of opportunity for evangelization”; and an “Easter Fervorino” with interviews with well-known Catholic speakers, time for prayer, eucharistic adoration and worship music with Sarah Kroger.