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*In Christ, through the
shedding of his blood,
we have redemption and
forgiveness of our sins.*

Ephesians 1: 7a

Going Back to School, but Remotely

Editor's note: Fr. James Smith, C.P.P.S., is a first-year student at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, Calif., and lives in Sonnino Mission House. He hopes to obtain a doctoral degree in theology, focusing on pastoral theology and care. From 2016–20, he served in the St. Henry, Ohio, Cluster, including the past three years as parochial vicar. We asked him a few questions about his new life and times.

How has it been settling back into the academic life?

This is the first time in my life that I have taken classes online. Due to COVID-19, most universities in California have switched to online classes for the fall and likely for the spring. GTU is affiliated with Cal-Berkeley, so GTU tends to follow the lead from Berkeley.

As with doing anything new or for the first time, it's nearly impossible to compare it. My undergrad was at Saint Joe, which was a very traditional college experience, though with only about 1,000 students. One of the rich things of my graduate work at CTU (Catholic Theological Union in Chicago) and my work at GTU now is the diversity, both religiously and culturally. The landscape of

the Church or ministry can be a little bit like blinders in seeing just what's in front of you. In my group of first-year students at GTU this year, almost a quarter of the incoming students are from China or Korea. In my concentration in practical theology, I believe I am the only white guy, which is quite different from parish ministry, yet reflective of where the bulk of the work in the field is being done.

Your classes are all online. Are you missing the give-and-take of the classroom?

Conversations on Zoom are not the same as in person. However, the mute button is really nice. As I mentioned to parishioners in St. Henry when we began streaming, I hoped they would like the Masses a lot more because if they didn't like what I was preaching, they could just mute the livestream and then unmute it after I finished preaching. The ten-step commute from my bedroom to my office for online classes is



Fr. James Smith is now a student at GTU in Berkeley (above), but seldom sets foot on campus, due to COVID-19.

the most convenient I've ever had.

One of the goals of theology and religious studies is to be connected to what normal people experience, something lofty academics sometimes lose sight of. The COVID-19 pandemic has inserted a lot of inconvenience into the lives of everyone. Classes on Zoom and no in-person school stuff is inconvenient, but it's not the same level of inconvenience most people are experiencing around work, family and the
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