

# Innovative EDUCATION



By S. Mary Bodde

Getting certified or earning a degree online may seem like a tech future, but not to S. Rita Hawk. She is facilitating a section in each of two courses in the Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation out of the University of Dayton's Institute for Pastoral Initiatives (IPI).

"I feel so blessed!" S. Rita said. "When I retired – with teaching and catechetics in my DNA – I wondered what I could do. The director of the IPI, S. Angela Ann Zukowski, MSHS, who had been my project director when I got my master's at the University of Dayton in 1981, called to invite me to be a facilitator of online courses for students seeking certification."

S. Rita has 14 students in her Old Testament course and nine in the Introduction to Scripture. With a focus on a learning community, each session appearing online includes an introduction to the topics and a discussion question that students are to answer online. The university provides the facilitator with a guide and any materials needed, including discussion questions, quizzes (and their answers), plus directions on how to proceed.

"I can access the materials from any computer – in case something happens to mine," S. Rita explained. "They also include an introduction to the session, its objectives and requirements for the week. Each week opens with a quiz or a discussion question; a reading assignment (in the textbook that each student purchases); and 'learnings and practices.' The first posting is an answer to a discussion question. At least two more postings are required for the two discussion boards each week for five weeks. And I can't wait to turn on my computer!"

"In the beginning students meet as if it were 'around the drinking fountain' for chit-chat and to learn about each other," S. Rita said. "They come from Italy, Germany, Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, etc. One couple, Enid and Sergio, were en route; she was in Dubai the first week, then London, and both are together now in Rome, and they still participate!"

"I am inspired by the involvement of these students, especially on military bases," S. Rita added. "They are

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directors of religious education, teachers, RCIA directors; others enroll to enrich their own faith. I get a sense of the universality of the Church. One, a 17-year career Army officer in Germany, grew up in Dayton; a woman from the Diocese of Camden, N.J., is a seventh-grade teacher in a public school; another woman is a licensed practical nurse."

Additional postings online are interactions within the group. They try to bring the Old Testament reality into the current situation and "sometimes get off the subject," S. Rita noted. She puts her English teacher experience to good use asking a student, for instance, 'Could you talk to me some more about that?' so all can understand what the student is trying to say.

Besides clarifying their communications, a big challenge for S. Rita – and for all the students – is *time*. She usually has 40 or more e-mails to address daily. Each week she completes a checklist of all that has to be done by each student. At the end of the course she 'scores' each student, who chooses to be evaluated, with 'good,' 'very good' or 'distinguished.'

More than 50 dioceses, such as Samoa, Honolulu, Hawaii, and Detroit, Mich., have partnered with the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives. Ohio dioceses include Cincinnati, which piloted the first program in 1996, and Cleveland. Each diocese makes an investment so that students pay \$40 per course instead of the usual \$90, plus textbook fees.

S. Rita says she can hardly wait for her next two courses to begin. She will facilitate Introduction to Catechesis for 14 students from such places as Rome, Italy, Washington, D.C., Washington state and New Jersey. She also will facilitate a New Testament course for 10 students from the Archdiocese of Miami, Fla.

"While each student can expect to spend five to seven hours each week, I will spend 20 to 30 hours responding to messages, contributing to the discussions and encouraging some who haven't taken a class for many years or who are taking an online course for the first time. I love it!" Sister exclaimed.