

Fr. Bob Thames January 2016 Newsletter

Family, All of you! I pray that God continues to bless all of you with unity at home and a willing spirit of help to others, especially in this year of Mercy for our Catholic Church Community!

I arrived back in Bolivia this past Tuesday, 26 Jan. after a time of some 9 days, two weekends, in the U. S. The trip was quick, but I have scheduled another for April to continue to seek help for our educational services and our pastoral work in some 50 plus communities in this area. I am so appreciative of being well-received by all, especially Bishop Olsen, during this trip. And God blessed us with some mild winter weather in North Texas, unlike some other areas that suffered the big snow and cold. I am so aware of the unity of us here with all of you there, how the Holy Spirit puts us together in common causes, with unified purpose of loving mercy for others in need.

For this letter I include a report of our educational services that perhaps many of you have received already, but others may not have seen. This report is updated to December 2015. So this letter may be a little longer than others.

Education in the Parish of Nuestra Señora del Carmen Cabezas

First we can ask, "Why have we decided on the service of education?" It is an effective way to help poor people. First, education enables people to stand on their own two feet in the future; they know how to earn their own way in our sophisticated world. They do not need ongoing support while contributing to improve lives of others in the society around them. Secondly, people can decide for themselves what is best for them and their country, which makes it harder to be manipulated by unscrupulous demagogues or leaders. More than that, it is a tradition of the Catholic Church to be in education as a way to help people -- at least from the year 265 AD (after Christ). (Confer St. Athanasius' life of St. Anthony of the Desert).

We believe from our faith in Jesus Christ that every person is a gift from God for the good of the entire community (1 Corinthians 12:7). Each person is a unique richness offered by God for the good of their brothers and sisters. For the progress of a people it is necessary that ALL people are developed to contribute to the common good. Each person uneducated or who lacks a complete education cannot give their bit for the good of all. So we must find ways for all area youth and adults to have the opportunity to study. In our municipal area or county there are more than 60 communities and most communities do not have courses through 8th grade -- much less to a high school diploma. (Only 6 towns have high schools apart from our own.) At the same time there are many families in which there are not enough resources for books, school supplies, and money needed to buy clothes for school. Apart from that, there are many communities in other municipalities with the same circumstances (single mothers, children of separated parents abandoned into the hands of poor grandparents, and families made poor by sickness, etc. About 60% up to 70% of our regular high school students are from broken families.) So we look for the most remote and poorest young people to offer our services. Too, there are many adults who did not have the opportunity to study as children who now need ways to complete their development. Being followers of Jesus Christ we have to look for those who most need our help.

To overcome these difficulties we have provided the following services:

1. IFRA program with Radio Santa Cruz (Catholic station) offers primary education for adults that had no opportunity to finish primary grades in their younger years.
2. We have two houses with food and lodging for elementary school children who live far from any school, or those who need help paying for education expenses (There were 48 in Mora and 18 students in 2015.)
3. There is a boarding school from the sixth primary grade through high school for those who live far from any school with courses they need or do not have the resources necessary for study. (There were about 360 students in 2015) This school offers technical and humanistic courses, now required by Bolivian law. We furnish school text books and library reference books, and for those who need them, we have free school supplies, uniforms, medical care, and food with lodging. (All countries south of the border with the U.S. do not furnish books for any students, so all families must buy books for their kids -- an expense that prevents many young people from studying.)
4. There is an alternative or high school education program for adults or CEITHA (Center integral humanistic accelerated technical education) in 7 locations for those who could not study as teenagers. There were 465 students this year in all its locations and classes, both humanistic and technical. It is a GED program with technical branches. This year we offered agriculture with veterinary and beekeeping, sewing, natural medicine with first aid, auto mechanic, executive secretary, gastronomy, accounting, special industrial food preparation, physical therapy, folk dancing, and classical music with violin, guitar, and keyboard. There were 11 courses in all. Some students took two, others few, and some up to three technical courses to prepare for their future.
5. There is a technical institute with 4 careers: agriculture, veterinary, beekeeping (including all animals, bees, grains, vegetables, and forestry) to the level of senior technical and middle technical, and clothes making to the middle technical degree. (We want to extend the offer to auto mechanic, accounting, and industrial food processing). Actually, all the areas work together and students can take courses in any of the areas they would like, including folks who have no basic education but want to learn a profession. But only high school graduates will receive a degree, others receive only a certificate of formation. Fortunately our employers here only want to know if the person can do the job, not see a degree/diploma.

To expand our number of technical courses we need our own center or buildings. All our programs are now offered in the high school area, where we use the same spaces 7 days a week. The Ministry of Education has promised to augment our offering of careers when we have our own buildings for the technical institute. (We are in a process of working to do this at present). All technical courses offered are open to all students and adults from throughout the area, and as we offer educational services for the poorest. We give our services free of charge with only some materials asked of the students if the schools do not have them. Again we are the only

technical schools that exist in our rural area for over 100 miles (some 140 kilometers) around us, which is so essential for the development of our area -- an area that has much poverty. Here over half of the population is on subsistence living. Especially the vulnerable who are most in need (Single households, sickness caused poverty, and elderly grandparents raising abandoned children).

6. This past year (2015) we had a psychologist and sociologist with us, but this year (2016) we will only have a psychological pedagogue who will help with personal problems and how to study better. I do not know if this profession exists in the U. S.

7. There is special education (students with brain damage and learning difficulties) serving some 30 students from Cabezas, Abapó, Rio Seco, San Lorenzo, and Mora, where there are centers. So far this year of 2016 we enrolled all of last year's students, plus 3 new ones. Our special education teachers also are helping with students with learning difficulties in the public school of Mora and Cabezas one day a week. Now with our center of physical therapy we will begin giving physical therapy to those little students to see if we can help them have better movement of limbs. My hope is that our second year physical therapy students will help as practice.

8. There are 2 houses for university students in Santa Cruz (northeast of Cabezas) and Camirí (southwest of Cabezas) where there are units of the State University of Santa Cruz. Here high school students can continue their studies at the university level or in an institute. (I do not know the number of students yet but we can accommodate some 70 students). We give lodging, but no food.

We now are serving just over 1100 students, adding up all the programs. (Some students are taking two to three technical courses, which makes this number add up to over 1300.) This does not include numbers in public primary schools we help as slow learners. We have now graduated with high school diplomas some 748 students counting teenagers and adults (December 2015). We are the only boarding school in the whole area, receiving students from some 6 municipal areas (municipality is an area about twice the size of our counties). We have the only special education program with specialized teachers in the whole department (understand "state" in U. S. terms). Special education just has not arrived in the Eastern part of Bolivia, and two of the 4 teachers are graduates of our high school, including the principal. Some 60% of our high school graduates or more go on to some higher learning either in a university or specialized institute. Of the public schools only some 5% go to higher studies in our area. All our programs are recognized and validated by the Ministry of Education.

Because all technical courses in Bolivia are 70% practice and only 30% classroom or theory, our students have the possibility of practice in producing, processing, and selling. We ask of the students in all levels to donate time of practice to help make something that can be sold, which gain goes to support our educational work. This donated time is their contribution to our schools. Our overall goal is to make possible work in the rural area so that young people will not migrate of necessity to the city where much violence exists with the overcrowding.

All this has been made possible by all of you there who so generously provide for our needs. I pray daily that Our Lord will grant you the happiness with unity of family and sense of worth that comes from Faith in Jesus Christ.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames