

## February Newsletter 2016 Fr. Bob Thames

A beautiful day for us, as it began to rain this morning about 7 AM and continues now at 10. We really needed the rain. Normally here February is a dry month after rains in January and again in March. Bugs have eaten some of our crops, but we yet go along fairly well. It is Saturday, 27 Febr. and our house is full of kids who have stayed the weekend, both boys and girls, mostly the younger ones from what we would call junior high. They will try to cook a meal, either for noon or their supper. This will include meat, the one day we are able, while I maintain my vegetables. About 8 to 10 bigger boys went to the farm land we bought last year to the northwest of here, to continue the repair of fences so that our neighbors' cattle won't eat our crops. Now I am wondering if they will make it back today, maybe not even tomorrow, as they must pass two rivers without bridges, that is, if it is raining there also, which is probably. It also rained last weekend there, a lot of rain that made the rivers impossible to cross for two days.

School has started off rather slowly, with one week of school, then carnival, the big feast here in Bolivia that runs 4 days prior to Ash Wednesday. Even if some company ordered their employees to work, probably no one would show up, it is that important and practiced by custom. So no school on Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. And this year the teachers in our school asked and received permission from the district superintendent not to work on Ash Wednesday, so we ran our trucks on that afternoon and early Thursday. The Monday of Febr. 22 was to be a holiday, as national elections to change the constitution was held on the Sunday before. We had school to replace Ash Wednesday. Our technical courses are just now getting started. A lot of the slowness is due to our principal from the last 3 years resigning to rejoin her husband in La Paz where he works for the Catholic Conference. They have several grown kids, but also one young daughter of 8 yrs. who needs both parents, so with pressure from her family she reluctantly moved to the capital city, some 16 hours by bus to the northwest of here. This required some rapid reorganization on the part of the teachers to name one of their own to be principal until a new one steps up. As of now we are yet waiting. Our school secretary also went to Santa Cruz to finish her studies in business administration, so a new secretary has been found also. We have a few less students than last year, but more live-in students in the dorms than for several years back. I had thought we might lose a teacher's salary, but the minister of education has ordered all schools to have a maximum of 30 students in a room, so we actually could use another teacher or so. We yet lack a music teacher even though we have the salary from the government waiting.

(now Tuesday, March 1) Some special news this year. We have two university graduates from the U. S. here as volunteers for 3 months, one giving English classes at night. This may sound strange, but English being the international language for commerce, it is not only sought after, but is obligatory in all high schools. Becoming proficient in another language is hard when one is not in the place where the language is spoken often. But we have many students from the school and many adults (teachers, just folks from town) who are signed up. (See below on new computers with ear phones.) The other young woman is a graduate in organic agriculture, who has come with the first one. This last one spent time in Chile last year or two years back. These two are both graduates of the University of Vermont, but one is native near Washington, DC and the other one is from Atlanta, Ga. The contact with them goes back to my time in Cd. Juarez

when the Dad of the first one came to spend the summer in 1986 along with a nephew of mine. It is now his daughter who wants some similar experience.

Another difference this year is the presence of two university graduating seniors (one young man and one young woman) from Bolivia in agriculture, with a specialty in veterinarian science. They are doing their 5 month practice required here before receiving their degree in June. They bring new things for us, practices that have helped us in both the areas of the hogs and the cows. I am hoping that this becomes a yearly event as it brings us more closely in contact with the state university with people who know the latest studies in the areas we need to stay up on for our own production and for our students. The young man is the nephew of a woman who works with us, and the young woman is a friend, both of whom are the top students in their graduating class this year.

Now to the new computers for our school. Our old ones in use have been from mostly 2008, surely a relic in our days. The old ones have been kept in repair, but still difficult and slow. With some special help from the U. S. and some money from our funds here, we have been able to get the new ones. The news ones are 17 in number but we will try to sell the older ones with good parts taken from one or another, to make a fairly good one. Then use the money to buy the other 3 to make 20. The course of English will use the new computers for the course with ear phones to help learn good pronunciation, a real challenge for people who never hear the language spoken by regular users of the language.

Another note on fewer students this year. When we began our school in 2004, there were only two high schools in the municipality of Cabezas. Now there are 5 others, and one in the district to the southeast of here, another to the southwest of Cabezas. But still students keep coming to us. These are the poorer ones who need help, the very ones our school was made to assist. So our numbers have held rather steady despite the other high schools. And our number of adult students in our high school course have gone up dramatically. This is due to the realization among our population of the need of a high school diploma, as more and more work places are asking for this diploma on their work applications.

Again this Holy Week our kids who volunteer will head out prepared to spend their free time helping with Holy Week Services in various communities, mostly far off the paved road. They will be helped this year by another catholic high school in the city who wants to bring some 60 graduating seniors to share in this same experience. Actually I am not sure we will need so many. Now with us so many years in pastoral, so many of our communities have folks who can handle their own celebrations with help from us. At present I am the only priest in the parish, with us working some 50 villages in all. The other priest, Padre Wily Flores, was ordered by his bishop back to his own diocese (with its 13,000 ft. altitude). He came here with problems of his heart because of the altitude, which his new bishop does not accept. We will see how he will last there without serious health problems. I give him 6 months, but hopefully no real problems before his bishop accepts his condition, so as not to put his life at risk his.

This is lent and a time of deepening in our relationship with Jesus Christ, so my reflection will be along those lines. Also it is the theme of my sermons in these days so this has been on mind, for others and for myself. Looking back into the Old Testament there are the 10 commandments, the

center of the Faith of the Jewish people, and our own beginnings too. These are written rules that form a whole that can touch much of our life, even today. One of the details that we notice reading these rules is the emphasis on “do not” do such and such, although this is not universal. But with Jesus Christ coming and our Faith in Him as our Redeemer/Savior and Our God we are obligated to go beyond the 10 commandments. Our law or rule now is a Living Person, not written rules. Jesus, talking to the apostles and other early followers, told us through them that to live these Old Testament principles only is not enough. These the Pharisees kept, at least in the exterior, and Jesus said they were not justified by this (Matthew 5,20). It is Jesus Who now is our Rule, so it is He that we must study, and study, and getting into prayer, ever deeper, to arrive at a reflection as in a mirror of this Person, now living in us, and making Himself visible in the world through us, His Body. By study, prayer, fasting, and finally total abandonment to the Father’s Will as reflected in the Life of Jesus, and then passed on to us, we become God’s visibility. This is especially needed in our world today, not any of the watered-down and false images of Jesus seen so much in pictures and popular religious folklore in our midst among Catholics as well as Protestants. We have so much conformed Jesus to our lifestyle and mentality that we have no need to change anything in our lives to say outwardly that we are Catholic or of this or that Christian Faith. And no one will question us, as all our society, our world, accepts this with few exceptions. Pope Francis would be at the head of these exceptions, called to a task that seems too big to be accomplished in a lifetime, much less in a short papacy. But we are not alone, as the task is God-given, God-driven. We all should want to be a part of that, which means more seriously studying, more seriously praying, more seriously fasting (real positive mortification, YES). All of this so that Jesus Christ be formed in us as ST. Paul says (Galatians 2,19-20 and Galatians 4,19). It is not too much to say that we need to be consumed in Jesus Christ, to be passionate for Jesus Christ. If we love those around us, there is no better way to love them than to be a saint for them. This is the goal, the deeper purpose of lent.

May Our God bless all of you with His Spirit.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Fr. Bob Thames