

May Newsletter 2016

Fr. Bob Thame

Greetings on this rather cold, rainy day in Cabezas, as we enter our winter season with an early start. Cold for us is around the upper 50's to lower 60's, but the very wet, almost constant misting rain makes it feel so much colder. I am surprised that we have had very few colds and no flu so far, even though some of our kids put on light jackets or some just short sleeve shirts, both girls and boys. It makes this old man feel cold just seeing them. We really have not had a sunny day since the middle of May, and even then only two days. Since April we have been in this mode.

Mothers' Day (May 27) is a really big feast here in Bolivia, with the public school even canceling classes that day. We of course had our school and a big program with a lot of mothers, and whole families of the kids attend. There was the usual folk dancing and skits highlighting the role of mothers and their place in our world. I as always really enjoyed it, spending the 3 hours plus attending. The extra events that have come in these last few years is the raffling of food baskets with free tickets given to the mothers, some 14 or so with the teachers adding some money gifts that also went with the winning tickets. It was long this year, longer than usual, but I never noticed the time myself and evidently no one else seemed to either. The variety was well placed and kept the attention. Empanadas and chichi (non-fermented corn drink) was served twice to everyone who attended (except the students). I keep boasting that Bolivia has maintained much more of its original Indian culture than other countries, with customs and dress, that continues to show the beauty of the early tribes of people who lived in this land. All of this comes out at festival time. I would invite all of you who would like to see this all the more to come on our bigger Independence Day (August 6) celebration that we usually have on the day or two before. We have in our clothing workshop native dress of some 13 different cultures, worth seeing. But some of older kids save and rent even more elaborate dress from the city. Of course, I am prejudiced to our kids and our things that we do.

People who have come from the U. S. have eaten in our kitchen and to my knowledge no one has ever gotten sick from our food. When the bird flu was rampant, world-wide several years back, we did not have one case here. One thing that helps us here is that all our food is prepared fresh each day, no leftovers thrown in. But nevertheless the municipal government is taking us a step further now asking all who prepare food for public consumption to get a health card that certifies them free of any disease that could affect the quality of the food prepared. Our cooks and bread makers will be included in that. Actually we have been considering this for other reasons, and are happy that our local hospital can now grant these cards with the various tests required. Our ulterior motives are our gastronomy projects, not only teaching students the commercial preparation of food to be sold, but also our actual production of food for our own selling to help us here. We have brought our cheese, sausage, pastry and bread preparation areas to the health standards of the state, and are ready to have our processing procedures certified so that our products can be sold in a wider area, and hopefully our bee honey can even be exported, maybe to Europe. A friend of ours who supports us in the city knows personally a man who exports honey, but we need to meet all the requirements first for that. Here in southern Latin America Argentina and Brazil dominate the food production market, but Bolivia has a large capacity for food production and our own processing experience could make our kids well prepared to enter into this after graduation with or without further training/study. An added note to all this is that we are having butane gas installed in all our kitchens and gastronomy areas, including the small kids' dorms in Cabezas and our living area in Mora. There is much bureaucracy in any and all processes so I have no idea when this might be reality, but we are in the process.

I must apologize for an error in my talks when in the U. S. in April. I said that Claudia who is having her legs lengthened was about or less than 3 feet tall. Actually she was over 4 feet tall and now with the lengthening process will leave her close 5 feet when all is finished. Because of the pain and time involved she might decide after August not to have the second phase done on her legs. But she will be some 6 inches taller anyway with special shoes that come at the end. Someone just told me this week that Lionel Messi, the famous soccer star, one of the best in the world, had this operation when he was young so as to be taller. I am not up on these things, but telling Claudia this animated her, as you can imagine. For all those who are not knowledgeable of these things of world soccer, Lionel Messi is one of the top soccer stars in the world, and is a native of Argentina, so a hero and well known in Bolivia. Secondly the process used was started at Scott and White Hospital in Temple, Texas where our doctor learned of the process.

Corpus Christi is a national holiday in the mostly (although dwindling in percentages) catholic country. In Santa Cruz as I have mentioned in past years, there is a large gathering of people in the big soccer stadium (holding about 35,000 or there about). The archbishop gives the Mass with much spectacular display of coordinated movement of colorful costumes of students from the various catholic high schools. Even though we had school that day (our holiday transferred to this Friday, June 3) our confirmation students went with other folks from various towns in our big truck. They arrived back at 11:30 PM, cold and wet, but they enjoyed it anyway. Don't have exact figures, not really looking to investigate either, but there seems to be some 1150 to 1200 students this year involved in all our programs. The largest number is in our adult high school program, a type of GED school, which has some 465 students. Our Jr.-Sr. high program is second with about 395 at present. I am not sure of the number of students in our two university houses in Santa Cruz and Camiri. I am most proud of our special education program with 32 students in our classes and helping with some 42 other slow learners in the public school. Our scholarship program only helps those of primary and Jr.-Sr. high school programs, but we continue to be a major force in education in our area, taking the most disadvantaged young people to prepare them to contribute to our society at large.

Our spiritual formation program is now being strengthened in our Jr.-Sr. high school with a psychologist who also has theological/spiritual formation, and we are establishing a small chapel in the school that will offer a place to pray and reflect, with sessions to bring students to deeper faith. The bible readings of the day and a book open with the saint of the day will be there too. We try to follow Jesus Christ more closely in our work to search out and bring here those who are most in need and have no other way to get education. We have all those who have fallen through the cracks in the regular system. All of these flows out from our relationship with Our Lord Who has shown the way and continues to lead us through our pope and local church.

I will tell of Marita, (little Mary), whom I mentioned in my talks while in the U. S. She is from the village of St. Isidro II (there are 3 St. Isidro's). Her family has 3 kids, an older sister of Marita, and her younger brother. Marita was born without hearing, which has now been taken care of somewhat with a hearing aid in her left ear, awaiting another when the money comes available. An organization in La Paz gave the first one; the second one must be bought. Marita is 12 years old in the 7th grade, from a family who lives on 24 acres of land, her father being crippled and limited in his ability to work. Each time I have Mass in that area they come in their horse-drawn wagon with neighbors loaded on also. The family origin is the state further to the west not far from Sucre, the legal capital of Bolivia. Land available is what brings folks from the west to our area and is the reason the family came. We have put Marita into our special education program for one year so that she can begin almost from zero with special attention with only 5 students per teacher. I visited Thursday AM to find Marita already hearing and pronouncing letters with their sounds, so as to learn to read, now at 12 years old.

I would like to end this letter by reflecting on the root of our human weakness. The story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 offers us a biblical understanding of our human condition, however we want to understand it, as real history or as an early Hebrew story that was formed to explain how we came to be as we are. At the very root of our weakness is our pride that wants us to be equal to Our God (the core of the devil's temptation), letting us decide what is good and evil, so as not to follow what Our Lord tells us for our own good. This so evident trait in our world today is seen most in our making of money with its political and social power as our god (Pope Francis in the encyclical "Laudate Si", on climate, but I can't find my marked copy right now). This of course is not new to human history. Economic expansion in territory seems to be the reason behind so many wars, small and great, since we humans have lived on this planet earth from rock throwers to nuclear bomb loaded missiles. I pray for peace in the South China Sea where expansion threatens trade that keeps so many nations eating. But my concern first is for the family world-wide whose fragility is first seen in pride (whose word rules, who decides what and how we spend our money) that causes friction in our homes and insecurity in our children, so many times leading to open warfare and separation. For good reason HUMILITY and HUMBLE SERVICE is at the root of sanctity, the model shown to us in Jesus Christ, Whose Total Giving on the Cross is told so meditatively in the ancient Christian hymn of Philippians 2, 5-11. Worth our prayer time, double and over, so God's Spirit in Grace can calm our high-horse and let us rest firmly on the ground of service without looking for our own good.

May Our God Bless All of You.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames