

July 2016 Newsletter
Fr. Bob Thames

Family all of you, Here is the July letter, a little late, but hopefully insightful. I hope it finds all of you well and growing in Spirit of Jesus Christ!

Here on this 6th day of August, a Saturday, the young folks of the school are all yet here. It is Independence Day for Bolivia and there is an obligatory marching in procession in honor of the country and in front of all the elected government, and anyone else that belongs to some or other organization that wants to parade. I do not go, as they always want me to be up in front on their stand above the crowd. This just does not fit in with what I read in the Gospels of Jesus. It seems to me that today especially a Church with public recognition as an institution is not what Pope Francis is trying to generate. A humble, servant Church is closer to Jesus of the Gospels and this is what I hope and pray is the image that our people receive from our way of acting in the public view. Last night there was the regular candle light parade of all the students from 6th grade on up as well, and the military regiment and its marching band. But the morning parade is bigger with primary grades, the military regiment, and any and all organizations and associations, civic, social, and commercial, who want to show off a little. It can last several hours in the hot sun, another reason I don't go.

However, another reason this day is that a 10 month old baby died in a local community and the funeral is at 10 AM today. I almost always put funerals as priority over other things. Death is a time for reflecting on our Faith in Jesus, Crucified and Resurrected, the main pillar of our Belief in Our God as God has revealed to us. I don't want to miss an opportunity for explaining this, helping us overcome our materialized, positivistic weaknesses in modern society, world-wide. Our material home, visible and so comfortable for many of us (not for all), is just temporary, so short in terms of our actual existence which is destined to extend into eternity, without end. We just have to break the barrier of non-belief. For me death is the perfect time when folks are more open to listen to the bigger Reality of Life- After-Death brought by Jesus. Maria Laura, the student of our school who was killed in an auto accident last year gave me much time and interest to try to get this across to our students. I recently celebrated her one year anniversary in her home village at the end of June.

When I was in the U. S, I had a chance to meet with a professor of economics at Texas Christian University of Fort Worth, who has heard me speak at a local parish so many times over the years. She is interested in doing a study to see if our students with some faith-based influence live out better those faith-based values after graduation in contrast with non-faith schools. It is very interesting for me also. So today we have made contact with as many graduates of our school as we could to have a meeting here to get names, addresses, telephone numbers, and internet addresses, so that contact can be made for personal interviews beginning next year in March (2017). I am a little bit nervous as the

study may find that we have not been as successful as we would like to believe, but I am willing to find out. It could be that she will publish her findings in a book, which could be a way of spreading our way of doing things if it is found to be effective.

It is now Sunday, and after the meeting with the students, talking with individual ones, I found out that there already exists a network of students, mostly who came for some time, but never graduated, yet made some real friendships that have lasted through a page on Facebook. There are two groups, one of 952 associates (right word?) (Started in 2010) and another 323 members (started 2009). If you think I don't know much about what I am talking about, you are right. But it just seems unimaginable to me that the bonds made here, going back to 2004 by so many have held steady and continues to increase with this line of communication on the every-where telephone in the hands of everyone. When I asked how many of those present (some 50 or so), almost all hands were raised.

Which takes me to the next topic, a Facebook page for our school, called "Parroquiael Carmen Cabezas". Anyone of you can open it to see pictures and some notes that were taken continuously in these last days. And Claire McKenna of Bethesda, Maryland, outside Washington who just spent 3 months with us, has the Facebook in English, for anyone who would like to see updated pictures of activities and some notes on what is happening. Edil Medina, our psychologist, is well versed in picture taking and putting it all on the web. All of you can see it whenever you want. Unfortunately for us he will leave probably in the last days of August to start his master's degree in psychology, but he is training two students to continue this publicity work that will keep all of you up to date on what happens here.

All this brings up another topic, visits from the U. S. The middle of July brought a grandniece of mine, just graduated from U. T. Austin in physical therapy to stay for a month. Then this last week, on Aug. 3, two came from St. Vincent de Paul parish in Arlington. Ross Martinez was one who came for the first time in 2004, the first visitors ever to our school with Steve and Amy Zeder. With him came Shaun Williams for the first time. It was a short trip, but full of seeing all that we do, including the land at the base of the mountains to the northwest of Cabezas. My niece fitted in well with our work and classes on physical therapy, even teaching a little with her limited Spanish. These visits make me wish more folks from the U. S. would come to see what Our God has done for the good of the people here, especially those who are most in need. This is Believers, real Church/Body of Christ/Visible at work. All of you there are part of it as the Holy Spirit in Communion unites us in Love in Action.

Report cards for the second semester came out last week. Gladly for most of those of my house it was good. Only 4 had one or more failing grade, but not so low as to scare anyone. All should easily be able to bring up their averages before the end of the year.

On Friday August 5, we celebrated the 5th anniversary of our special education program. The kids of the course made excellent deserts and other food to show their abilities. We are concentrating on food preparation for those able (a surprising number of them participating in one level or another). Most of the kids from the 5 centers (some 25 students and 7 professors) came to spend three days here for the celebration. The food was excellent, too tasty to resist, even for old folks like me. We do this because with these skills many will be able to maintain themselves in the future. We know this because one already is doing that, without being able to add $2 + 2$ in her head, she can remember recipes easily (concrete things). The government is now installing (mostly free) natural gas to our kitchen that will make it more efficient and easy.

For the visitors on August 4, we had a dance festival, something that I always enjoy for its beauty and the joy of the kids in the school. There is lots of preparation and this year things went more smoothly than other years, with all the kids ready for their act when it was time to appear. This does not always happen, when waiting is part of the presentations. And a good number of kids had to change costumes as they participate in several different acts.

I had some health problems from the end of June until the end of July. Finally I went for a check-up with my cardiologist who told me it was urgent to take a rest, to lessen my activities. This was on July 28. Then on Sunday night, July 31, I had a rather severe drop in blood pressure that was hard to overcome, even with two nurses who work with us. With the doctor's medical report, on Tuesday, Aug. 2, I presented my resignation from being pastor of the parish, keeping only the schools as my work. The Archbishop tells me that there will be no priest to replace me until January, 2017, and urged me to stay on at least in a limited capacity. I will meet with my team this Wednesday, Aug. 10, to talk it over, seeing how we might organize to do the work, mostly with lay folks, and not put too much pressure on me. A grand part of the problem is that I was not made to sit still while seeing so much need. It will be a contest of will. Our program will include a lot of lay formation and the beginning of 4 men for the permanent diaconate. Please pray for all us here that we allow the Spirit of God to form Church in humble service as God allows us with very few priests that seems to be the norm for years to come here in Bolivia.

One word that has been misunderstood in the Church for so long is the word "martyr". For us at least in English it usually means being killed for the Faith, not so uncommon today as Pope Francis has announced. But the word really means witness, one who gives testimony, mostly not done by dying before denying our belief in Jesus Christ. In the 6th and 7th centuries there developed the idea of "white martyrdom", first of all from Ireland, people who live in such a way that only makes sense if one believes. For me this is extremely important today, in a world of materialized existence. The limited resources that are necessary for life, not only for humans, and the need to recognize that our existence is only temporary here, that we are on our way, only passing through, to our

final, permanent, and totally fulfilled state of Life that is possible only by God's Loving Power. This needs to make us hesitate in making such a dent in this planet's capacity for life. Pope Benedict in an earlier teaching letter said that he hoped believers, especially religious, would show the way. It is obvious that we are far from that. But it seems to me that all of us baptized are religious, and all are needed to show another, more faith-orientated life-style, more simple, much less consumerism, much more service-filled to those most in need around us. In other words we all need to be "martyrs" of today. We need to show another way of life, much more closely related to the exterior life-style of Jesus Christ Who in His place and time, lived in such a way that was a preparation for Life after Death, the permanent and perfect One. So in our place and our time, in our circumstances and our type of vocation, the world needs to see witnesses, "martyrs" that point beyond to LIFE that never ends and is lived in total happiness in total Communion with our Trinitarian God of Love. The world urgently needs another style, we of Faith need to show the way!

May Our God bless all of you!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames