

# A HEART FOR THE POOR

THE MISSIONARY PRIESTHOOD OF FATHER ROBERT THAMES

By Susan Moses

Sometimes, “no” means “not yet.” In the 1960s and ‘70s, Father Robert Thames heard “no” a lot when he requested to be assigned missionary work. When he finally received the “yes,” he made the most of it.

This June, Fr. Thames will celebrate 53 years as a priest for the Diocese of Fort Worth, and he has served 36 of those years in Mexico and Bolivia.

Raised on a dairy farm in Decatur, Texas, Fr. Thames is the eighth of nine children. Monsignor James Tucek impressed the young boy, visiting the family frequently for meals or Bible studies. In fact, Msgr. Tucek made young Robert an offer: “If you decide to become a priest, I will drive you to seminary in San Antonio.”

After high school and college seminary at Assumption Seminary in San Antonio, he completed his theology studies at Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. Fr. Thames said studying four years under faculty who were also involved in the Vatican II Council gave him a strong foundation and great zeal for the Church and priestly work.

Ordained on June 27, 1964 at St. Patrick Cathedral in Fort Worth, Fr. Thames pastored churches in Dallas

and Longview. While serving as pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Breckenridge in 1975, he opened the doors of the rectory to house three refugee families from Cambodia. In turn, they opened his heart and mind to being a missionary priest.

## LIVING SIMPLY ISN'T EASY

Fr. Thames described the next few years as “the happiest in my life.” He joined Maryknoll missionaries in the mountains of Bolivia, walking from village to village, some as high as 15,000 feet, to lead Bible studies. Being arrested and threatened during a military takeover did not dissuade him from his efforts; however, working years without a day off finally did. Exhausted, he contracted hepatitis and returned to Breckenridge to recover.

His next foreign assignment in Ciudad Juárez,

Mexico lasted 11 years. Throughout his priestly life, Fr. Thames chose to “live with the poor in this time and place, like Jesus did.” In Juarez, he met a like-minded priest who invited him to join Prado, an association of diocesan priests “who aim to be poor apostles for the poor,” according to Fr. Thames.

He explained, “People have an innate recognition of God’s presence in simplicity and humility. The doctrine of Jesus Christ is the same as it’s always been. We’re called to live differently, live simply, to be closer to the people.”

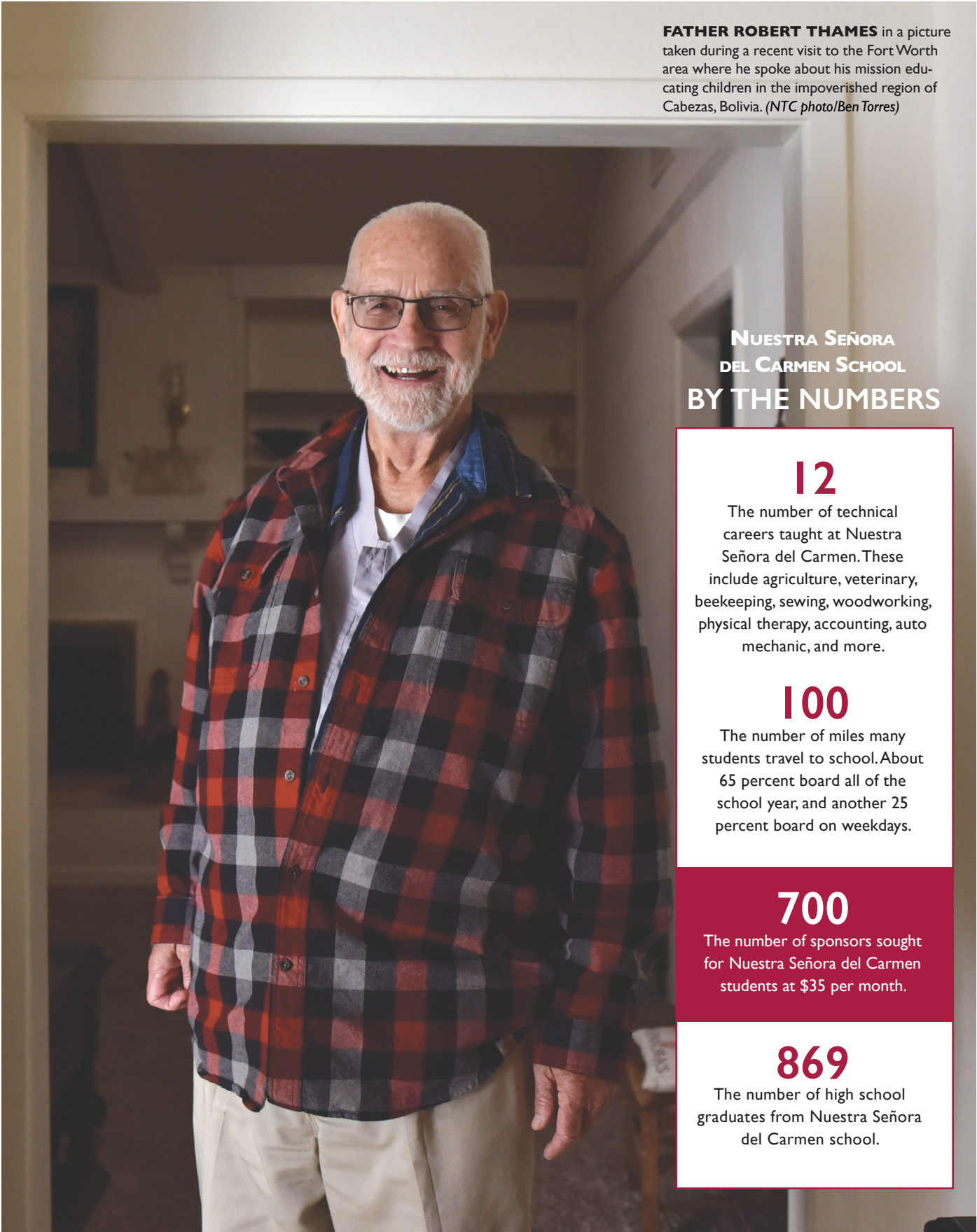
In September 1996, Fr. Thames returned to Bolivia, this time in the bustling city of Santa Cruz, accompanied by a few sisters and lay ministers to help serve a huge parish

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**The number of times Fr. Thames has come close to death.**

The list: hepatitis, heart attacks, military coup, hit by drunk driver. “God keeps rejecting me. He won’t take me home,” he says.

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**FATHER ROBERT THAMES** in a picture taken during a recent visit to the Fort Worth area where he spoke about his mission educating children in the impoverished region of Cabezas, Bolivia. (NTC photo/Ben Torres)

**NUESTRA SEÑORA  
DEL CARMEN SCHOOL  
BY THE NUMBERS**

**12**

The number of technical careers taught at Nuestra Señora del Carmen. These include agriculture, veterinary, beekeeping, sewing, woodworking, physical therapy, accounting, auto mechanic, and more.

**100**

The number of miles many students travel to school. About 65 percent board all of the school year, and another 25 percent board on weekdays.

**700**

The number of sponsors sought for Nuestra Señora del Carmen students at \$35 per month.

**869**

The number of high school graduates from Nuestra Señora del Carmen school.

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with six churches.

After more than four years there, he volunteered for a post that had gone unclaimed for a year: to serve remote, rural villages in Cabezas, Bolivia. Fr. Thames was not deterred by the lack of paved roads, running water, or electricity. However, he did have one condition: his sisters and lay ministers would join him.

#### A VISION FOR EDUCATION

Fr. Thames and his team asked the residents of Cabezas and the villages beyond what they most needed. The universal response was high school education. The first year, 102 students from rural areas came to Cabezas to attend the only public school within 100 miles. They slept on straw pallets in the church. But teacher strikes and poor management quickly convinced Fr. Thames to open his own school.



For an annual contribution of **\$35** a month you can sponsor a child or the school. Contributions are fully tax deductible. To get involved with Educate the Children, Bolivia, visit [fwdioc.org/etc-bolivia](http://fwdioc.org/etc-bolivia)

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The number of times Fr. Thames has read the New Testament. “God speaks to me through the Bible. I can be down or discouraged, and I start praying the Psalms and I’m ready to go with fire again,” Fr. Thames says.

Nuestra Señora del Carmen School opened in 2004 with funding from the Diocese of Fort Worth. Unlike the public schools in Bolivia, the school provides free books and uniforms, which allows the poorest and most disadvantaged to attend.

In the years since, the school has expanded to add technical training, high school education for adults, special education, boarding for elementary students, and housing for state university students in Santa Cruz and Camiri.

Fr. Thames also made vocational training a requirement for graduation — a move that was met with fanfare by Bolivia’s education department.

Henry Del Castillo is a team leader for Educate the Children-Bolivia, the diocesan program that helps sponsor students and provides for the needs of Nuestra Señora del Carmen School.

“When you look at what he’s done down there, it gives you hope,” he said. “You get the sense that one person can make a difference.”

Although he is 78, Fr. Thames intends to continue his mission. “I plan to work as long as I can. I see too much need to retire. As long as I can do some good, I’ll keep working there.”

# THE TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

And how they are changing young lives in Honduras

By Juan Guajardo

Gustavo Villanueva pulled out a thick golden envelope on a recent afternoon.

Flipping it open, he ruffled through the dozens of letters he’s received from grateful students at the two schools that Educate the Children-Honduras is sponsoring in the country’s rural and mountainous Olancho region.

The St. Stephen in Weatherford parishioner pulled out one letter and started reading it.

“I am in my second year of study at Valle Alegre School...,” the small, neat handwriting read. “And am making the effort to finish my studies so I can earn a university degree and become a professional... so I can support my family, live a better life, and give back to the school.”

To Villanueva and his wife, Cecilia, strong supporters of the diocesan Mission Council’s program, the letter is significant, not because it’s a gesture of appreciation, but because it’s a sign of change and hope.

“Over time, we’ve seen the change take place,” he said, explaining that youth, who would otherwise be destined to eke out a living by working low-paying jobs in the fields, now feel as if they have a bright future.

The two schools the program supports, Barro Seales and Valle Alegre in poverty-stricken



A Feb. 2017 photo shows the entire junior high and high school class at Valle Alegre School in Olancho Department, Honduras. (Courtesy photo)

Olancho, provide education from seventh grade through high school. They were established in 2005, after the late Father Bob Wilson and his parishioners at Holy Redeemer in Aledo got involved in a diocesan mission partnership between the Diocese of Fort Worth and the Diocese of Juticalpa, Honduras. Members of the parish they were partnered with identified a need for education past the sixth grade. That's when state-funded schooling stops.

After Fr. Wilson died in 2008, a small group of parishioners carried on his vision, sponsoring the schools through ETC-Honduras and with support from the Diocese of Fort Worth. The Villanuevas got involved in 2012 after a medical mission to the area.

"That was a shocker to us," Cecilia said. "We realized the kids needed a lot more help than they were getting."

Now, the schools, which were founded in 2005, have seen various classes graduate. Some youth have gone on to pursue university degrees, Gustavo said. Others have gone straight into the labor force, but are getting better jobs and higher pay because of their high school

diploma. Three alumni returned to the schools as teachers.

Parents, also, are seeing the benefits of higher education and "talking about their kids going to university," he added.

While the success stories are increasing, the need is still there, he said. With an average wage of \$5 per day, some families still cannot afford to send all their children to school.

The diocese is currently discouraging parishioners from traveling to Honduras for mission work due to increased violence, but sponsorship through ETC-Honduras offers a way to help without having to board a plane.

Similar to Educate the Children-Bolivia, the success of the schools is dependent on the donations of parishioners from the Diocese of Fort Worth. Sponsors give \$30 a month, adding up to \$360 annually, to cover the costs of teacher salaries, school supplies, and building repairs.

"[It's] planting seeds of hope in this community," Gustavo said, paraphrasing what an Olancho parish priest said of the effort.

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For an annual contribution of **\$30** a month you can provide education for one child. Contributions are fully tax deductible. To get involved with Educate the Children-Honduras, visit:

**[fwdioc.org/etc-honduras](http://fwdioc.org/etc-honduras)**

