

***Father Bob Thames' end of January 2024 letter from Cabezas, Bolivia, follows below. Please use the [link at the end](#) of the letter for easiest access to the on-line donation page.***

Greetings to all of You! It is now Feb. 1, Thursday, and I am just starting this letter for January. I just kept putting it off to do other things, a rather bad habit of mine from years past. Sitting at a desk just has not been my desired position for just about all my life, rather to be in middle of the population, seeing if I could help those most in need.

The big news of this letter is the preparation for the school year ahead which begins next Monday. But it makes me sad to report that this is rather false start, because here the two days before Ash Wednesday are legal and obligatory national holidays. Mostly what will happen this next week is getting rolls of the various classes set up, knowing that after Carnival (Saturday up to Tuesday before Ash Wednesday) we will have as many as half the kids of each class show up. That is just reality here. The fanfare of Carnival really includes huge publicity and huge participation of the whole population. Ash Wednesday is rather minor here, but to see how many families live in Lent all year long with not a lot of food, where fasting for lack of food and little clothing is just a natural part of living also. I had thought that Bolivia was coming out of its poverty somewhat, but the pandemia and mostly other factors have plunged us again in a downward spiral. Too you might have read the international news this week where Bolivia is listed as the third most corrupt country in Latin America, so listed by an international group that evaluates these affairs. The group is not headquartered in the U.S., but I forgot where it is centered. But among us here and in the national press the news of this was seen and was already suspected. We lack moral in so many areas of our world, and the role of the Catholic Church and other Religions are ever more necessary. We need God, not just on our lips, but in our living daily, so that we do not so disintegrate into a vicious and corrupt chaos world-wide, Our Lord so helps us! You all who have the Faith and so live in its closeness to Jesus Christ are so essential as LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS! May Our LORD bless all of you in your lives! I am putting all of you there on a pedestal, but your help to us gives me no other way to think of you all. Helping others for me is the first and most essential way to show our True Faith in Jesus Christ. Read Chapters 3 and 4 of St. John's first epistle and also St. James epistle Chapter 2, 14-26. These passages have helped me along my way for so many years. It is God speaking through His Apostles. MAY HIS WORD SO KEEP US IN TRUE LOVE IN ACTION!

Back to getting ready for school. Right now, we have so many kids for the first year of high school that we may need to have 3 rooms of first year students. There is a community where there is no high school not far from here. Someone from there called us about slots for them, but they haven't showed up yet. I

don't know the final tally, but a week ago we were pointing to three rooms of our first year. But I have to admit that many of first year high school kids are not able to stay. Emotionally being away from the home and parent (s) for the first time takes its toll, and quite a few withdraw after a short time. Last year 12 of our first year students withdrew. We will have to see where we stand after three or four weeks. But I am also sad for the great quantity of kids who leave study after grade school. Just yesterday a lady from one of our communities not far away (we pass a truck there twice a week to pick up kids and bring them back home) was telling me of a neighbor with a young girl who probably won't study beyond grade school. There are problems with her papers and lack of an identity card, both essential here for school, and so won't continue studies. What will be her future without this education? She was abandoned by both parents as a baby into the hands of her poor elderly grandmother who sees no way to get all the documents the young girl needs to continue to study. Actually, our Child Defense office can fix this and this will serve her whole life, not just high school. Sunday, Febr. 4 I will have Mass in the community and will visit the lady to try to convince her to let us help. A prayer from you all there for this effort would be a great help! (After writing this above I visited in person the lady that is head of the Child Defense Office who assured me they will try hard to get all set up for her continued study.

In this same line I want to double-down on our teaching of religious living this year. I say "religious living" as so many of our kids are not catholic. Bolivia was mostly catholic years back, but out here especially in the rural areas so many of the communities have been abandoned by lack of priests and sisters, basically leaving the communities open to many types of "preachers" and others who teach something in word and so many who live to the contrary. I could tell you many stories about this, sad to say. This is not to say there are not good ones, but competition for members of a group in one church leads some (if not many) to say some things that are wrong, others who do things that are wrong. And almost without exception the preachers are without any formation nor supervision.

For this reason I want to start our First Communion and Confirmation classes in the first weeks of school, not like last year when we started after Easter, even though Easter is earlier this year. And I have a religious service each Tuesday evening for all who live in the school. This leaves out those who live in Cabezas. These students go home each day. Most students do stay and so will be in the service each Tuesday. I mostly give the Sunday previous readings but that gives me a chance to teach many things that are so necessary for our living of the Gospel. After the time with me those students who want First Communion and/or Confirmation will stay with a religious Sister and some lay catechists for studies from a printed text basically digging into the Living Person and Teaching of Jesus Christ. A New Testament is necessary also for each student as the text has fill-in parts that require reading so much of the Life of Christ. I just hope that interest now in the Gospel will help them in their

lives as believers later on. Again, you all there pray for us here in our efforts to bring Christ into so many lives. To continue in this same line, I hope to have various types of small retreats for all students in our retreat house in Abapó. Actually, this is our Church building there, but it was really built as a retreat house for mostly seniors and juniors who are preparing to go into our world. Most probably we will not pass the night now, but just some afternoon and evening hours on those days when a class will be freer. For that reason, there are bathrooms for both boys and girls with even showers, thinking of staying the night when built several years ago. Now just an afternoon and evening with some food to help in fraternity at the end, a very important part of Christian living. Again, pray for us here!

I could say a word about my house which houses many who live far away so do not go home except on longer holidays and others whose only home is with me. 4 such kids who live far away came last Monday (Jan. 29). Two sets of parents brought them, with tears falling as the parents left. If we add up the distance by travel, it would be 4 hours by motorcycle to the larger city nearby, then 5 hours by bus to Santa Cruz, then two hours by a type of taxi out to Cabezas. These families are new settlers in the forest of eastern Bolivia with little land to cultivate, a cow or two, just getting started. Thank God both parents are together, just very poor and struggling to make a living that allows them later to pay all their expenses of life, including educate their kids. Actually, there is not even a grade school in their village yet, just a 30-to-40-minute walk to and from a small village nearby that has a grade school.

Now Febr. 3. There are new elements this year in our school, but these I will include in the February letter. I do not want to get the jump on what will be part of living educational practices this year. I just hope my words come to life in reality, not just me talking as so many times I have experienced. As you know I am a dreamer and not all my dreams become reality.

We are in a rather big drought, with the first real rain on Jan. 16 this year, the first moisture since last April 2023. We pray and pray, so many praying, but the Plan of God evidently is different. I went yesterday to a community near the mountains to give a religious celebration where there has been more rain than here in Cabezas. They have planted (we too have land there and we have planted), but they too are praying for rain as the crops are drying out.

I want to make a type of confession here. Last August and September 2023 we were in serious doubt about opening our school in 2024. Probably you might well have noticed this in the letters you received. But donations in October, November, and December have made it clear we will continue. I pray daily for all of you who are helping us make this service to families (80% below poverty line in Bolivia in our school at present) Actually poverty is growing again in Bolivia, and the study that was done in August 2023 made us very aware that we were on the right track offering help to so many whose only hope is our

school here. This year the national school policy is exactly in line with what we were doing and had planned before the official notice came to enlarge this next year. In a way we beat them to the punch. We want our kids to leave here able to maintain their own lives with the classes in producing-processing-selling that we teach here. But we go further, with classes in Religious Moral based entirely on Jesus Christ's Life. All of these elements are necessary for a healthy society that allows a happy existence. Your donations have made this possible and as you have shown again, you continue to make it possible for us here. Along with your donation please include prayer for us here (when will this guy get tired of asking for prayer). With me let us give Praise to Our God of Love with over 1800 high school diplomas given to folks since 2004 (both regular and adult high school).

Your brother in Jesus Christ, Fr. Bob Thames.

***We are volunteers supporting ETC Bolivia. The current contact information at the Diocese of Fort Worth to continue to financially support the children is: Dianna Rhoads (817) 533-3174 or via e-mail at: [DRhoads@adv-fdn.org](mailto:DRhoads@adv-fdn.org)***

***The following link takes you directly to the Diocese ETC-B web page for easiest access to donate on-line: <https://fwdioc.org/educate-the-children-bolivia>***

***To donate by paper check, make it payable to: Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth. On the memo line, please write, "For ETC-Bolivia, Fr. Thames Mission". Mail it to: Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth, 800 West Loop 820 South, Fort Worth, TX 76108-2919. Please reply to this e-mail if we may answer any questions.***