

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 Juárez, 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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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 [REDACTED] 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.

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 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 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

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

