

Dear Folk's all of you there. Greetings!

Here is the January letter which I hope and pray that all goes well there.

As I begin this letter on the second day of February, it is rainy though no drops are falling. Here in Cabezas we have had more rain than usual, but many parts of the country are flooded, whole towns, and in the agricultural section of Santa Cruz there are thousands of acres under water. And continual rain is yet in the forecast. Yesterday in the city walking through the streets was like wading down a creek bed in the rain. That was fun when I was young and barefoot on the farm, but for old men it is not the same. Such is life, and by choice I could not do anything else. This is my place and work.

In our dormitories we are putting more beds in the small kids' dorms. We already have 14 kids registered there, and all of these are new ones, 3 of them are only 5 years old with their brothers and sisters older, but all 10 yrs. old or younger. We need a good mother-type for them, but so far that right person has not appeared. I may bring the youngest down with us as the kindergarten near us is easier to take kids to attend, as the kindergarten up by the main road has a lot of traffic to cross. Speaking of the smallest children the ones registered already are from very difficult households, including two single mothers without education who live in rural areas with no money to buy school supplies or school clothes. Just eating is a struggle. At present we have 8 of these, and of the 14 all are new ones, none of the ones from last year. These are considered already registered in school and are sure to come. They usually walk in on the day school starts, or up to a week afterwards. Most of Bolivia has progressed much in the aspect of income, but there are yet many who fall through the cracks. These are the ones whom we most look out for, whom we try to take care of, our calling from Our God of Mercy.

We have just put a new roof on the special education rooms in Cabezas, as so much water was coming in. We think now that we may have over 60 special education students this year, maybe in 4 centers, all but one along the highway. But our vision is growing; we want to branch out off the paved road to take in students from villages, to bring the students in each day and return them in the afternoon. Our hope is to make a pick-up we have into a type of bus with seats and sides too high to fall out of. Adding these kids with a rather large group who cannot hear nor speak this could take us into the number of kids in the program to 65 or more. One experience I had about a year and half ago yet haunts me. I was about two hours off the paved road, where there are families who have come recently from the western part of the country (high plains up to 14,000 ft.), looking for land. I entered a wooden one-room shack where a young girl, maybe 15-16, of special education had just had an epileptic attack. She was lying on the dirt floor, partially clothed, unconscious with eyes staring up. The only other person around the house was a very elderly lady outside near a small fire, preparing food for noon for the family. All the rest of the family, men and women, were in the field, working the land by hand (turning the land with shovels, preparing for planting). Bolivia has programs for epileptics that are free of charge, but getting to all the folks who need it is extremely difficult, with no transportation provided for the personnel who work in these programs. Rural areas like ours are the most abandoned. We want to remedy this as much as possible with our program.

As I have mentioned in the past, we have one seminarian (Ismael Rivera) who will begin his second year of theology this month of February. He graduated from our high school in 2013. Now his little sister (now 14) has come to study here, staying with her Dad who works with us. Their parents have been separated and the mother has broken all contact with the kids and Dad. Ismael's older sister, now a university graduate in public accounting, also has come to Cabezas to be with her Dad and little sister for some time to renew family relationships. She lived in our university house in Camiri while studying there. I mention this to emphasize again (as in the December letter) how our school has been a help to families over the years. We have some cases of some kids who are here whose younger aunts and uncles have all studied with us. The Arancibia family from the communities of St. Isidro Area and St. Isidro Uno have had two generations of their family here. This is a very religious family and I had hoped that one of the older girls (Ercilia and her sister whose name I have forgotten) would enter the convent to dedicate their lives to service to the poor, but Our God did not move either of them that way, only my idea. All of this made possible by you all there who give so generously, out of love for folks never seen.

But there is another story to tell. Rosa Aramayo who graduated from our school in 2008 has asked to be admitted as a postulant with the Sisters in Mora. She has lived the last year with them and will be admitted officially on February 10 in a ceremony at the convent. Rosa has a technical superior degree (something like a Junior College degree with 3 and ½ years of study) in Special Education and another technical superior degree in Classical Music (guitar and keyboard). She was the principal of the special education program last year, but has passed this job on to another to have more time for formation, although she will continue to teach classes in Mora. Rosa graduated at 16, helped by her mother who is a teacher in our school). Surely the prayers of Ms. Rosalie Kuhanek of Fort Worth, St. Bart's parish, southwest Fort Worth, who gave the scholarships over the years for Rosa Aramayo, can take some credit for this religious vocation. You can see that your prayer and monetary help can go a long way with God's Grace! I am hoping that Rosa may have a little time to teach classical guitar, her specialty, in our school this year.

Now it is February 5, the first day of the new school year, clear of clouds and a very hot sun. Another new occurrence this year will be that our school will officially pass to be a technical-humanistic high school, meaning that technical courses will be required and failing the technical course will be like failing any other subject and so failing the whole year. This signifies repeating the whole year. All high schools in Bolivia are supposed to be such, but the government has not given the salaries for teachers for these subjects. We have had problems in the past as we have had available the technical courses, but not so obligatory since we began the school. And students, looking around at the other high schools with no technical courses, thought it unfair to have to study morning and afternoon while their friends in the other schools didn't have such. Now we have a new district superintendent who is pushing the technical courses for all the high schools, and wants to use our school as the model for this, as we are the only high school with workshops for all our courses (that is, milk cows, hogs, milk goats, fields with all the farm equipment, silos for grain and silage, honey bees, irrigated garden, workshops in auto and motorcycle mechanics, gastronomy, music with musical instruments, natural medicine, and physical therapy. (Am I bragging too much?) So the new district superintendent enrolled her own daughter who is a junior in high school in our school. And more, she asked that our workshops be available for practice for other schools. Can you imagine a poor cow with 150 students there trying to vaccinate her? Or a large group of 30 students learning to drive a tractor for practice, fighting over the steering wheel? I told her we would have to think how to do it, plan it well. But the advantage is that the high school diploma will carry the technical course in it that will allow them to enter an advanced course in an institute or university with part of the university or institute degree already studied. Our kids will have to discovery this to be convinced of its worth, which I hope happens soon to calm the gripes.

My ticket for travel has been bought since early October of last year, so I leave this coming Monday early, Feb. 12, arriving in Miami around four PM and then on to Orlando, Fla. for a reunion of our class of 1964. I just wonder how many will attend, maybe better to ask how many are able to attend at our age. I'll be 80 later this year, but we have been a close class over the years and have been supportive of each other, although half have left the priesthood, some yet come with their wives who can, although a number have passed on, hopefully, prayerfully, to Our God. Then on Feb. 15 I go on to Washington, DC to visit friends and relatives, trying to get support with contacts there and maybe find a foundation that will help us. On Feb. 22 I come down to Fort Worth to start going around there, visiting and renewing help to our kids here. I hope to see many of you there.

Now it is Feb. 8, Wednesday, We have started work on a new video about work in all the programs we have going on, plus interviews with the number of folks that are participating in this. It was again brought to our attention at the end of the last school year, when the Minister of Education of the whole of Bolivia came to dedicate a new gym and other new buildings for the public school. Our principal went with the senior class and had a chance to talk to the Minister. He knew of us and commented on our technical courses as being something others could follow. It surprised me, but with pleasure. The video will be made in Spanish of course, but hopefully will be translated into English by folks in Fort Worth. We had made a video in 2006 when we were just starting. Now there is so much more to tell. The older video in Spanish is on our Facebook page in Spanish, but I'm not sure under what title. I know some of you there have seen our Facebook address and have commented on what is there. By the way the video will be made by us here at the schools, as the new computer teacher has studied this and has some practice in it. Several of the folks working with us will help in the making. We have bought a video camera and other equipment that will make it professional, so we hope. Pray that it does.

Other news, no classes nor work on Feb. 12 and 13 as carnival takes precedence over all other activities (for me sadly to say—but I leave that day)

Again ending this letter no other idea comes to me other than Gratitude to Our God Who moves so many people to make all possible here. Looking around there is so much more to do; even a mountain of people could not do all of it. But our work is inspiring others without any doubt, as witness the Minister of Education. You there are part of it, having major responsibility. May Our God continue to bless us here and all of you there as One People with us, so that we may continue to serve those most on the bottom, giving Life of Love made Visible Flesh in Our Church, The Body of Jesus Christ. Pardon any mistakes in this letter.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames