

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter January 2019

Family all of you there, I hope and pray that this letter finds you all well and growing in God's Grace. Here is the January letter, a little shorter as I just wrote the December letter so late. There are things that could have been added, but they only come to me now as I am sending this.

It is now the first day of February, and our new school year begins this next Monday. To our surprise and with some consternation the attendance at our school is now over 400 (now at 410), the most we have had to start with for 10 years back or more. The first few years when there were only two other high schools in the area and we were the only one with dormitories, it was understandable. Now it seems different. There are seven other high schools spread out over the large area we cover to take in so many kids from smaller villages. It seems to me that as we are more and more known for what we do, that is, take in the most disadvantaged kids, poor, abandoned, kids left out with families that have not been able to go up the economic ladder that has taken many families out of poverty. I am surprised to hear folks from rather far away who tell me they heard of us from some relative or friend that we help widows or separated, single mothers, parents or grandparents broken by illness. And something new, a man told us that we have the reputation of having better teachers and we have technical courses that they feel the need of for their kids. (I believe that the district superintendent is responsible for passing this around the area—she believes strongly in this and we are the only school that offers these—her own daughter being in our school specifically for this reason.)

I said above the large attendance has caused us some consternation because we are hurriedly making more beds (double bunks, upper and lower), getting more mattresses, having to find another teacher for first year secondary (7th grade in the U. S.) It has taken us by surprise. But someone told me that there are more kids in the other high schools around us too. (Is our population growing around us here so fast?) The sisters in Mora have their own place full of kids already and others are still coming in. They too are asking for more beds and mattresses. For all of this I just do not know the reason. But we too are known in the city to take in those disadvantaged kids. Just yesterday two women came to enroll two young girls, one woman being the mother, the other her sister. The mother has cancer, with my experience of seeing folks with cancer, I do not think the mother will live out this school year. For that reason, I ask to have the two girls put in my house where they could get more emotional support in case the mother dies this year.

Another situation that was just brought to my attention yesterday was a baby that died the day before. The mother is a girl from our school who gave birth last year but was not ready yet to be a mother. She is probably 16 or older, but was active in sports, although a little bit heavy, not much, and no one noticed her pregnancy. She was selected and participated in the girls' soccer team that played in the district meets when she was 7 to 8 months along. Everyone was surprised when she gave birth about a month later a weekend in her own village which has a small clinic with a university nurse in charge. As I found out yesterday her parents live in and keep the small clinic. The young girl called me at 9:15 AM yesterday, asking me to have a funeral for her baby at 10 AM. It is a horrendous drive of an hour and a half, over a rough road that tears cars apart. We must cross one river, the difficult part being the deep sand that covers half of the river bed, the other half having water and a more solid bed, all together some 150 yards wide. To no surprise I did not get there for the funeral at 10 AM. I did leave then at 12:30 and arrived at 2 PM. Quite a few folks came, and I had a chance to explain a lot about infant death

and our Faith, the future for the young mother that would honor her child, etc. and then end with the funeral prayers for infants. It all turned out well.

Another reason for not arriving early at the village was an important meeting of quite a few of our workers and myself with a man of the municipal government who is working on a project for us (our schools and non-profit foundation) all in his free time and at no cost to us. The project is to build a hydroponic (type of green house) that will produce vegetables for our schools' food and to sell to help pay our cost. He is planning and almost all done now, ready to present it to a government fund that helps in food production. If you would wish you could look up the word on your internet. It seems to really be taking over in Mexico, also Peru, and the government is promoting it here in Bolivia. It is especially relevant for our area that is slowly becoming desert. As you will read on the internet the method was developed in the desert of Israel by Israeli scientists and agriculturalists in a situation with little water and much need. I won't try to explain this now, just to say that if you want to know more about it, look on internet and come to visit us when all is finished. The difference is the size of our project (by God's Grace and Gift, if all goes well). The area will cover some 2000 square meters, about one half of an acre or more. It will consist of 10 separate green houses, each being 10 by 20 meters (200 sq. meters ea.) Without telling him, but already we have talked of this, of just connecting some, filling in the open spaces between different ones at a lesser cost of material, just add on in the middle. But also, he is including in the project a new water well near the hydroponics. We had found a big underground stream of water (by water-witching) back when we had just started our schools 14-15 years ago. (I believe in this as my Dad was a witcher and never failed to find good water, and a man in the next town over to the north is also very good at this and teaching us as well.) The stream is some 12 meters wide, bigger than any of our present wells, all of which have proved themselves, never once failing to provide all our needs. And this stream is just a few meters, maybe 30 to 40 meters, from the new hydroponics. As all of you can imagine, we will include teaching hydroponics as a big part of our agricultural courses this year.

Another plus is the possibility of producing stevia, about which many of you already know, being a natural plant that is an alternative to sugar. The week before we visited with a man who does projects in hydroponics, but also produces stevia and is a market for stevia, all we can produce, and he pays immediately. Our project man here thinks it will be a big boost for us in producing income for us. But also, we think we can produce ice cream for diabetics, a big market in Santa Cruz and other cities of Bolivia. There is no one in this market at present. And another plus will be hydroponics produce all vegetables without any chemical pesticide nor herbicide, all organic. And all our ice cream is all-natural products, whole milk, eggs, etc., only whole fruit in a blender for favoring. But I want health department approval, so we are now beginning to start the process in this.

One downturn this year will be no course in music (teaching guitar and keyboard). A young woman who is also a graduate of our high school and now has a degree in music was teaching this for the past several years. She entered the convent with the sisters in Mora, and this year will begin a more intensive religious study for formation. She may even go (as yet undecided) to Mexico to the mother house. If she does, then that will last probably 3 years. No one else has showed up yet to be able to give this course. We do have two young men and one young woman, two on guitar and one on the accordion, but all three self-taught by ear, no formal training. To teach more formally accepted by the Ministry of Education some formal study and a diploma is necessary. A Dad of one of the girls studying music last year has asked if his daughter and another girl could at least practice with the three who are part of our retreat music team so as not to forget what the two girls have already learned. We will see. I put a lot of stock in culture (includes music, folk dancing, art, much influence of Religion, history of customs, habits

of a cultural group, amid other things). These forces for me have a lot to offer to our society, especially for families raising kids. Culture tends to stabilize a society and young kids, giving habits and customs based on values that have held societies together for centuries in the past.

To end this letter, I want to tell again that our schools and our services of education and raising kids has been and still is really a Work of God. I have been so taken up these last few months seeing so closely doors opening that we would never have expected. The man back in September telling me of the village with hunger, causing me to pray extra for solutions, then Our Lord presenting the hydroponics as a solution, unknown to me prior to this, even though it has been around in so many places for some time, big in Mexico and Peru, now arriving in Bolivia. (At this moment someone told me that a course is being given in La Paz by the Government). Then visiting with a veterinarian who has put us in contact with a rather large project of hydroponics near Santa Cruz who gives courses in stevia (offering us a market for all we can produce of stevia, and hydroponics), also helps in projects and finding funds to finance projects). Even more we see a way to help keep the Sisters in Mora who have been given two large lots in a small village near Mora—hydroponics can easily maintain them when I am no longer around, equally for another man who has been with me in pastoral since my time in Santa Cruz. All this seems to come together by Our Lord Whose Hand is so obviously present directing all. Look at the first reading of this Sunday (Febr. 3) from Jeremiah. It is Our God Who has designated him from the womb, his life has been planned from the beginning. It has been Our Lord Who plans and brings all together for good our work here, and now seems to be working overtime for us, opening doors, showing us roads to travel, that we did not know existed. Maybe this may seem too scattered, too unclear for all of you there, not understanding all I am saying. But time will tell; all of us here are elated. We can only PRAISE OUR GOD WHO hears us, and in mercy moves mountains to help the poor.

Remember us in your help to us here, as we remember you all in our prayer. I will see many of you soon there.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames