

## Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter January 2020

All of you there, Greetings! I hope and pray that all goes well there with all of you. Here is the January letter.

Today is Friday, the last day of January, here in Bolivia, to the southwest of Santa Cruz in Cabezas. It is a little cooler than the really hot days we had earlier this month. I don't know the exact temperature in Fahrenheit, but it surely was over 100 degrees many days. Here it was 41 degrees Celsius. Yesterday here it rained some, the ground being wet now. I was in Santa Cruz where it really dumped buckets on us, the streets like gullies that we had to wade through. At least the rain did cool us somewhat. This month has been getting ready for the new school year which begins next Monday, February 3. The kids from my house today are getting uniforms, shoes, and book satchels for the year this afternoon. At least one of the uniforms they must buy themselves if they had worked some. The others I will give. Exact school supplies will be given later by each teacher. We have just bought wholesale some \$5000 or more of school supplies for our small store, that includes some shoes. The uniforms were made by our sewing shop, over 300 of them in various sizes. This will include the small kids' dorms in Cabezas, so the uniforms that the grade school uses.

This year will see some changes in our list of courses, already talked about in times past. We move into what is called an obligatory technical course regime, which means that all high school juniors must choose a technical course to follow, which involves 70 % practice, 30% theory. They have been preparing for this now for 4 years, taking courses on how to run a business, what laws are involved, how to handle accounts, how to do everything that is involved in this. (Please don't ask me what all it is). I had warned the kids last year and the parents when there was a meeting with them that this was now obligatory and if they or their kids did not want to do this, they would have to withdraw from our school. The secretary of the school told me this year that some 5 kids had withdrawn. But so many more from other places have changed to here, with some 112 to 115 kids new to our place so far. The Sisters in Mora told me that quite a few who always have lived in their dorms have decided to come to Cabezas precisely for the technical courses. In the whole school district, we are the only school who offers this. But the public school in Cabezas will send all their kids to our place in the afternoon in order to assist in our technical courses. I don't know how this will affect us, as we don't have classrooms that can handle such large groups. This will double or more our class size, way beyond the size permitted by the school system. So, we wait some official word on how all this will play out. I have explained before that the high school diploma will list the technical course of the student and any institution of higher learning will have to honor that in a shorter course of study in the area

studied here. This makes me think of young folks in the U. S. who were able to take university courses in the summers before high school graduation.

I would like to share with you all probably the worst case ever that I have had to deal since we started back in 2004. I won't use her name, as someone there might come someday and know her here. I am telling this because she has asked me to be her Dad, making it more personal. We get along very well and she does well in school. She has ambitions which again might surprise you after all that she has been through in such a short life. She is now 16, in her junior year of high school, debating which technical course she will choose.

But back to the beginning when I arrived here in 2002. Florida is a very old village about 21 Kilometers to the northeast of Cabezas, and beyond that another 11 kilometers to a village called Piraicito. I met her parents at times along the road there, but more often than not just her mother walking along, just a long way from nowhere, most of the time with a baby on her back. She would come walking two days to Cabezas, passing the night in the bushes alongside the road. I came to know the couple more for the constant fighting that took place between them, not just your ordinary fighting of couples, but threats of violence more severe. There were at least 4 kids, 3 boys and a girl (with me now). One boy graduated from our school a year ago and I don't know where he is now. There are two younger brothers living with single uncles in Piraicito, whose uncles do not believe in education, so the kids have never set foot in a school. The two are now about 10 to 12 years old. Several times the child defense office has tried to talk with them, but the kids always run to the bushes and hide. Back to the couple, after some 10 or more years of fighting, with threats of killing one another, the Dad finally killed the mother, and is now serving 30 years in prison. The kids were dispersed with different relatives at first with the only girl now with me. What really surprises me is her normality, her good personality, after having lived through so much conflict. This summer she worked in gastronomy, making cheese, also helping at times with the bread-making. She is rather pretty and at times rather flirty, more for fun rather than seriousness, as she loves to joke around. She easily talks with me and I with her, a good relationship. In all of this that I see in her, I ask how Our God has worked in her, how Grace has either shielded her or has healed her for all the violence that she so young has suffered. Other kids with less violence in their lives have been affected much worse. I see only the great miracle of love from her relatives and friends, and now our chance to help her grow into a holy and sane adulthood. You all there might say a prayer at times for her, let her keep growing better.

I could tell many stories, not all so sad, not all so full of suffering, but this is what we do here, try to rescue those who need it and also want it. THANK GOD we have failed so few times, and so many who would have had a very sad life are now living more normal lives, some even beneficial lives that contribute to the good of their communities. Meditate if you would John 8, 1-11 to see how

Jesus also rescued folks caught up in conflict. By the Grace of Our Lord, I also have the great joy to follow Him, to do what He did and still does through us. Some on the progress of Noelia. She is now walking on her artificial leg, but it was discovered that her left foot has no tendons that make it move along with her right foot. So maybe this coming Monday (first day of school, Feb. 3) she may have the foot operated on to secure it firmly so that it moves along with her artificial leg. The doctor told that she must not ever sit in her wheelchair again, just push it in front of her until she doesn't need it any longer.

Probably I will not finish the letter today, now Sunday afternoon, Feb. 2, Feast of the Presentation, but I want to do some writing on this day. Trying to get some personal experience of each of us in the Feast, it seems to me that we can ask ourselves what we present to Our Lord in our own presentation. What can we offer in gratitude to God Who has made us and, even if we find it hard to believe, made us good, made us able to give something to others in love, something that others need and whose lives will be better for our gift. There was an advertisement back years ago of a young kid, saying that God made me good, because God does not make trash. There are so many passages in the Bible that can support this, but let's begin at the beginning. In Genesis 1, 1-31 the Bible continually proclaims that all creation is good, made by Our Lord, including humans, as the reading ends saying, "**God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.**" We must here emphasize then that humans whom "God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him, male and female he created them" (Gen. 1, 27) ought to be very good. How else can one believe that God made all good, and us humans "very good"? It is we humans who have made a mess of creation so many times, beginning with ourselves by our ugly, self-centered behavior. At the very core of our goodness we have been created free to choose, even to choose against our Creator, to be the opposite of God Who is Love (1 John 4, 8 and 4,16). What this love means is to give to others all our inner person and all our outward person, our totality, day by day, to those in need around us and even beyond us. This is what Jesus, Son of God, (meditate John 14,8-11) Who makes the Father God visible for our benefit, shows us in His own total giving, the ultimate giving, on the Cross, even to the last drop of His Blood. (John 19, 30-35) This is **TOTAL GIVING, TOTAL LOVE**, and is the model and Source of Strength for own lives. We can examine ourselves now in the light of the Word of God. Where do I fit into these passages, I who have the power from Our Loving God to live out the same as Jesus? Do I use much of this goodness given by God to live out the goodness that I was created to live out? Do those around me benefit from the goodness that God created in me? Does my time and energy make for a better, more holy atmosphere, where I live? Are others better because I am there, interacting with them? Now turn to Our Lord Who lives within you, what can you say, what do you hear from God Who is present? Maybe forgiveness is in order, maybe a new commitment, a new burst of love from Jesus to your heart, to make a step forward toward Jesus, Whom

the world needs so desperately now as always, faithful witnesses to Jesus Who lives in His Body, the Church.

Please keep us in mind this year as you have helped us in the past; maybe we will be self-supported by early 2021. At least it is our aim. I will be very honest with all of you, not asking for more than we need. But pray also that God continue to guide us in this aim of ours. We have been made by God, kept alive and active by God, so may Our God be recognized and praised for His Work here in Cabezas!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Fr. Bob Thames