

Family in large letters, Greetings! I hope and pray daily that this letter finds all well and growing in Jesus Christ.

Here is the monthly letter, Thank you for getting to others who may be interested.
Your brother in Jesus Christ, Fr. Bob Thames.

Today is the 3rd of November, the day after one of the biggest days of the year in Bolivia, All Souls Day, although here it is called Todos Los Santos (All Saints). The distinction is not made nor understood for the most part, but deep within the souls of the people here. One example of this was yesterday when a woman who for some years has been a Jehovah Witness called to find out the time of the celebration in the cemetery and blessing of graves that she wanted to attend. This in no way means she would consider herself Catholic nor have a desire to think about coming back. But deep within the psyche of the people here having a prayer and blessing of the graves of one's family members is just a part of being Bolivian and human. Likewise I went to have Mass in two cemeteries where non-catholics attended and had the graves of the family blessed with Holy Water as well as were present for the Eucharistic celebration without receiving Communion. I in no way push them nor talk about being catholic, knowing it is just a part of the culture here. Actually this goes back further than the Catholic Faith in Bolivia. There was much respect and reverence for the past ancestors before the first Spaniards arrived. Our customs of Faith just replaced the prior practices (my thinking on this). Some really good news! It rained at the end of September (last letter) and twice more with good moisture in October. It may be that Our God will give us a good year with agriculture. We pray for this at least and we are off to a good start. We have soy beans to harvest soon, and maize silage to cut and store, and lots of field ready to plant now as our summer begins. We now have just a little more than some 60/70 acres to plant if we can get all the roots of the bushes out that we bulldozed. At least some 35 or more acres are ready now and we are working on the rest.

And so far a good year for honey bees with just about 200 hives now. This does not mean that all 200 can be harvested yet. Some 30 to 40 are just recently divided and will need time for the new queen bees to produce enough workers to produce the honey for harvest. For those who are unfamiliar with the bee/honey work, feeding several larva the jalea real (translated to regal jelly, a food the bees produce) makes those larva fed to grow into queens. The bees do this naturally for one or other to replace an older queen, but our people can do this, producing several other queens, then putting a new queen in another hive, dividing the worker bees between the old and the new hive, the workers form around the new queen and start to work, first producing comb and honey for the new larva in the bottom part of the hive. When this is full they then begin to produce comb and honey for the top part which is what we harvest. The hole that allows bees to enter the top part of the hive is too small for the queen to enter so no larva are laid there, only honey that we harvest. Actually the comb can be bought on the market which cuts the time for the hive to produce only honey. A normal hive on a normal year can produce some 74 to 76 pounds of honey (34 to 35 kilos) with 3 harvests a year (March, September, December). If I were you I would not quote me on this work to a specialist in honey production. This is just what I understand listening to the folks with us who do the work. We are organic in production meaning no insecticides or other chemicals that can contaminate our honey, and our bees are put quite a ways from fields where there are chemicals in use, mostly in forest areas. Our man in charge of bees thinks that about 200 hives is his top capacity for keeping. We want more hives, so that means we will need another person with another vehicle in charge of the new group of hives, probably under the first one's supervision. All of this bee production is not just for our earning a little money. We teach bee keeping in our technical institute as it is one of those areas here for our people that can maintain a family. So we do both, produce and teach. We sell our honey in a jar at 42 Bolivianos a kilo, which comes out at about \$2.75 a pound. (Exchange rate here for us is 6.935 BS per dollar) Our hope is soon to have health department approval which will allow us to raise the price to 50 to 55 Bolivianos a kilo which in turn the supermarkets will sell at 70 to 80 Bolivianos.

We have been at something all year that is finally bearing fruit, that is a process leaving the Escuelas Populares of Don Bosco and entering into a grouping called Fe y Alegría, a Jesuit founded international organization. The difference is that Don Bosco charges us each year per student without offering help to us while Fe y Alegría has 3 technical people who go from school to school all year long for those with their organization giving workshops to teachers to improve the quality of teaching and no charge. Their schools are some of the best in Bolivia. Bad information was given to us at the beginning of the school year in March or so, and we foundered, struggling to do something already done.

A young man who works with us was handling this. Finally I went to see the new director of Fe y Alegría (a friend of mine) in October and discovered the errors. So our application was sent to the head office in La Paz on the last day possible (Oct. 31) to be considered this year. The group is also introducing new techniques for teaching technical courses as well. It seems to be a blessing in several areas for us. We began in 2004 with 3 workshops for teachers, but that ended that year. We are in sore need of betterment. We have greater difficulty than some other schools do not have, which is receiving students from small rural and isolated schools where professors never did serious teaching. We get kids in the 6th and 7th grades, even some in the 9th grade who have trouble reading and not knowing their tables of multiplication. We have to spend a year working with these especially to bring them up to par with the others, taking a lot of energy and time that could be spent otherwise for all the class. We will see how Fe y Alegría can help on this. It is for sure we have no control over the small schools that have no transportation for professors, who then must walk for hours to get to work, usually on Monday afternoon or early Tuesday, and leaving on Thursday at noon, meaning 3 days of teaching in a 5 day week. And we wonder what they do when they are there. But at times one professor has 3 to 4 grades that he/she must teach, so it is hard to judge them badly. This is part of our helping those most on the bottom which is our purpose. May Our God continue to help us do the best possible for these who most need us.

Now on to the retreat center and retreats. We had scheduled a retreat for Oct. 27, a Friday afternoon. Just about 100 students arrived, many in their senior year, to have a session on marriage preparation from the viewpoint of Faith. It seems God had other plans, as before we started, a cloud moved in and poured rains for some two and half hours from about 3:30 PM. As we have no floor other than the sandy gravel (very small), well packed, the water came in more and more despite our efforts to prevent it as no walls yet exist, just a roof. Then wind arrived with driving sheets of rain that came in filling the floor completely with water to about an inch. I tried to tell the kids and some few adults that we had to cancel the retreat since it would not be possible to have it. The kids were having a great time however and no one wanted to leave. The rain began to let up about 6 PM and by 6:15 just a sprinkle. The head professor of the community school lives next door to the center, and his daughter is a senior this year, and had been there since the beginning. He suggested that we go up the hill to his school since there was a large covered basketball court that was dry. So we walked up about 10 minutes and Sister Yakelin (the Brazilian sister) began her work, improvising mostly, but concentrating on their development of Faith and community, ending up with a beautiful prayer service with candle light that ended at 10:30 PM. Food was brought in that had been prepared, so no one suffered. And the kids were ecstatic and are pushing to come back. God has so many ways to get to folks, which always surprises me and I am utterly grateful. We are planning another senior retreat on marriage somewhere around Nov. 13, hopefully before the seniors leave school about Nov. 20. Here the seniors are let out early so they can get all their documents together and ready so that their diplomas can come from the state head of education in Santa Cruz. (All the other grades will go until the end of November or close to it. Unfortunately Sister Yakelin is leaving today, Nov. 3, for Brazil for her vacation at home after 3 years without a home visit. We will have to fill in for her, but I expect more kids from the 3 areas where the kids came from (Mora, Abapó, and our high school) as the enthusiasm will attract more, I firmly believe. We are conscious that more than 100 kids will be more difficult to handle with quality. We need your prayer for us, PLEASE! Our retreat will concentrate on three levels: the popular, sexual union level of the body, then moving on to the psychological and doctrinal level of life-long external commitment (using Gen. 1, 26-27 and Mark 10, 1-12), then on to a deeper spiritual level of a couple to live the fullest union of body, soul, and spirit that is possible only in God's Sacramental Grace (Gen. 2, 18 & 21-24, and Ephesians 5, 21-33). (I will try to explain more of this in the future letter of November.

As it must be obvious from the above explanation of events, the center is yet in construction. The big roof and bathrooms are done, but we need to widen the sides with 4 meters on each side, build a store room for the benches and other things that need to stay there in safe-keeping, add a stage area at the back, with a Eucharistic chapel on the back to one side. You understand that the building will be a community church and maybe even a head church for a parish in the future. The Eucharistic chapel was so important and effective in the first retreat, where young folks stayed up to a half hour in silence before Our Eucharistic Lord. It yet amazes me and makes me know more for certain that we were made for God and will not rest until we rest in God. (St. Augustine said this 1600 years ago and is still valid in our so materialistic world.)

Next year, in July 2018, here in Santa Cruz, there will be a Missionary Congress of all of Latin America. So it seems that it would be good to say some things along this line. There can be no doubt reading Acts of the Apostles that the enthusiasm and life-style of the early Christians was missionary. Other people were attracted by the living out of the Gospel of Jesus of the Believing Community. And since Vatican Council II more than 50 years ago it is the need today. It is all the Church that must evangelize by announcing the Kingdom of God by the lives they live, and give answer to those who ask us why we live the way we do. (See LG 5 and AG 1). Again Pope Paul wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that "the entire Church is missionary, the work of evangelization is a fundamental duty of the People of God" (EN 59 and 60). Pope St. John Paul II wrote in *Redemptoris Missio* that the Church's first task has the "obligation is to proclaim the truth of the novelty of life that is found in Jesus Christ, The universal mission of the Church is to spread the Faith in Jesus Christ. (RM 4). It is the task of the Christian Community (RM 11). And Pope Francis is noting the lack of dynamism today of our communities and their need to be renewed for evangelization purposes. There is not just one way of transmitting the Gospel. The ways will be so diverse that it would impossible to try to catalogue them (EG 111, 129)

Jesus Christ in His Living and His Word is the Fount of all our evangelization. It seems to me that study and prayer of the Gospel taken seriously, a life-long process of purification, of deciding to change habits and customs, to conform more and more to Jesus as He shows Himself to us, never letting up on this. People will see and ask why. And we can talk about Jesus Christ in our lives. I thank all of you for your attention and concern for us here.

Your brother in Jesus Christ, Fr. Bob Thames