

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter
October, 2018

Dear Folks, Family all of you, here is the monthly letter for October. I hope it finds all of you well and enjoying life.

It is now the afternoon of Nov. 2, Friday. This morning I spent some 7 and half hours in Masses in cemeteries and blessing graves, also including travel from one place to another. This is the most active part of the religious culture of the Bolivian people, even more than Holy Week. I think I said last year that I believe that the deep sense that the people have that people buried are yet living goes back further than the Christian Faith that arrived with the Spaniards in the 1500s. But it certainly dovetails with our Faith in the Resurrection of Jesus and His desire to share this Grace-Life with us. So many of the non-Catholics show up too and want their family graves blessed as well as the Catholics. Today is a national holiday, no work, but people travel far to get back to their origins where family members are buried. There follows lots of food, talk of old times, catching up on what's going on with each of their lives. Different from the city, I did not see any alcohol present, a real tribute to the people who keep the practice more religious in the rural areas that I visited. One group from the city of Santa Cruz, about 3 hours away, arrived to the cemetery of a small village where I was just starting Mass. They stayed for Mass then greeted the folks and got back into their cars to travel to another village another hour away to visit other parts of their family origins. Most folks don't have cars though and are limited to just one place and many will pass all day and some few all night in the cemetery. Now some really great news for our school. I have spoken before of the high school track meets (usually in discouraging words because it takes away from serious study), but never have we had such good news before. A young high school junior of our high school won our district meet in the 100 meter dash, then on to regional, then on to state (here department after the French names), then on to the national meet, which took place on October 29, last Monday. Again he won as best in all Bolivia (high school) and coming in with an 11.8 seconds win. For me really good for a young man from a very small village with mostly subsistent farmers located to the south-southwest of Cabezas. He is quiet and un-assuming, tall and lanky, and this year with a physical education teacher who has helped a lot in his training, using strategy of running as well as speed. His race was put on Facebook (sorry don't know what site, maybe our own Fundacion Ñombori Opaetepegua or Facebook page of our school). At the end he fell to his knees and lifted his arms to Heaven to Our God in Thanksgiving. The village from which he comes is mostly non-Catholic, but he is from one of the few Catholic families as I found out the morning he was to arrive back in Cabezas. Actually I don't make any difference in the Faith of the folks here. The Catholic Church as well as non-Catholic groups are so weak religiously that actually there is no or so few differences in neither daily life nor their beliefs. The village, part of the Guaraní Indian people, where he lives has 3 very small non-Catholic groups with self-appointed ministers and no church building. No priest either, except me, has visited there in so many years that no one can remember when or if there had ever been a priest there. And I visited only to talk to leaders about some water project. The village has the fame of having more kids in our high school than any other village at present and here some of the kids from there assist at our

Wednesday night religious and Communion service given by the Sisters. (You might recall two years ago I resigned as pastor of the parish and was forbidden to have religious services in the parish, only in the next Diocese to the southwest. I assist here to talk as a lay person this was to not to compete with the new pastor who does not go to many places.) Now back to the young man's arrival in Cabezas which put our small town (maybe 2000 folks) and our school, Our Lady of Carmen, in the news all around. We arranged a meeting of all our kids on the highway just outside of town, met him there and put him on top of the cab of our big truck (braced with something to hold on to, then paraded with him into town, around the public square by the municipal offices, then down to the smaller square of our part of town (Pueblo Viejo or Old Town), all with a police escort and the military band from our local military installation playing loud and very lively music. Afterwards there was a public presentation, which included a certificate from the district superintendent of schools that guarantees him entrance into any of the teacher training schools if he should decide to enter into a physical education teaching profession. (to note: it is very hard to get into one of the schools as there are more teachers prepared than there are positions open to receive them so entrance is limited to less than a third of the applicants each year). All was filmed and the municipal and school authorities were present. All of this put our school in the limelight with much publicity. It moved me which am not usual for me, but I was grateful to Our God who did this for such a humble young man and his family. By the way his name is Waltico Airuari, not just an every-day-name around town. And he'll be back next year.

So many things happened this last month that I will have to cut short some of the things that came about. But I want to include some things very important to us. First on Friday, October 5, we held a big exposition of all we do in our schools, our social and technical courses, and our special education program. With our students more than 500 to 700 people came, more than I ever expected but really don't know how many. It was an all-day event. At least a part of our program that brought people in was giving the 3rd semester report cards of the regular high school students, which we give only to parents if present. Many are given to me if parents can't come so some adult can see the results. We had killed two big hogs, all the meat of which was cooked and sold with plates of food as part of our gastronomy display. A young girl, blind, from the special education program sang and was well received with much applause. We presented folk dancing and other social presentations. All the ice cream made for the occasion was sold out as was all the cakes (some made by students from my house) and other food. Our technical courses were able to show off a lot as we are the only high school with these offerings, some 11 in all. We presented equipment that no one else has in courses that no one else has (mechanics course showed motors fixed, physical therapy presented displays and their activates, artificial insemination, hydroponics display, plants from our forestry work, a display on irrigation by drop method, garden products, our milk products (cheese, yogurt, ice cream) and I can't remember what else.

The big news also was that rains finally came, almost a week of it with cooler weather too, mostly slow rains that soak in, although two times it rained so hard that water ran everywhere. We are now ready to plow a second time on some fields and plant as soon as it is dry enough. Again, our God has had mercy!

Several years ago President Evo Morales began a program to give 200 Bolivianos (just under \$29 U.S.) to each regular grade and high school students towards the end of the year to keep students in school. This was and is an attempt to keep students in school because of so high a drop-out rate. It is costing the government a lot of money, but the program is working. The drop-out rate has lowered considerably as the kids hang in there until the end of the year. This took place the last two weeks of October. A change took place with kids from my house, which normally spent their money on food, especially candy and other sweets. This year the money went mostly to clothes, Thank God.

I can't remember if I mentioned in the September letter about the experience of a man with two kids in our school that came with a big sack of beans as his school offering for the year, saying the drought of the dry season had hit his village very hard and even some families were going hungry. This really affected me and I prayed to Our God of Mercy for this situation for help to give some solution. The villages are quite a ways to south-southwest of Cabezas where water is very scarce. On October 25 it seems that Our God was giving an answer to our prayers. One of our technical institute professors had visited a new business operation of producing vegetables in a greenhouse situation that is also hydroponic, that is, using only water fortified with plant food nutrients. The water use is very minimal and produces a lot. This was developed in Israel who always has had water problems. An agricultural engineer from Cochabamba brought it to Bolivia and also is the owner of the operation near Santa Cruz that we visited. "We" means some 16 to 17 people from here, teachers and students and other interested ones like myself. The method is relatively simple, in a green- house setting, without bugs so no chemical insecticides or chemical fertilizers, all organic to my understanding. Actually the engineer is anxious to spread the technology to others, not charging to see and be given an explanation of all the things that are done and what is needed to put the method into workability. The teacher who arranged the visit lives in a village not far from the village mention above and has little access to water also (water is piped into his village two days a week). But also a young student from one of the villages where I have Mass every week was a part of the group. Talking with him and the professor it seems there is enough interest to have some projects funded by the government that could result in putting two types of the system into operation. We will see at least. We as Church, part of Jesus' Body are called in Love especially to do what we can to help people be lifted up. I see this as God giving us a possibility. We will see where this goes. I would like to have two smaller operations at our school as teaching models that could serve us in our teaching role, as well as help provide food for our kitchen.

Now Saturday, Nov. 3. Just a short note on chickens at my house. I had a big cage built to house some 4 hens and a rooster which I bought here in Cabezas. Actually this is just to experiment on how to keep chickens where we live, how the kids will keep them, and to provide "farm" eggs with yellows that are yellow and have the taste with which I grew up. One hen has disappeared, the one that laid a green egg. The others lay brown. But now my experimentation is to lead to buy some 100 chicks of the piroca type. I hope to keep some 15 or so at my house and the others will be housed near the hogs. Our kids will need to learn how to help keep them, gather the eggs, and make various types of food with the eggs. Makes me nostalgic for my upbringing

so many years ago. Actually my aim is to go further than this. “Farm eggs” that is not caged hen eggs, are bringing a good price here and is something many families, out of town and in our town, can do to help the family economy.

In the U. S. All Souls Day does not have the importance it has here in Bolivia. But just read again 1 Corinthians 15, all of the chapter. St. Paul puts it strongly, that the Resurrection is the big basis of our Faith. Without this Life that Jesus shows us in His Resurrection how could we really know of life after death. And if there is no Resurrection (life after death) our Faith is in vain, we are the most to be pitied. There is so much to say on this. I just want to give some comments that I used in my talks in the villages on All Souls. We humans are more than just animals, with a mind to analyze and to decide, even at times against our instincts. Looking at our world history, even the small part of history that we have lived in, we can only say that so much of our humanity has lived and is living as miserably as humans. Lack of food, war, slavery and trafficking of today, drugs and alcohol of all types, racial bias, diseases, I could go on and on. It seems to me that without a Life after Death, that is, what Our Lord Jesus revealed to us, wants to share with us, that rectifies such misery, human life seems so unjust, so unjustifiable for our existence as a race. To go further it seems to me that compassion for others, to be dedicated to helping others with our lives, if there is no Afterlife that justifies compassion, that shows that our small efforts here will eventually win out, not by our own power, but by the Power of Our God Who is Compassion and Mercy as shown in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, then life here on earth is not worth living. If we were made for “loving, AGAPE LOVE, TOTAL GIVING, always our aim, never arrived at on this earth, (we are made in God’ Image and Likeness of TOTAL GIVING of Genesis 1, 27) then all is in vain, only to be frustrated in this earthly life without hope of eventually winning, as so many of our this-world histories reveal, then for me human life can only be for nothing, to be frustrated. I went through a lot of this reasoning when I was 19 to 21 years old, or at least came to these basic ideas. This reasoning is largely responsible for my vocation to the priesthood and my desire to serve those much poorer than what I have been given. I decided young that the Afterlife, showed so strongly by Jesus Christ in His Resurrection after a life struggle of suffering, puts human living in a world of Love that points always to its final victory. Jesus won, and we can share in this victory, by God’s Holy Spirit that was poured out from the Cross. I do not work alone, but always as a member of His Body, that guarantees one day to win. I can understand that some may not agree with me on this, but it is what I have lived with for some 65 years or more even with my weaknesses and failings, from time in the seminary until today. And it still moves me to keep giving, knowing that **God’s Compassion will eventually be made evident in TOTAL VICTORY IN GOD’S REIGN and I want to and can be a part of that.** Along with 1 Corinthians 15, read Apocalypse 21, 1-7. It moved me as a 14-15 year old and it still does today.

May Our Lord Bless All of you in Victory!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames