

Father Bob Thames
October 2023 Letter
Cabezas, Bolivia

Father Bob Thames' end of October 2023 letter from Cabezas, Bolivia, follows below. Use the link at the [end of the letter](#) for easiest access to the on-line donation page.

Greetings to all you there, October 31, this beautiful day here in Bolivia, coming into our summer, a little warm but a nice breeze to make it comfortable at the same time. I have been running around a lot, and actually accomplishing some good things at the same time. I hope I can talk about it, when and if what we were doing turns out with some success. We are at least hopeful.

An event that was not so good but did affect us a lot was last week. We have had a lot of forest and woodland fires to the east and north of us, quite far from here, but the wind brought a lot of smoke from there to here and caused us to have to cancel classes last week. Santa Cruz also, but they had all their own smog caused by vehicles and factories as well as the smoke from the fires. Some places close school on Tuesday, we on Wednesday until Friday. The kids went home on our trucks Wednesday AM. A few stayed with me, some leaving on Friday, returning on Sunday for classes this week. Here All Souls Day, Thursday, is a national holiday, so there is no school. There was the suggestion of not having school on Friday of this week, but the head of area schools, call the district super-intendent, ordered us all to have school this Friday, not losing more class time for the kids. I am very much in agreement with the lady. We have lost a lot of class time this year. The smoke brought in from far away also brought heat, even at night, making sleeping difficult. The professors complained of the kids having much trouble trying to stay awake during class time, so the whole area made the decision to close all schools last week. We had a little rain here for a couple of days, but much more to the north and east which put out most all the fires and our air is clean again. Even La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, closed their schools. But the fires that affected them were just to the north and northeast of them.

You might be wondering, why all the fires? It is really social problem here. A lot of the north and eastern part of Bolivia was jungle and heavy forested. A lot was also declared public land and protected areas for wildlife. Also, much of it was claimed by very large landowners, but not really inhabited or used. Groups come to invade, some of them being armed, and set fires to burn forest for farming, and high winds cause losing control. It is now a major element that has caused the problem we face at present. The government really has done nothing to solve this problem. The drug producers and distributors are in control of much, as many forests are used by their secret runways (satellite photos reveal more than a 120 of these runways) that transport drugs in small planes that fly from Peru, Bolivia, into Paraguay, Uruguay, over to Brazil and to Africa and Europe. We see wars far away (Ukraine, Israel, Sudan) and do not recognize the “wars” around us. So much more the need for moral values of Jesus Christ, that of total love that penetrates all our world, starting with our families. As we pray in the OUR FATHER: MAY YOUR KINGDOM COME! starting with us!

But October has not been all that is discouraging. We have technical courses of production that show outside of our school with what we call “ferias”, something like public expositions. We have worked to have something like the Bowie Trades Day, for those of you who know of it. It is a day when anyone can bring whatever they want, put it out to the public, sell it for whatever price, or just trade it for something else that another person has there. On October 5 we had such a day in our school, but now starting in November, at our suggestion and a little pushing from us, the county government is starting one here on the weekends (every week). This will give all the kids from all the schools to have a chance to develop their selling skills in public. At present all our high schools (10) have technical courses, most of which are producing something (agriculture, veterinary, gastronomy, honeybees, fabricating things for sell, including food made by the students, and I do not know what else, along with computer science and maintenance.) But the ferias will give them a chance to be in public, learn how to talk with people, for me, an essential part of living for their future. But for us, it will be more than just the students. Our workers will also present the products that we produce with a market close by for whatever we have to put up for sale. Actually, there is one really large feria about two hours from here that is really popular, so what we will do here will be just a copy of them.

(I know this will begin in November, but we have been working on this for several months, our tractor with a blade in front cleaned and leveled the area for the municipal government, so I include this in October.)

(Now November 2) Today is All Souls Day, a really big, national holiday (no work) and really a custom from the past that usually takes two to three days to celebrate. People take the favorite food of the dead to be set on the tombs of their relatives, almost always passing at least one night, talking, singing, just sitting there by the tombs. People who have changed to one or other non-Catholic religion do the same, even though many think that the custom is Catholic, the custom is just too ingrained to be set aside. Praying for the dead is very big in the Catholic Mass, but the vigil by the tomb is more remembering the person, rather than praying for them. I will have Mass later this AM in the cemetery near the Church in Abapó, and tonight for our kids who have stayed here with me for the weekend.

Another big event for the month of October, our school year: Confirmations and First Communions of our school. The classes began last April, being held every Tuesday night with a catechism text centered on the Person of Jesus Christ, just over 130 pages. Our Mass with the Bishop was last Saturday, Oct. 28. Again, we brought in extra benches which served a good purpose for all the parents and other siblings, godparents, and just other folks who like to be present when the bishop comes. Last year we had over a hundred, so this year fewer Confirmations, but also include a bigger number of First Communions, all from our high school. As is the custom here food was served to all the people, with just a little bit left over which we ate in my house, cake, a type of cheese sandwich very popular here and a drink made from corn for everyone. The bishop is very popular and has no problem staying after mass to have his picture taken with as many as would want. Then he sat down with us to eat what was set aside for him. Some good news for us too. At the end of the school year (we terminate the 8th of December, one week added for days lost during the year) there are contests in various academic subjects and even chess in each district (our district is composed of 10 high schools) or even in a wider area, (I'm not sure how big the area was included), but our school principal told me this week that we had over 70 students who were either 1st place or close to the top (usually 4th or above) in a good many categories. I know that

several people have told me of the good academic reputation of our school, but this type of evidence is more convincing.

Another event of this month of October, another high school senior class in Santa Cruz came out to visit us, bringing food for our kitchen, a lot of clothes, and I do not know what all. This high school is part of the parish where I was pastor in the city, and the school principal was principal of the grade school we started while I was there. She is now the principal of the high school of the parish. (We were just getting the land for the high school when I left there in 2002.) She wanted her students to see another reality of Bolivia and what we are doing here, with our chickens, ducks, hogs, cows, large garden areas, our gastronomy building, etc. (She and her husband could not have children, so have adopted 3 and the two youngest came out with her, the oldest just finishing college, the second now a senior in her high school, the youngest in 5th or 6th grade school).

(Now November 3) My last letter told of our fear of not being able to continue our high school next year, but now we are sure WE WILL CONTINUE. Yes, we will cut some services that we have offered over the years, but our basic help will not stop. We encourage you who read this letter to consider continue helping us some, even if a small amount. We feel that education for the poor at this age of their lives is extremely important as the students are passing puberty, setting their own self-image and ideals, in the process of setting higher goals that will include for most of them further education and a profession. We are spreading our needs here and have interested people and organizations looking at us, but only 2 have responded so far to an insufficient amount. But without education the kids are doomed to repeat their parents' lives of uneducated and unskilled, poorly paid lives. But here there is also the moral education that our school gives. We continually repeat that their education must also benefit others, their communities, all those around them. Their education just can't be only for their benefit. JESUS CHRIST IS OUR MODEL AND OUR LIVES IN HIM MUST BE REFLECTED IN OUR LIVES FOR OTHERS. We feel that our work here goes beyond the students; it must touch our world too. We pray too that you all find it good to help those here in Bolivia. We still depend in part on you all there.

All Saints feast and All Souls feast show us that our world of this earth is only a small part of our existence. This earth is just a preparation for Real Life that Our Lord has prepared for us in the future. Jesus in His Life on this earth really teaches us this preparation, more in Action of Living than in Words. Let us now concentrate on Jesus' Life, imagine Him living today, then try With God's Grace, to Live Out this Jesus Life in our persons, in our space. Our World so needs us in our example. Please don't let down those around us who need our presence and example. Jesus lives today, but we are His Visual Body, and our world so needs to see Jesus in us.

Thank you for all your help, your prayer for us, our prayer for you all,

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames

We are volunteers supporting ETC Bolivia. The current contact information at the Diocese of Fort Worth to continue to financially support the children is: Dianna Rhoads (817) 533-3174 or via e-mail at: DRhoads@adv-fdn.org.

The following link takes you directly to the Diocese ETC-B web page for easiest access to donate on-line:
<https://fwdioc.org/educate-the-children-bolivia>.

To donate by paper check, make it payable to: Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth. On the memo line, please write, "For ETC-Bolivia, Fr. Thames Mission". Mail it to: Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth, 800 West Loop 820 South, Fort Worth, TX 76108-2919. Please reply to this e-mail if we may answer any questions.