

## Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter November 2018

Dear Family, I hope and pray that all goes well with all of you. Here is the November letter, hopefully letting all of you know some of what we do here, how we pass our time.

This is a Sunday that is very unusual, with me here at the computer writing this letter, December 2. So many times, I leave early or am doing other things on Sunday AM. Again, this afternoon I won't be going anywhere which is most unusual. I weekly go to a small community some 30 minutes from here to have a religious meditation with the adults and then bring the 4 to 5 kids in our high school back to Cabezas for classes. Not so today. Our classes ended on Friday, 30 Nov. Only the technical institute is yet operating, ending on December 15. Our regular high school will have graduation on Friday, Dec. 7. The little girl in kindergarten graduated yesterday. There are six from my house who will graduate this year, Monica who is "one of mine" with me since the second grade in elementary school. She is a good student although not the top student, still very good and serious. She will continue in a technical institute with graphic design, then hoping against hope with a job in graphic design to get into architecture at the state university. Just hope all goes as she wishes. She is from a single mother family whose mother also has psychological problems and can't maintain them, so she and her brother and sister have been with me for so long. Another graduate is Claudia who is very small, whom we have helped with a leg-lengthening (some 5 inches taller now). She hopes to get into the teacher training school. As a handicapped person she may have a priority status that will let her in. At least that is what she is hoping for. There is another girl, Rebecca, whose mother now is going blind and her Dad with two tumors. They live high on a ridge in the mountains northwest of Cabezas. There are also 3 young men, Andres, who is also serious like Monica, hopes to study computer engineering. He is quite capable, but both parents are alcoholics and no help. His older sister has been a help, studying part-time for some 10 years and helping him at the same time. The other two young men are Juan Jose (brother of Claudia, but of normal size), and Cleibert. I think Cleibert wants to become a military career person, but not sure, nor about Juan Jose. Both of these two are from families that live into the mountains northwest of here or close by the mountains.

With regret I must say that two of my house has failed, both for laziness, because both are capable intellectually. Both had the habit to miss some classes if they were not too interested in the subject, or missing an exam, or did not like the teacher. Both are in second year high school, equal to 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the U. S. One of them is "one of mine" which makes it harder yet for me. But two out of some 35 students are not so bad. I yet have hope for "mine". The teacher may give him a chance as final grades are not yet handed in. We will see this tomorrow, or so, I pray.

Another big event for us was Confirmations and First Communions of our students who prepared themselves during the year, participating in the retreats and classes in the high school on Tuesday night. This was held in our retreat center on November 16, a Friday. There were 25 Confirmations and some 10 who just made their First Communions being too young to be

confirmed. Here in Bolivia the age of Confirmation is 15, and First Communion age 10. I must say I prefer this age as the maturity of the young people is much better, to understand more of what they are doing. With our retreats and classes, we gave some 90 to 100 hours of class, prayer, bible reflections, and small group discussions. What we lack yet, and what I hope to correct this next year, is hours of service to the community. I don't know yet how we will do this as our students come from so many different communities and some from far away. This may have to be "in-house" service while in our school here. I envy those parishes that have service as part of their Confirmation class. This is so much in the "Gospel of Jesus Christ", living the Gospel, not just talking about it. Our retreat center and church where we participate is in the Vicariate of Camiri, to the southwest of Santa Cruz, where I act as pastor, just across the river from Abapó (a part of Abapó). The river divides the dioceses. As I have explained before a Vicariate is a mission diocese in Church language and receives help yet from the annual mission collection on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of October each year. The apostolic administrator who is head of the Vicariate could not come, but sent the head of the deanery that did a good job, probably in his late 40's. He had trouble with his vehicle on the way but made it anyway. Probably some 200 or more people came, but we can seat that many or more. Next year we will try to make more benches as some events are heavily attended. (We have First Communions of the community there this Saturday and I expect more than two hundred. I have had hours of confessions these last two weeks, plus baptisms (not sure how many now). Just to give you a sense of the Vicariate there are 27 parishes and 17 priests, 5 of whom are old and several limited in health to the city of Camiri (about 20,000 people, Camiri was the center of the oil/gas exploration and production in Bolivia, but now gas and oil have been discovered in many places so has less importance. Actually, Santa Cruz is becoming more and more the center.

There are many parts of Bolivia where Catholics are totally abandoned, never have they seen a priest or some visible person who represents the Church in some way or another. I think the Bishops are to blame for this as they are mostly very reserved in their forming of lay people and even the seminaries that form our priests. At present the Church, nation-wide, is talking about formation of lay people, but I have little hope of seeing much change. The archbishop of Santa Cruz thinks only university graduates should be formed in this, which for me is completely off the wall in a country where so few university graduates are active Catholics and so very few graduates in the country places. I see more property and institutional administrators rather than real pastors ready to give their lives for the people. But I am more severe than most. When Pope Francis came he talked directly to clergy and sisters about going out to the people, being a part of them, precisely because evidently his nuncio or papal representative must have given him the report that I think is our reality, a Church above and apart, more dedicated to prestige and easy living, not a part of the suffering of our people at large. (As a whole I think – my judgment – Mexico is much better than Bolivia in this area.) We so need urgently the spiritual formation in the Real Jesus Christ Who lived poor among the poor and gave His Life for our whole world from the Cross, regarded as the worse. It is Our God Who saves and we as His instruments that must be His in-world images. But I know too that I lack so much in spiritual formation and growth "into Jesus Christ", and am in so much need of the Mercy of Our God. Pray for our Church and pray for me too. Sexual abuses gain so much

publicity, but our sinfulness as Church is so much further than that, things that don't get headlines, but nevertheless are part of a lack of total conversion to Jesus Christ. And Church credibility suffers. I believe that the world desperately needs us, needs the Gospel of Jesus in the Flesh, visible in the Church, and we are lacking.

Bolivia's President Evo Morales decreed in 2011 to have technical courses in all the high schools of Bolivia. As I have said before no money or very little was set aside to bring this about. Our high school began in 2004 with two technical courses and over the years has increased to 11 courses that can be chosen by the students. But our public schools are sorely lacking in this. With the initiative of the district superintendent we began planning in late July or early August to have an event in Cabezas that would further this interest in parents and students showing the public the advantage of technical courses. There were two expositions, one in a town farthest to the north and another in our school with the public invited to help in this cause. Then the big event was to be in Cabezas with all the public school seniors brought in to see what all the high schools were doing, even if a little. The event was planned for the anniversary foundation of Cabezas as a municipality, November 26. There was some conflict with the municipal government who wanted the exposition to be a part of their celebration to bring more people in. We were not interested in that as we wanted to concentrate on education. Four other high schools came along with our school, but the municipal authorities would not let us use the main plaza, so we redrew to our own school with all the others with us. It did turn out very well, but maybe we would have had more folks in the main plaza. But the sun was very hot, and our place had shade for all the stands of the exposition while the plaza did not. That turned out better for us as other students saw what we are doing. Maybe it will cause them to push for more in their own schools. Actually, my own participation was a push for the poorer families. Obligatory technical courses allow poorer families to have their kids learn a profession in high school that gives those choices, either to stay with that profession for their lives or to work part-time after high school and study at the same time to learn another profession of their choice. At the same time, we are trying to develop our technical institute to have more career choices so that graduates who cannot have parent support to further studies in the city can stay around home, work some at odd jobs and study in our weekend courses to develop some profession. The advantage is that our technical institute is free or almost free. What we need yet is to have several locations for our technical institute to lessen transportation cost and time. This is what we have with the adult high school and we have more than 8 times the number of students in that school as in the technical institute. The adult high school also has technical courses. (Maybe you remember that our regular high school students can choose any one of the technical courses in adult high school or any of the courses in the technical institute, which courses are given in our school hours or on weekends.)(I just reread this and maybe I am confusing you all, hopefully not) This is what gives our kids the advantage of 11 career choices.

They as well as the adult high school graduates can now graduate with a technical medio degree.

After high school they can continue in the technical institute to a technical superior degree in another year and a half, something like a junior college degree in the U.S.

With Christmas coming, Advent already started, it seems good to say something about religious themes of Christmas. I am asking each of you about how your home is preparing for Christmas, what about a simple crib with Joseph and Mary, an empty manger, some shepherds and animals. And this needs to be more real-like, like it was in Bethlehem so long ago, humble and helping us take time to pray a little each day or at least several times a week before the manger, asking Jesus to take time with us in all that we are doing, maybe too entering into some of our problems that need the Presence of God in them. Christmas is God taking time with us, the beginning of some 30 to 33 years of His Son living our lives in a real-life context, living our human experience. Is it not then logical for us to take time with God, some few minutes, to read the Gospel of the Day, give thanks, ask help, think a little of the real-life experience of Jesus and how it might help us live a little better. So much of my own religious formation was at home, customs that remained in my memory from my earliest days that influenced my life. May be yours too.

May Our God bless all of you as I pray each day for all, and for our conflictive world, your brother in Jesus Christ,

Fr. Bob Thames