

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter November 2019

Family, all of you there, Greetings! Here is the November letter, hopefully it finds all of you well. I remember Anita of John McNamee in prayer. Thank all of you for your continued support.

Already it is the beginning of Advent, Saturday, Nov. 30, Christmas just around the corner, how time flies where there is not even time to reflect much. This has been the case for us here with all the conflict in the country and at the same time our lives and work go on. More so now that our school year is now ended, we were all doing all necessary to get ready for its final days. Some kids on the edge were given some extra work to help make their grades to passing quality, a rush that gave them hope, mostly justified with a passing mark. Some however in my house were not so lucky, or maybe better said they were just plain lazy when it came to studies, so they failed. Four now to my knowledge, hopefully no more. But out of 42 or 43 I do not consider that bad, knowing all the problems and hardships that some have lived through and are now with me. The last day of school was yesterday, Nov. 29 and I was gone all day at a meeting of pastoral folks in the diocese next over from the Santa Cruz Archdiocese. There is where I work in pastoral and where our church and retreat center are located. I will say more on the meeting later in the letter, really a winner! I would have liked to have been here on the last day, to say goodbye to the kids, ask what they will do for the summer (our time now south of the equator), Etc. It has been a good year, with some good things being made better, like our equipment for the chemistry lab. By the way more equipment arrived this last week, and we hope for more yet. The turmoil in the country has made us think that no more stuff would be coming, but evidently, we have not been forgotten. We have a very good and very interested chemistry professor and he will be back next year. This makes it even more important to have more equipment. And there are things that we will have extra here in the rural area, such as equipment to test soil and water for nutrients and balances of these that we will buy. We have some of this already that we have

bought and will have more yet. We want our kids to have the interest and the capability to do things that directly help them in their daily lives.

On the meeting yesterday of pastoral work in the diocese next door, I had arrived the day before thinking that the meeting began that day. I was told that it was just the arrival day in the night for folks who had to come from afar, as myself. The actual meeting would start the next day, Friday. I returned home and came back the next day with another person, the man who works with me in pastoral. It was worth all the trip and more, some two hours driving. We had excellent presentations on the recent Amazon Synod that Pope Francis had set up in Rome at St. Peter's. The themes were for me so timely and so important for the Church today. Considerations on so much of our people world-wide that are left out of any pastoral care, not for a few months but for years! The topic was directed to the jungle area of the center of Latin America that covers so much of our continent, but in all the world there are sections that have the same experience. So, what solutions? The proposals were to consider stable married men in the area who have been faithful for years and proven their faith value could be ordained priests and deacons and put into positions of pastoral care for folks who have not had such care. And the most controversial topic, make women to be deacons with the same pastoral authority and responsibilities. Of course, this was the case in the early church and is written about in the Pauline epistles. Votes were taken among those present and all the proposals passed with quite a good majority, some with more favorable votes than others, but all passed. It is now in the hands of the pope. I am writing all of this because our area of Bolivia is living the same experience. We have few priests, and many communities have not seen a priest in years. I am thinking of the parish just to the south of us, with some 120 villages and a larger town center of the parish of some 20,000 folks. I would estimate a parish of 70,000 to 80,000 people. The youngest priest there is 50 something, pushing 60, with two others late 70's and early 80's. Some villages have not seen a priest for some 20 years or more. The amazing thing is that so many folks still maintain their faith with home practices and home teaching their kids. So, some men who were trained as lay catechists have now started their own churches related to the Assembly of God, but most just have their own churches and take collections for

themselves, each being his own pope, not related in anyway with the Catholic Church. This covers a large area all the way into Paraguay and to the north into my area, where I had some 50 villages, working some 38 of them at least once a month, the bigger ones twice a month. I had religious sisters and lay folks who covered the same villages each week when I was not there with a bible study and prayer. But the archbishop stopped all the lay folks when I retired. It was just too much for me at 78 years old to keep the pace. Now two priests who took my place are giving service in a total 8 villages and towns together. So many faithful people are now just abandoned. I see Our God opening our Church to see new horizons, older practices already tried and found to be effective. Again, I am thinking that with the Bishop next door so in favor we might just have the future catechists trained in our schools on a volunteer basis, preparing them for future ministry in their villages. We have of course not only our regular high school students, but also our adult high school students who are older and working, many with families, along with our technical institute students. These services put us into contact with so many villages and with so many young folks of different ages, some of whom will have an interest in their Faith, desiring to serve their communities in these capacities. Another level of education and people who will serve in more than just the material things that maintain a home with kids, also serving communities in the affairs of Our God!

Just a little on the turmoil that some of you might have read about because of the political elections and the fallout afterwards. You surely have seen some things on TV and in the newspapers. Our area was hardly affected directly. Our only conflict was a roadblock to the southwest that was not so tight as traffic was allowed to pass through regularly after some wait. All ambulances, food and vehicle fuel could pass immediately. Then after the national government began to settle down a group here took over the municipal government offices, ousted the mayor who had been there too long and unfortunately corrupted. He put in his resignation and a member of the municipal council was put into the office, a very good and honest man. He will serve until the next elections next May (National government elections seem now to be set for next March). Fortunately, much corruption has now been revealed in the national scene, and hopefully will be handled honestly and justly. Surely

many of you who help us here have read about all of this. Now we are at peace again, life goes on. Many schools in the cities were stopped in the conflict and classes were extended another week to cover losses. Not so with us, never failing one day and so finished on time at the end of November.

Our high school graduation will be the morning of Dec. 6, Friday. We just finished this week a two-day retreat (Nov. 26-27) for these seniors; sadly, only about half came to the retreat. Actually, we had wanted to have the retreat several weeks earlier, but the political problems prevented it. More students would have come had we had it earlier. Also, it was hot and sweaty, meaning we should consider some time in August or September in the future. The retreat started slowly but finished with lots of enthusiasm, all to help them plan their future with good goals and how to reach them. But our major concentration was on making a good marriage and being good parents. So many of our kids have come from broken homes, we just do not want this to happen to them if we can help prevent it. Actually, we had retreats annually for the first years of the school but had stopped for the cost. Now we have our own center and nearby that is a double plus.

We are moving ahead on our building of a lot of hydroponic, the type of greenhouse that uses water with nutrients to produce vegetables. Before Christmas we will have at least 1000 square meters working, maybe more, with our goal to have 2000 sq. by the end of February. We need a minimum of 4000 sq. just as a starter. Our hope is to get some help from the new government, and this seems at least now very possible, another 2600 sq. meters. Please pray that all goes well in this endeavor. Our God has been the Cause of our schools from the beginning and continues to move us forward. We just can't stop now with Our Lord's help!

Back earlier in the school year, probably in September or maybe even August when there were a lot of fires burning forest here in Bolivia as well as in Brazil, a professor of the technical institute with a specialty of forestry offered to start making seedlings to plant next year when the seedlings would be taller and more likely to live. A group of students, some 25 or so, volunteered to give Thursday afternoons to help her. I don't know how many seedlings they have made, in the thousands, but

they are many. To honor this group and to say THANK YOU to them, we had a big cake made with all the decorations along with soda on the last Thursday that was free for them. There was a lot of enthusiasm, and I am most grateful to them. We will do our part to help save the planet here as best we can. And our senior class since July or maybe even June has been collecting plastic soda bottles to put into a big press and so compacted to be sold in Santa Cruz. It helped them with their graduation money but also helped imprint in their minds the need of conservation practices for their lives. The big press is owned by the municipal government, but they were not using it, so loaned it to us. I want to continue this in the summer with the kids in my house. We will see if it catches on.

With all the political problems it has put me to reflect much on the place of moral in our society. This should be the role of good religion, but many times we have failed in our offering to our society. I have talked a lot in my letters in this time and even before about the role of testimony, not words but lives that live the Gospel of Jesus in such a way that Our Christ shines through and people notice it. This is never easy, especially when the dominant society displays disgust for those who live such lives. There are ways of getting a Christian message into the media, but this is so often just words. Jesus Christ was never just words, as St. John speaks so plainly in St. John 1:14, "And the Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." The flesh of our lives must reflect the presence of Jesus in us, meaning our Baptism and the Eucharist we receive weekly, must show out into our world. NEVER EASY BUT NECESSARY! St. John will add in his first epistle 3:18 "Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth." In my mind the word "truth" in St. John means always the concrete life-style of Jesus Christ, the true human being that Our God wished from the moment of our creation in Adam and Eve but was lost in the fall of our first parents. Jesus in the flesh came to restore us the possibility of living the "Truth" again with Grace of the Holy Spirit poured forth from the side of Jesus on the cross (St. John 19,31-37). This is what we receive in the Sacraments, our prayer and bible meditations, and especially in works of charity.

Please remember us in PRAYER DAILY, and in some money-help that keeps us going as we work for self-sustainment. There are two steps in this, one is production, the second is selling. We are working on both and I will share what all we are doing sometime in the future when we have some more concrete steps in this area.

Meanwhile THANK ALL OF YOU for this continued help to us as we continue to help those whom without us would be left out in our world!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames