

## FR Thames December Letter

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Today is the 29th of December; it rained hard last night for 3 hours then continued to rain off and on until about 10 AM this morning. We are really fortunate this year for the amount of rain since September. Remember we are farmers and hoping for a good harvest this year in 2018. This is our summer vacation from school and some 8 or so older high school kids are working our land with two adults. Other young folks are here in Cabezas doing different jobs, sewing, setting up a natural medicine center with another adult, helping cook for the workers and the rest of us who stay here. I feel a little lazy with no community Masses to have except a few to the south, but when I think of visiting some villages as I have promised to do, I feel tired too. Too many years running too much, and although I miss being in the homes, visiting, and in the small village chapels and homes for Mass, the area is just too large for me, and too large even for a younger person. There may be a change this next year, but the archbishop hopes the present priest will stay on. The people feel so abandoned with him who gives very few Masses, no attention to the sick, no setting up catechism classes. We will just see what happens in February, the usual time of priest changes.

Meanwhile we here at the school are preparing for next year, starting to set up programs for retreats that will include Sacramental preparation of First Communion and Confirmation. The diocese to the southwest of Cabezas which begins with the river at Abapó has received us with open arms when we attended a pastoral meeting of priests on Dec. 19 (invited by him). So we are established there as part of them. We will use the retreat center-church as our hub of operations, spreading out to the small villages to the southeast and southwest. We know so many of the families there as almost all of the families have now or have had kids in our school, some 70 or so at present.

Our graduation of this last year's senior class was on Dec. 7, a Thursday in the morning. As usual the start was late, was supposed to be at 10AM and began on 11:45. Normal for us here, so well accepted. There were 42 graduates this year as I had said in the last letter. No one failed so all are going on. Some cry, especially the girls, who are leaving after so many years here, parting from friends who have become more like family over the years. I attended this year's celebration, escorting one young person whose family did not come. My hope always is that this is just the start of an educational formation that will continue on at least with one year in a technical institute if not three, or even in the University of 4 to 5 years of study. We have a first this year with one young man managing to enter medical school. Unfortunately it is a political influenced entrance, not necessarily based on talent, but the young man is capable and also hopefully dedicated to serve with his profession. He is a graduate too of our physical therapy course and has helped others in his free time as assigned work in the course. At present all the doctors in the public hospitals in Bolivia are on strike against a new law that holds doctors responsible for any mess-ups, especially in surgeries, or other mal-practice. Road-blocks are again their method, making it hard for us coming and going to the city to buy needed supplies.

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I do not get into these things, too political and no one really wins, just the public who suffer. I personally know several doctors, who treat me free of charge and also give special benefit to our kids.

I mentioned in the last letter of a retreat for couples of children that was to be held on Dec. 8, the biggest Marian feast in our area. About 100 folks came, but mostly women and children of all ages, very few couples as it was a Friday and men had to work that day. So no program, but there was food after the Mass which followed the procession of about 30 to 40 minutes. A beautiful day, that became hot as the time wore on. In the afternoon after I left there was a big meal served to all who stayed, usual for big celebrations like this. The same housing area called a barrio will celebrate its anniversary on Dec. 31, Saint Sylvester, whose name the barrio carries. It will be held, this Sunday, further up the hill in an open area of a house, which family always provides the meal again for all who come.

The retreat center is being finished today at about 3 PM (later changed to 4:30PM) with the final part of the roof being put on. The problem of delay was the maker of the roof (steel beams covered with tin) who had an accident in late November and could not do the work for two or three weeks. But I wait on him. He has done a lot of our buildings since the beginning and in 14 years we have never had any problems. Others whom we have had have not been so good. So I waited for him to heal. Of course it serves as a church too and continues to have Masses there. A family has promised to help put a cement/brick floor, which at present is sand. We will see. I hope too that with my collaboration the community will put some walls, at least to 5 feet high. To have it all closed in will make it impossibly hot, but with no walls as now, the wind blows dust and when it rains the wind blows water in the area. I hope to get some pictures when it is all finished. We now have rustic benches (cut planks on log trunks) with some regular benches that together seat over 300 folks. You see it is rather large (just over 3400 square ft.). But our student retreats will try to limit our attendance to about 70 to 100 if that many. I see quality lessening when the numbers are so large, too little time for each person. Also I hope to build a log and plank nativity scene ( the stable at Bethlehem) to be used as a Blessed Sacrament chapel during retreats, maybe with a fabricated cow and sheep cardboard animals to resemble Bethlehem and Jesus' Birth among us. The Humbleness of Jesus throughout His Life on the earth still holds me, impresses me as revealing who is Our God. I hope the kids there can capture spiritually the Greatness of Our Lord who chose to live so lowly among us (Our Servant God in truth).

While I am on Christmas we still had our big Christmas meal on Dec. 26 as always for the past 14 years. There were about 45 folks, kids who live with us full time and the workers with their families. We had food left over which we are yet eating, but the specialty was our ice cream, really great. We had bought an imported ice creamer

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freezer from a Mennonite family, but we couldn't get it to work. So we made the ice cream in big plastic containers, then put it into the freezing department on our refrigerators, let it begin to freeze, then took it out to stir it twice before it became too frozen. It worked, and all ate plenty, with little left over.

This was a trial to see if the Bolivian taste would accept this. Now we hope to sell some not only to students in the school, but to folks outside too. Our chocolate was especially good, natural chocolate which grows abundantly in Bolivia in the jungle area north of here. As you might well know there is a chocolate tree that produces chocolate in a nut, which is broken open and its contents taken out, heated to turn into a paste. It is this natural chocolate that we use, with our whole milk and cream, Excellently Delicious!

Back to graduations along with our regular high school graduation we had technical graduations, 16 students terminating physical therapy with a 3 year study course, and other areas as well. Two students were special to me, a brother and sister, Miguel and Rocio, whom I raised for a number of years until 18 but did not finish high school, later married, and now finished in our adult program. I escorted them both to receive their diplomas.

This brings me also to the construction of our new adult high school building which includes 3 classrooms and a small auditorium that will be used by all groups as the need presents, holding about 200 folks. The auditorium will also be able to be portioned by moveable walls to form two large classrooms as needed. We are also building our new technical school building with 8 classrooms and an office with storeroom. I mention this because so many of our kids in regular high school dropout mostly because of need to work to support the family usually, and are in need of another program to finish. (I have said this before, sorry) This is what we are doing, providing the only programs that assist those types of students in all our area for over a 100 miles around. Most of these kids are the poorest who drop out, and when in our own school with free school supplies they are too embarrassed to ask for the supplies needed. As with the case of the two that I raised, as almost all others too, they are married now with kids, so must work. So our adult high school is all on weekends, or in some small towns, on weekday nights, as our program of adult education is carried on in 5 locations with professors going out to the area where at least 10 students will gather.

I have said so many times before the following, but it seems good to do so again. I am deeply moved by the Humbleness of Jesus in all of life while He lived among us. St. John records Jesus' words saying He does only what He sees the Father do (John 5,19) and He judges only from what He hears from the Father (John 5,30). Our doctrine from St. Paul and other Scriptures tell us that Jesus was the Faithful Manifestation of

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the Father (Read all of the text of Philippians 2, 1-11. This can only mean that Our Creator Jesus with the Father (read Colossians 1,12-20) is Servant to our world, Servant to creatures created by Our Creator. As ST. Augustine said so many years ago (I have learned that he was not the only one who said so) "God became human so humans could become gods (to be with God in Grace).

That must mean too that the Church, The Body of Christ, the visibility of Our God on earth today, must be The Humble Servant in our world. If we take seriously this Mission of ours today, believe more completely all that Jesus lived and showed from the Father, then we believers must be servants of the rest of our world. St. Fulgencio (a bishop in 6<sup>th</sup> century in North Africa and Italy) in a text in the priestly breviary for the feast of St. Stephen Martyr of December 26, says so many times that Jesus showed charity in all its forms, physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual (my way of saying it), then it is our role as believers to live out today this same charity. The same saint says the charity of Jesus converted Stephen to be bold to the end, pardoning those who were killing him and this same charity lived out by Stephen changed Saul in charge of the killing detail to become St. Paul in his charity. May our charity be so contagious! This can only mean for us today, humble service to those around us, in all the various particular needs of Mission today. The world so needs us, the new Birth of Jesus in His Body the Church, to **make visible this love poured out from the Father in Jesus Christ in the Power of the Holy Spirit**. May this Spirit of Jesus make us so bold in action so as not to grow weak in charity when all the rest around us are discriminating, or wanting more of the material world, or not wanting to share with those more in need and laugh at us who do so, are opposed to us when we want equality for all world-wide that for which Jesus lived and died to bring about. **Our charity so needed today to turn our world around!** (Now 1 Jan, 2018)

When you receive this it may well be into the New Year, so A Very Holy Growing into the Fullness of Jesus Christ for all of you! Your brother in Jesus Christ, Fr. Bob Thames