

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter  
December 2019

Already it is January 3, and I am just now starting this letter. Lazy and rains have kept me from doing much in pastoral. THANK GOD FOR THE RAINS! But I have just been sitting around, mostly doing nothing of consequence.

The big event of this past month of December must be the graduations, both of our regular high school and then our adult high school, the first being on Dec. 6 and the other on Dec. 7. The regular high school graduation with 48 students (second highest number in our history and second highest this year in our whole district) was a sunny, hot and muggy day, but with loads of folks coming, filling our type of gymnasium (covered basketball court in the U. S.) Both side stands were full as well as chairs benches that almost filled the middle. It was scheduled for 10 AM, but as usual it was late, starting about 11:45 and finished just after 2 PM. But no one seems to mind, this is so normal. Actually, report cards were given starting from 9 AM and both students and parents keep coming in, little by little. Of course, the mood is always joyous, no one failed, all received their diploma and are off to another segment of their lives, some with a level of sadness after having lived here for some 6 years or more most of the year. And close friends who are unsure of seeing each other again even crying, leaving our place. I think this year will see more of them from our graduating class back next year in our technical institute, as it is getting better in quality and more respected. And also, it is the cheapest for those who live around here, with a diploma that is accepted all over the country (more on this later in this letter). I had several of the graduates that have lived with us here since first grade elementary and had asked me to be part of their escort to the front, as well as others who just wanted me to accompany them. This year more than any other that I can remember. The top student in the class

always receives a scholarship directly with entrance into the state university in Santa Cruz and is awarded the pleasure of bringing in the big banner of our school and passing it on the highest student in the junior class, this year both girls. I had a chance to say a few words which I used as usual to impress the kids that education is for service to the community (our gifts are for the common good. 1 Corinthians 12,7. I also mentioned our technical institute that can offer yet more courses if there are more students, and maybe this year even offer some transportation if there are enough students for a small fee to justify our trucks up and down the highway, northeast and southwest.

The regular high school graduation was Dec. 6. Then on December 7 we had the adult high school graduation, also in our covered basketball court. There were two types of graduations as we give diplomas for their high school studies, but also give diplomas for their technical studies. We have had problems in previous years with this latter diploma as the Ministry of Education was just setting up the requirements for documents, and many times before this there were a lot of problems with documents. But the school principal this year put a lot of time and effort to see that all who studied here got their diplomas, both in regular studies and their technical course diploma. Just a note to clarify a point here. Some are just studying for their high school diploma, others just for their technical studies, while others are studying for both. Technical courses in our adult high school is only to a tecnico medio (two years of study by professors less trained, not as in the technical institute which gives tecnico superior (3 years of study, professors of university level). So, this meant a lot of time for all to get their due diploma. Now altogether with our regular high school and our adult high school we have passed above 1100 students with high school diplomas. And I do not know how many have received their technical training diplomas. We are hugging 1200 or more in all the graduations, making a big difference in the future for those who

have passed through our place over the years. We are making a difference in our whole area!

Now going back a day to December 5, a Thursday evening, we had our high school Sacrament of Confirmations in our church in San Sylvester barrio in Abapó across the river. This included some 12 of our high school and another 18 from the surrounding area who completed the course and were confirmed. It was a beautiful ceremony, with Bishop Jesus Galeote of Camiri in whose vicariate apostolic the church is located. He is a young bishop, ordained for the vicariate last May, really a bishop of the people, coming early to mix and know folks, then staying afterwards to meet, talk, and eat with all. I actually left about 45 minutes after the Mass had finished, and he was yet there at a table talking and listening, just enjoying himself. He had decided to stay in the next biggest town to the southwest for the night (one hour away) rather than the two hour drive back to Camiri, so was not in a hurry. The local people were taken back and really enjoyed it all, with the beautiful celebration and great community closeness that was generated. If only we had more of this in our world-wide (catholic meaning universal in its original Greek) Church. I was gone so much at the beginning of this past year, but I'll be here this year and hope to put a lot more emphasis on the Sacrament of Confirmation in our high school. But I want to include service as part of its formation process, not just studying doctrine. The Gospel is to be lived, that shows outwardly our belief. Testimony must be an integral part of our Faith in Jesus Whose Testimony in Life and Death on the Cross is so central to our way of life. Part of the formation this past year did included a pilgrimage to the big Marian shrine just east of Santa Cruz, and a visit to the home for severely damaged special people near the shrine. There are some 120 folks there and left our kids dumbfounded to see their condition and the attention given by believers of our Church. (The superior of the house is a man

religious, but just about all the people working there are lay employees who too are dedicated.)

Just a small note on the vicariate and the bishop there, there was a day and a half in December of pastoral planning that wowed me in its openness to seeing the needs of the people in so many small communities that populate all of our area all the way to the south to Paraguay. The work document was the recent results of the synod in Rome (October 2019 on Amazonia) under the direction of Pope Francis, talking of the need for more pastoral ministers, lay formation, possible ordaining established laymen as priests who have shown faithfulness throughout the years, as well as women deacons. The needs of the people of our time must be the main determinate in our pastoral, studying the early Church and our needs today, leaving behind rules and regulations made in years past that no longer help us in the Faith to Be Lived.

This our summer time in Bolivia has seen some 21 or so youth staying in our house, mostly to work, although some few are rather inactive, mostly results of an early childhood of disorientation, mostly caused by alcohol. I have worked with these to some success, though not as much as I would have liked. Their future will depend on a type of self-discipline that will make possible their lives without too much suffering. Almost all our bread-making, cheese, garden, etc. cooking for all meals in the kitchen, plus milking our cows, etc. have been done by these students, some with supervision, others without, with great success. I am proud of it.

We continue to work on our hydroponic structures, now with the structure of just over 1000 square meters done, and now putting on the plastic sheeting (almost all done) and installing the electrical system that will man the pumps that make the water with fertilizers flow through constantly. We have calculated that this is the best way to make our schools self-supporting implying that we must sell our produce in one way or another. We are on to this as

well. Pictures of some of our work are on our Facebook page under Fundacion Ñombori Opaetepegua. Probably next week there will be newer pictures put on as the man who does this is out visiting his Dad (Mom died years back when he was young). He is also finishing up some final papers on his master's degree in psychology in the university closer to his home, west of here in the center of the country. He hopes someday to land a professorship in the Catholic University in Santa Cruz or another university there. There are many so I think he will eventually get one. Meanwhile he has made a workshop in project writing and has helped us with some of this, again hoping to get some funds for at least part of what we need here, to continue to be better, more equipped.

Even though the national political scene has calmed down, our own situation is just now settling. A group of folks from one party took over the local government offices, threw out the ones who were there. But the new person appointed by the folks did not have the right to sign checks, so no worker was paid for the time. This has just been decided in the court this last Tuesday, Dec. 31, and the new head is now in the process of getting his name on the check-writing so all can be paid. This includes many of the hospital workers and even medicines that are essential to its operation. TURMOIL! I called the new man just a couple of hours ago and he was in the city in the court trying to get all straightened out. At least not the violence of when I first came to Bolivia, two military takeovers and many (in the thousands) killed. Some now were killed in El Alto above La Paz and a few near Cochabamba, but this may have been done by folks from outside who wanted to start a violent struggle, hoping that the military would react and cause more violence, justifying an armed struggle. Actually, some ex-guerrillas from Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia were involved. Thank Goodness it ended there, and things have calmed down.

A note on our technical institute, hoping with the new government we can have more career choices, adding veterinary science,

business administration, and farm mechanics. I would like to see us again have classes on weekends which the former government denied. It would open the door for many here who must work to support a family but would take advantage of weekend classes. We will see later this month or early February.

**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."** John 1,14. This passage so haunts me, inspires me, because it so projects, so reveals to our world, to our human race something so "other worldly". It seems that we cannot comprehend the depth of this in practice. I know without doubt we talk a lot, think a lot, philosophize a lot, but when it comes to practice it seems we opt more for this world-view rather than the "other worldly" message it contains. I am speaking here of us believers, the Church. I am speaking of the Life that Jesus lived, a life totally given over to the service of others, ultimately giving his total worldly existence for the good of our humanity. And this act of Total Giving continues in the Eucharist, sharing with us who receive the Body and Blood of Jesus but many times with little or no intention of striving to live out this same act in our daily lives. What a difference it would make if even 50% of all Catholics would suddenly begin to live the power of this type of life, made possible by the Grace-Power of total loving, AGAPE LOVE, seen so easily in Jesus' life, so strongly and impressionable in the Eucharist. What I am proclaiming here is LOVE MADE VISIBLE in Jesus Christ in the Flesh which was precisely done for our world's good, our salvation, not only making it possible for us to enter heaven, but also to be leaven of total love in the mass of humanity and light in the darkness of our world today. We need total loving Believers as our world continues to disintegrate in family life, large sections in violence whether political and economic conditions that made migration necessary, or just plain open warfare. We need urgently some counter-balance of loving found in JESUS CHRIST MADE

FLESH. This is the purpose of the followers of Jesus, His Body, to be precisely NEW WORLD MAKERS, HEAVEN DIRECTED LIVING that brings love to the front of lives where hate, greed, just pure egotistical behavior, have so much sway.

Please remember us in your prayer and in your deciding to help some place. MAY OUR LORD SO BLESS ALL OF YOU IN THIS NEW YEAR WITH HAPPINESS THAT ONLY OUR LORD CAN GIVE.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Fr. Bob Thames