

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter December 2020

To all of you who make what we do possible,

Greetings to all of you in this New Year! MAY IT BRING NEW BLESSINGS FROM OUR LORD, WITHOUT ANY PANDEMIA! (Actually, I am starting to write this on Tuesday, Dec. 29, but have no intention of finishing it until next week.) So many good things have happened in these days, and I just want to start to tell some of them now. This doesn't mean that some bad things have also come our way, but the good has outweighed the bad by enough.

First of all, Christmas Eve. It was decided among all the kids in the house that it would be good to go to the Christmas Eve Mass in the chapel where I am pastor across the river in Abapò. Of course, transportation is always a problem, not enough cars to carry all, some 18 to 20 who would go. Finally, it was decided to use an older pickup we have but are careful not to use it too often. With a few kids in the car with me, and all the rest piled into the pickup, it did make it to the chapel, and we had a beautiful Mass, singing, with the Nativity crib in front of the altar. A family with their kids all together walked in front of me carrying the Christ Child and placed It in the crib. This happens to be one of the best families actively speaking, one who lives more our Faith. The father is a schoolteacher in a small village nearby. There was food after the Mass, which is normal in this chapel, nice, good for fraternity, more especially at Christmas. A lot of folks came, probably over a hundred, but I did not count, with most of all our benches filled all around. Edil, the guitarist who lives with us played and led the singing, with a newer person now who plays the drum, beating out a good rhythm.

As in the city too all the folks who have a Christ Child in their own Nativity set at home brought theirs to receive a blessing with Holy Water (really a strong custom in Santa Cruz, with hundreds of them around the Altar, and always someone or several lose theirs in the process of picking theirs up after Mass—tears that follow, hunting to find theirs, but so many are look-alike, it is hard to say which one was theirs.) The Mass began a 7 pm and finally finished with food and all around 9:30 or 10. And we began our return to the house in Cabezas.

That's when the trouble started. The pickup went ahead of my car as I stayed talking with some. But about a little less than a mile from Cabezas the pickup blew a tire and no spare had been brought. We had some of our cars from the house to pick up the kids. We also arranged for a car to pull the pickup home so as not to leave it on the highway. (our best truck had just brought 3 new cows and two calves that afternoon just at the time I was leaving, which messed up the back bed, no time to clean it, so it was not available. Farmers will know what I mean.) We had fruitcake (10 of them) and ice cream waiting in the house when all finally arrived. But I was tired and went on the bed about 11 pm without eating before the kids arrived. (Besides getting ready for the Mass in the evening, I had had a type of funeral in the afternoon in a house halfway between Cabezas and Abapò. This is a custom of many, having another funeral to remember their kin after 9 days, and/or 6 months, and/or one year. In this case was a son and a dad who both had the same given name.) In the morning I awoke before all the kids to find that all the ice cream had been eaten, only about two and

half gallons among some 20 kids, (our home-made ice cream is delicious, so to be expected) but there was fruit cake left. The kids also had shared their presents with one another that night (remember the secret friend presents mentioned in the last letter, when names are drawn among kids and presents given on Christmas Eve after Mass). You might remember more kids in my house, but some of them had gone to relatives and those with parents (at least six that I can remember right now), so there were fewer at the time. Our home is more and more blessed as it is becoming in fact a true family!

As on other weekends I had Mass on Saturday AM and again on Sunday AM. Again, the kids came with us for the Mass Sunday AM, but immediately after the Sunday Mass I left with several kids to a small village far to the south for First Confessions and First Communions there. This turned out really well. First, I had Confessions and then the first communicants dressed up in silk-like white robes (both girls and boys). As Edil had gone to see his Dad (His Mom died many years ago and his Dad remarried now with more kids). Miriam, a young woman who has been with us quite a few years played and sang with the same drummer. The Mass was on the front porch of a house nearby the catechist as the space in her house is very limited. Again 5 kids from the house came with us. After the Mass there were photos and then food for all. We got back home at almost 4 pm, a rather long day. This community is unique in two ways. First the catechist is an ex-religious sister from the parish where I was in the city. When she left the convent quite a few years ago after 5 years inside, she came out to be with us. There she met and eventually married her husband, a professor in our technical institute. So, she went to live and raise her family there in the country. But her husband's family is a little different, rather strongly catholic, 11 children, now all grown (the father just died, and I had his funeral in early December). All the kids now married and with quite a few kids of their own. Education was an important part of their growing up and so most now, if not all, are professionals, most of whom now live in the city, yet a few live in the rural community about an hour and a half south of Cabezas. We got stuck in the mud just before their house and had to be pushed out. The sun came out and dried the mud enough for our return without any problem. I really enjoyed the Mass and all the family atmosphere in its celebration, more like the original Mass in Jerusalem some 2000 years back. For me this is the finest in missionary work, small community celebrations with all knowing each other and are supportive of each other, like family. It is so easy to see and touch Jesus there! And be touched by Him!

(Now written on January 3, 2021) Can we recall a catacombs Mass of believers risking their lives to be there? I recall some early Church Fathers who spoke on this. It is not the material stones that build the Church of Jesus Christ, rather Living Stones that make the Body of Jesus The Lord. It is a message so needed today, Living Stones of Faith-Filled people who like the Wise Men who followed through for two years to find and worship the Humble Child in Bethlehem. No worldly grandeur, no big display that this contemporary time imagines and builds to gain attention of a world so enthralled with material importance, but yet Our God Who holds in His Hands this whole universe created by Him (read and meditate Colossians 1,15-20), this Same Baby in the Virgin Mary's arms that day when Faith-led Wise Men finally completed two years of very hard travel, recognizing God Creator in an Infant. Could we have such Faith today? (re-read Matthew 2,1-12, imagine it all as in a movie in your imagination). (Some will say that this story perhaps never really happened, at least in most parts,

but I hold to the main events here, written by St. Matthew so early – in the 60's to 70's AD -while some of the second generation of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were yet living, hard pressed to have this passed on if those living witnesses did not testify to the basic truth of the events. I hold to St. Matthew's Gospel to have been written in Hebrew in the Holy Land if not in Jerusalem proper, then later translated to Greek, so a witness with the first generation of Christians in Israel, especially in Jerusalem where Jesus' family, especially James, the Lord's brother (step-brother Mark 6,1-6), was head of the Christian Believing Community (there are several other early church documents which testify to James and the early Christian Jewish community). See more recent studies of literature written after the finding and studying the Essene documents and other contemporary documents, plus archeological investigations brought out in the last 40-60 years in Israel itself. These things have changed my mind from some of what I learned in the early 1960's in the seminary.) I have relied much on a Benedictine priest who lived some 40 years in the Holy Land, a professor of several seminaries and did quite a bit of archeological work too, a specialist in Hebrew Christian literature, as well as Essene studies. I have read his book twice, but as it was in English, I carried the book to the U. S. and have forgotten his name now.

Now on to other events. On Dec. 28, in keeping with our long custom of having a big meal with all our workers and their families, plus the kids who live with us, we had a huge meal for all here in our house. This actually was the best organized and carried out that I can remember. And better yet, all the folks came together at one time, as opposed to having a few come, eat and leave, then others the same, then others, as in other years. We set up tables for all, and food set out so all could eat at the same time. It was very good, at least in my mind. Luzbaida was mainly responsible for this, very well done. There was lots of ice cream, the Mexican cake of 3 leches (3 types of milk), my favorite. Unfortunately, I have more control now over my eating than before, so did not eat as much as in other years. But I did sit back to see all the others enjoy themselves. Again, THANKS TO OUR GOD!

This next week some of the professors, our high school principal, probably the district superintendent, and myself will meet to start to plan classes that will begin on February first. The national government's education ministry has given some guidelines to be applied but must meet the local municipal government and their medical team's criteria for our specific area. I am hopeful even though there is a big rise in virus cases in the country, most of these are in the big cities. To my knowledge there are no cases in our area. As I had mentioned before the dorms for the kids presents a problem for us. Pray for us that all works out to the advantage of our kids and their education. We are your hands in service to those who otherwise would be left out literally in a world that constantly advances in education.

Now it is January 5, and I was called this morning by our school principal of a meeting tomorrow morning at 8 am in our library to plan our educational procedure for this year that begins on February first. What I have said above applies for our meeting tomorrow. I will write more later when we know more for sure. Our school inscriptions will begin I believe on Jan. 18, if not earlier. Just this morning a man came from Santa Cruz to ask about his stepdaughter whom he would like to see enrolled with us. She has some problems because of the first marriage of his wife and the separation. He thinks that we are capable of helping her here more than another school. In reality

we have done a lot of good for lots of kids, which he had known when he was a soldier in the military base in Cabezas in 2012. That`s why he came to us now. Not only do we have psychologists here with us, but our teachers give more time and energy to help individual students than other schools. As soon as I know how we will proceed with teaching this school year I will write to all of you again.

Just an appeal for help here for our school. Yesterday I received a financial report from the Diocesan office. It will be hard for us with what we have right now to finish the school year. It is our hope to be more and more self-sufficient, but right now that is more a wish than reality. We certainly are doing better, but there are several things that are yet uncertain for us. So, I am asking for your help (scholarships of \$35 monthly, or \$420 a year, or just some donation that will help us during this year of 2021. All money given through the Diocese does come to us.) Our prayer is guaranteed for you that Our Lord will bless any effort on your part.

I thank all of you for your support during these many years that we have existed, with now over 1200 students having finished their high school education with us that otherwise would not have been possible for them. As I have shown in other letters this past year, we help the poorest of our wide area, we are known for that, and are sought out because of it.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames