

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter
February 2021

With this letter I greet all of you there, hoping that all goes well with all of you. (Saturday, February 27) Hopefully no one of you is ill with the virus or other sickness. Here we are yet still doing well, no real sickness at least to my knowledge. My house keeps getting more students, and I am not sure that that is all well and good. But the needs of poorer families and those who live far away from here motivate me to take some more in. The fact that the kids live further away means that the kids cannot go home on weekends, so need to stay. My house is a 7 day a week place, different from the school dorms. I believe that we are passing 28 to 30 now who live here, not so healthy, but so far God has protected us. I was just checked with a blood test two days ago and all yet was negative. The school principal does not want to keep receiving students now that we are one month into the school year. But virus fears have made folks a little slow in bringing in their kids. But education is so needed in the life of anyone, so I keep pushing to receive the later ones. We are now at about 350 students, just a little under what we had before the virus came around last year. (Note: now 4 days later, there are now 42 students in my house, something like two years ago. But this year so far better behaved less trouble. Pray it stays that way.)

Our classes continue now as I wrote in the last letter, Monday to Wednesday for 6th primary to 9th grade, then Thursday to Saturday for 10th to 12th. Then each room is divided into two groups into two classrooms next to each other, one with the teacher, the other with a large TV transmitting the teacher live next door. I am just repeating the last letter, hopefully not boring you all. But all has worked out very well. All the school (all dorms, classrooms, library, etc. are dis-infected twice a week, including my house, even with a liquid that protects from dengue, a very prevalent disease here, with more deaths normally than other diseases. This includes my office which is used constantly by students doing research on the extra Dell laptop given by Mike Wuller in Fort Worth (if I am not mistaken). It has been a strong support for so many here in my house, doing homework. The professors even in our school give homework that demands use of internet, either by laptop or telephone which has that access. What a nuisance at times that the kids have cell phones, but it is showing its value now even here in Bolivia. Before school started I made threats that if I found kids looking at videos or soap operas I would smash their phones with my hammer. But the reality is now that the cellphone is so indispensable for studies for us even here today.

(Now Tuesday, March 2) Having two groups of kids here now also means two religious celebrations each week for the students. Tonight, is for the smaller kids, 11 to 14, (the rule in Bolivia is First Communion classes for 10 yrs. old or older) so we will organize tonight for the First Communion classes (In my house we are already organized, at least to some extent—more on my house below). This year after finding a pretty good study text of the New Testament with lots of exercises that are almost games, but demand reading passages of the New Testament to be able to do the games involved, we have decided to use this. More than that I want those of who have a home with parents to take the book home to do the work with the parents helping. Our desire is to involve the parents who without much doubt need the study as well. And the text is rather cheap as well, published here in Santa Cruz, prepared by a priest and sister whom I know. This is the best text that I have seen from them. I may as well have the Confirmation kids to use the book also, but we will add much more activities of service for them. At least one half of the preparation for Confirmation will be activities of service and other activities to help introduce them into the active Catholic life here in our area of Bolivia. This will mean a lot of service, the very essence of being Catholic as I understand it, without which we lose ourselves in self-centeredness. This is self-worship, a simple form of paganism in my mind. Please pray that we get this across to our kids this year. Our world is so immersed in selfish pursuits; we would like to make a little difference in the power of the Life of Jesus Christ. Friday night of this week, we will organize Confirmation classes for those kids who are 15 years old or older—the rule in Bolivia. I would like to include a visit to a home for the most deformed persons called the Home of Santa Teresa de Calcutta. Last year the kids of Confirmation went there, and it had a real dynamic impact. It is close to a pilgrimage church of Our Lady that is part of the active Catholic life here, even though it is some 3 and half hours from here by truck, our transportation.

(Now March 4) Now on to my house. It was not my intention of receiving so many kids this year into my house. My hope was to have about 25. But so many needs presented themselves and without counting the numbers but concentrating on the kids with needs, the numbers just kept growing. It was only last night that I had several of the kids closest to me to do a head count of the 7 rooms that we have for beds. It amazed me that we had accepted so many. Actually, more wanted to come to live here, but some I insisted that they live in the dorms at the school one city block away. As I had said earlier this year the kids are better behaved. There are two girls who have problems, but there have been others worse in years previous. One just turned 14, the other also 14. One has suffered much worse than the other in her earlier years. But they both are doing their studies now, keeping them occupied. Hopefully, it will remain so in the months ahead. Another girl, 17, but just in the 9th grade,

disappeared yesterday and various family members and the Defense office, with us, are looking for her now. She seems to have no parents and has lived with various family members all her life, being tossed around from one relative to another, rather unstable and it shows in her personality. She is the next to last person who has come here. I had hoped to make a stable home for her here; we will see what happens if she returns. Her clothes are yet here, as she left with only her book satchel.

Last year as I have written in the past was terrible for no rain. Drought destroyed so many here with their small farms, animals dying, men having to leave to look for work while the pandemic raged on (and yet does today, mostly in the cities). But so far with rains beginning in last December, now continuing in February, we are really hopeful. (Floods are ravaging the northern part of Bolivia worse than other years, what a contrast with last year.) Most all folks now have corn doing well. We planted two types of corn this year, one for grain harvest (doing really well), another type that grows tall, but the ear of corn is small, but the whole plant is used for silage. We are now harvesting our first crop of this and it is doing really well. Corn stalks are readily eaten by our cows, better than sorghum maize, and we have now harvested more than 50 tons of silage of this type, with more than half yet to go. But if we get our Health Dept. approval for our milk (for yogurt and ice cream), we will invest in more cows so we will need more silage. This process of approval was to last two months, now going on 7 months. Bolivia is known all around here for its slow and excessive paperwork for whatever type of paperwork that needs to be done, changing a title to another name, whether property, car, etc. Our honey health approval took two years of pestering, pushing, asking, etc. (It has occurred to me that I am talking to you as if you all were from the farm, hopefully I am not boring you, or leaving you wondering what I am talking about. Without doubt I am communicating not only my farm background, but also my love for that type of life. The choice I had to make as a young person for being a priest was hardest for being divided between farm and priesthood. Now in my last years, Our God has granted me both together. How good is Our God to us old folks!

This morning at our school we had a young woman doctor talk to our senior class students about their own future. She graduated from our high school in 2010. She came from a single Mom family whose Mom cannot even now do much more than write her own name, working as a cook in a small eating place. (I would hate to call it a restaurant.) But she received a scholarship for her grades and entered the state university for medicine. She talked of the hardships she encountered, not having enough money for so many things, the constant pressure of staying with the choice, but her desire to be a doctor forced her never to quit, with Our God helping her persevere. Now she has been named head of the small hospital in Abapò, her hometown. With that authority

she can decide to treat persons who do not have money to pay. Also, she has the desire to study to be a pediatrician, waiting for the opportunity that will let her continue her studies here in Santa Cruz. I had invited her to talk here to help the kids make good decisions and have the courage to work to stay with that choice until they finish. Our lives are to use our talents for the good of others, and hopefully they will make a difference in our world with their talents God has so generously given to them.

Last Friday (Feb. 26) I visited the family next to me that occupies the lot between my house and the school. The older man had a stroke some time back (he is two years younger than me), but had lost some of his mind, and was continually calling on his dead sisters, and his family who lives there with him, day, and night for two days, not letting anyone sleep. I had given him the Holy Oils some time back, but this time I prayed with him and also called the doctor at the hospital, who came and gave him a tranquilizer. The prayer and the shot changed him so much as I visited him on Monday, March 1, and he was yet so calm, recognizing me and gave me his hand.

I probably have written to you before of this, but again, each month I give a small bible study to each group of our workers as it has been Our God so directly involved in keeping our school going over the years. This month I have been using some parts of 1 Corinthians 15, stressing the Life after death of our humanity, our option to choose now to accept the endless Life that Jesus offers in Heaven, or reject that life with Jesus Christ, choosing a worldly life of selfishness for our own worldly, very limited number of years here and passing on to life with the devil that follows. In either case life continues, a real existence continues, only our body dies, while our soul, our personality, our inner self created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1, 26-7) continues to live, waiting for the final resurrection of our bodies at the end of the world. Then that body that died will rise, newly transformed, be re-united to our soul, and we will pass to God eternally or to the devil. (See 1 Corinthians 15, 1-58, it is all worth reading and meditating). We all make choices, consciously or unconsciously, that help decide our future beyond this very small, very limited earthly existence. Our lives here are so short in comparison to the eternal life that follows. And any suffering here cannot be compared to the Heavenly joy that Jesus will guarantee us, there waiting for us. So much depends on our choices here and now. What St. Paul writes us about is the real existence that follows, the plan that God made from the beginning, this life on earth being so short, so conflictive and hard for so many humans (I have been witness of so many whose lives, whose existence, has been one of a constant struggle and suffering). God did not design that as our only existence, but our lives here are only a short preparation for what follows, where wrongs will be righted, Our Lord's justice will prevail, and that rewarding happiness of fullness of Life will

be eternal. This is the total proof of a God of Love and worth my short life serving the poorer folks who have not had the advantages of others.

May Our God bless all of you there, keep you safe from sickness, and please continue to help us here; we need your help to do the work we do. I am so grateful for the very generous help shown in the January report and pray daily for all of you.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames