

Fr. Bob Thames' Newsletter February 2022

As I begin this letter of February 2022, I was overwhelmed by the help given to us in December 2021. I am sorry that I did not receive this report of December before I wrote the last letter for January. The report came to me some days after I had sent the January letter to all of you. I had feared and had shared my concern with those who work with us here that this year of 2022 might be the last for our regular high school that has served so many and gives a new chance of life for those who attend here. The regular high school costs more as we serve food 3 times a day, give clothes, school supplies, medical attention to those who need it, plus people who attend to their needs and watch over them, cooks and dorm supervisors, computer teacher. Of course, we have several programs that probably would have continued without the regular high school (adult high school, technical institute, special education, our university free housing in two different cities). But all of us working here think along with myself that our regular high school is the most basic and far reaching in the lives of so many. Without the regular high school available to those poorest, the students would have left studies, started working in places available to them, forgetting about education, and living poor for the rest of their lives, and without giving their God-given gifts to their world around them. Education is what makes the difference in their future, as all of you who read this know. My fears for the regular high school were no doubt reflected in my last letters of 2021 and January 2022. (I had hoped then that I had not offended you all with this in my last letters.) Maybe that is the cause of so much outpouring of your help to us in the month of December. I am so utterly grateful to all of you for all of this. **MAY OUR LORD SO CONTINUE TO BLESS ALL OF YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT AND MAY YOU ALL CONTINUE TO HELP US CONTINUE OUR WORK HERE, SO BASIC AND SO NECESSARY FOR SO MANY WHOSE ONLY HOPE WE ARE!**

As mentioned in my last letter we started our 2022 school year on Tuesday, Feb. 1, again in a semi-presential mode. The virus cases obligated us to first protect our kids, which as of yet has been very effective, not one case in the years of the virus among our students, although one teacher has died, two or three have been sick. But the teachers move around a lot, mostly in the city where the virus has been so prevalent. This is not the case now with vaccinations and controls being in place. So that the city will start presential classes on March 14, and I am hoping that we here will do the same. We have had always fewer or no cases out here in our area. Our professors tell me that the students have learned a lot less with the classes 3 days a week that we have had for the past two years. They are concerned and hoping that our health situation will allow us to change this month. The head doctor of our areas wants at least 90% vaccinated and yet use our masks. I support this to see that we don't start something here. We disinfect all our buildings, including my house twice a week and will continue to do so until we see enough control that makes this not necessary. I just don't want to be the cause of someone dying. There are again some 330 students in our school, and still, some are coming in from further away. As I have said before we analyze the family

situation before accepting them and their origin. We are more stringent on those from the city of Santa Cruz or the metropolitan area. If the situation continues to better, our number of students will rise again to where it was before, some 340 to 370 or above. Here as in so many other countries the number of families in poverty situations has increased. It is possible that more families will seek us out from further away for the help they need for their kids' education.

We are very grateful to Our God who has given us rain at least in the mountainous area where we have most of our fields. This year we have stored up more silage than any other year. But we have more cows too, so the need is there. But we are not finished yet. There will be more silage to be stored up later on. Also, our corn and soybeans, two other crops that we plant are growing too. As you who are from the farm will know soybeans are a legume crop that puts hydrogen in the soil which corn, and sorghum maize take out. We made a lot of soybeans last year, sold a good part, and use the other part in our balanced feed for our cows/hogs, and in our kitchen we use soybeans as the base of peanut soup, a big favorite in Bolivia for Sunday dinner. Maybe the kids know, maybe not, but they eat all of it anyway delicious for me too! Actually, we have had more rain this year than in the last two years, just hoping that it continues this way, but not back to what we had in the first part of this new century. There have been floods in other parts of Bolivia, and lives lost to floods and sides of mountains washed down on villages. We are grateful at least that none of that has happened in our area.

It makes me proud to tell you of Felisia (again?). It seems to me that I had mentioned her before, but don't know exactly when, maybe not. Felisia was the top student in her class (2021) that had studied all her high school with us (6 years here in Bolivia which has only two levels, primary and secondary levels, each 6 years). Felisia was raised by her grandparents all her life, after her mother at 12 years of age became pregnant with her, seduced by a man in a musical group who had come to their small village for the town feast, then left. Her mother grew up, married, and moved away to start another family. Her grandparents live west and way back in the hills (small mountains), across a small river that runs into the Rio Grande further south, on the other side of several other small villages. At first the only way out was horseback, then motorcycle, and now finally a pickup with 4-wheel drive can get through, if the river allows them to cross over. Felisia came to us at age 10 but turned 11 after two weeks with us 6 years ago. She was very nervous and had many fainting spells, usually 3 to 4 a year for which we had to rush her to the hospital for oxygen and an IV. Her blood pressure would go down very low too at the time. She was over studious and really set on doing well, which for me was at least part of the cause, but always near or at the top of her class. She grew up to be also a very beautiful young woman. For her graduation her grandparents coming took two days to get here, as the river was too high to cross. The grandparents had to go further west over 30 miles (I don't know how far exactly), then take an all-night bus on a highway further north to Santa Cruz, then another bus or taxi two hours back to Cabezas. (One explanation for Felisia: the top student had been the student with the best over all grades in their senior year. This changed two years ago, as it was discovered that good students were changing high schools looking for places that would make them the top student in

the last year. This year the top student was calculated by the student who had studied all 6 years in the same school.) Felisia was that student for us, but second in her class. The top student was one of those who had changed around for this purpose. The reason is that the state university of Santa Cruz offers an automatic entrance into the university for the top student in all the high schools in our department (like our state). (Understand too that the state university has branches all over the department, so the student can select the branch nearest them.) So, Felisia received the scholarship this year from our high school. Who could deserve it more than she? She is tied to the rural life, so she chose studying being a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. (You probably know better than I what this means as it is not just an ordinary veterinarian). We are glad to be a part of her success! But I could tell you many such stories, for Our God has blessed so many through us here with your help!

There are 3 areas of activity that are involved in agriculture. First of all, there is production which for us now is going well. Then there is the processing of our product to give us a better earning of our product. Finally, there is selling at a price that helps us to be self-sustained. We are slowly moving forward in our processing at least in our milk products and our breads. We make a lot of yogurts, some ice cream and enough cheese for our own use (in some of our bread we put some cheese, so I understand, and we sell the bread or other products with our cheese, nor for our eating. We also will try selling milk flavored with strawberries, chocolate, or other flavors. We are lacking yet in selling, but we are progressing. Interestingly enough with our sales more in our own area, in the small towns around us, even now moving into the Mennonite area. You must understand that this is what is necessary for our students whom we hope will want to eventually settle in the rural area, not into the much over-crowded metropolitan area. Already the city has announced that by 2060 there will be shortage of water in the metropolitan area. Is there life without water? I hope our school will influence our area to help the students of our area to eventually settle to live out here! At least it is one thing I am trying to do. (Can you imagine an old codger like me trying to do something like this? This is not my gift!)

How sad to see the war in Ukraine! But it is something that our kids also feel. They never watch the News Casts, but are seeing this on TIK TOK, maybe other social media. I was surprised when I started talking to one of the boys who was greatly concerned about it, and I asked how he knew of this. He told me that he saw it all on this on TIK TOK. I have always rather held this media as not so good, but I am wrong again, at least in this case! The world and its youth that surround me just keep surprising me!

All of the above was written on Feb. 28 and March 1. (It is now March 4) I had planned several ideas for a reflection, but the Ukrainian invasion turned me upside down. I really don't remember much of World War II, but the fear that I saw and felt in the adults and my older siblings really penetrated me as I later found out. When the Korean War started I had several terrible dreams or nightmares, and every time there is war that touches our country more personally it affects me more deeply. This happened again this time for a couple of nights. This experience

of war probably has influenced by vocation to the priesthood although I can't really place something specific. Poverty and reports, books I have read --Gandhi (3 different books), early Church fathers such as St. John Chrysostom, schools as an essential part of missionary activity in the Americas, and others that I can't recall right now. But I understand all such evils that are embedded in war of any kind, including colonialism in most of its aspects, just show our lack of being "IN JESUS CHRIST" despite our Baptism, our catechetical formation, our reception of Holy Communion so many times. It is evident that we Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians (Russian) and Evangelicals of any type just haven't committed ourselves enough to Jesus Christ. In no way does this affect our need to defend ourselves and others who are unjustly attacked. But also, must demand that we include our putting economic and material affairs below real Peace that comes with equality in justice in a world that belongs not to us, but to Our God Who made all for all in a more or less equal way. We are so far from that loving justice that Faith and Love in Practice must move our world to reach. The trial of a Cardinal Archbishop in Rome because of a \$400 million misuse at present surely is only one item of our Church mishandling. I don't say this to condemn anyone but is a call to myself and all of us who must reflect again and again on how Jesus lived and taught us what it means in all its aspects to be a true follower of Him, OUR ONLY SAVIOUR. To the extent that we fail in our living Jesus in our world, we will have to face one attack after another against Peace in our world. We can always put the blame on others, this one and that one, but our Faith must begin to include ourselves too in the cause. The devil is so adept at having hid us from blame so we can continue to have another war just around the corner. May Our Lord so forgive us, give us insight to the real truth, and lead us to deeper conversion. JESUS ALONE IS "THE WAY AND THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE." (St. John 14,6) There is no other road to lasting peace.

May the Lord Jesus bless all of you in your help to us here. We work here because you make it possible. We couldn't without you!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames