

Father Bob Thames
February 2023 Letter
Cabezas, Bolivia

As I begin this letter for February 2023, I must apologize for not getting the January letter to many persons. There was a misunderstanding on my part, and it was sent to only a few persons.

The first story must be the starting of our school year the first day of February, a Wednesday, and this will run to the last day of November, all being our official school year. We had just around 320 students sign in this year, although now the secretary has told me that a good number of new students have withdrawn, mostly being the cause of being away from home. We have a number of things that are better here or are non-existent in most of the high schools in the municipal district. We have a full chemistry lab, 3 technical courses (the only high school with 3 choices, which means a way to make a living after high school, either part-time to study further, or to keep the work for life). We give food and lodging, again the only school that does this, and school supplies and clothes, and medical attention if necessary for the poorest. There are 10 high schools now, but when we started there were only two. I noticed last night in the religious celebration (always every Tuesday night, then classes of First Communion and Confirmation for those who desire), that there were about 30 or more students than last year there. But the actual number of students in our school has gone down, meaning the students we have are more this year from small communities where there are no high schools. And those who have changed have come from our own town and other nearby communities that could facilitate daily commuting. This confirms me in our desire to give education to those who would not have it otherwise, mostly communities without high schools and families who cannot afford education in their own schools close by. But we are drawing students who are poor who live far away, more so this year than previous years, again our desire to be of service. Just about all of these are from single mother families or families where the breadwinner has died (even the mothers, leaving the kids to the grandparents with no real stable income). It is obvious to me that we are serving those who otherwise would not have an education of high school.

I could tell the story that I have told before, but many years ago now, the story of a young girl from a single Mom family in a nearby town. She finished second in her graduating class, and after graduation went to the city of Santa Cruz, had to work to pay her housing, food, transportation but did so and began studying in the university. It took her 7 years to finish the 5 year course of studies, then on to a master's degree. Then with another friend, began a business of real estate, which business has really bloomed. Finally she decided to marry a young man, and came to present him to me before the marriage in Church, and before living together (a rarity here in Bolivia. First the couple

normally wants to see if they can make the first years without problems, then marry in Church.) It is interesting to note that her niece (who had a single mother also) with help from another family, is now a medical doctor in the town she grew up in (Abapó), now only missing Sunday Mass when she has to work Sundays.

I tell this story but there are many such lives who have been made so much better for the education they received here. But I would go further. The young woman above moved on to a business. Two others have decided to do other things with their lives. One is now a religious sister, while another is now an ordained priest. The religious life is more and more a rarity in our modern world, folks who want to spend their lives, not looking for rewards in this world, but looking beyond to the World that is God-filled, and God-rewarding. I keep hoping for more, “praying for more” would be the proper word for these vocations, as such works are works of Our Lord, not ours in any case.

Again, I can repeat that just over 1500 students have graduated from our two high school programs, whose lives have been made better by the education that has been made possible by all of you who receive these letters. So we pray for you daily, putting your own families before Our God Who Alone can bless you for Life-Without-End in Eternal Happiness. So we begin this school year with Hope in God Who makes so many good things possible and makes lives more fruitful for our efforts to help the poorest in our area. Your help is an essential part of all of this.

Lent has just started, but here in Bolivia not much is practiced for lent as in the U. S. Even Fridays with no meat is not kept, even in lent. I think the poverty before of Bolivia was much more sacrifice all year long than our 40 days of lent. What is practiced or rather celebrated here is the 4 days just prior to Ash Wednesday called carnival. Maybe you all have heard of this from New Orleans which means much wild celebrations. Bolivia is not exempt from much of this, mostly done in the big cities. But luckily Cabezas does not have the conditions that make possible the worst elements. But nation-wide the effect of some cities causes the schools to close as holidays are declared in the whole country the two days just prior to Ash Wednesday. But this year for us here it was a little more. We had enough sickness that our district superintendent allowed us to have a full week free so we could recuperate from some of the sickness. We started again this week, yet with some sickness but less than before. There is a lot of dengue in the city of Santa Cruz, and maybe there is some in the area of Cabezas, but in our school and my house there was more of colds, some sick stomachs or headaches that pass quickly. Our university nurse has been kept busy attending these, and when it was necessary to take some to the hospital. But none of our kids to my knowledge have been hospitalized nor diagnosed as dengue.

We in Bolivia, just about the whole country, but especially the south where we are and some southeastern areas have had 3 years of drought, similar to the south and western U. S. Normally our rains begin in September and go through March of the following year. Again, this past Fall for you all we some small scattered showers until January 2023. But now things have changed dramatically, with heavy rains almost every week, sometimes twice a week. Thank Our Lord, we had all our land planted before all this started, but we are really blessed now. We began irrigation projects on some land beside the river (Rio Grande) and we are now harvesting these plots, only about 7 acres in all, but a blessing. We are looking forward to the future when our big plots northeast of here in the mountains will be ready to harvest the corn and cut for silage, some soy beans too. There is a type of corn here that I have never heard of before, called here Cubano o Chiriguano. This was the original corn in Bolivia before the newer hybrids arrived that are used now, according to an older man who has worked with us for over 23 years. It has a bigger stalk and small ears (I think as I have not seen it yet), but it is really good for silage. This is what is best for our cows, and we want more of this as our cows give more milk with this feed. Right now we are cutting by hand the first plot that was irrigated by the river, grinding it in our feed mill to give to the cows. Sorry if I am boring you all, as this old farmer talks like I was yet there on the farm in Decatur.

But all of this also affects some things that might interest you all as it involves farming and education. Last week we began making various types of bread that sell very good here, even in our rural area, called pan (bread) Valle Grandino , named after a section west of Santa Cruz and in an area more elevated than we are (around 5000 ft or more.) (Keep in mind that this is just a gradual rising to 12,000 up to 15,000 ft. in the most western part of Bolivia (not including the much higher mountains, with 3 peaks just over 22,200 ft., and just a little over the tallest mountain peak in Alaska. I worked in this area some 40 years ago when I first came to Bolivia. It was one of the happiest and most difficult times of my life in my early 40's, but the altitude and the walking (no roads then, and a military take-over of the country destroyed the economy, no fuel and no motor transportation, and all this with my walking up and down the high elevations destroyed my health in 3 and a half years. Very sadly I had to leave to restore my health back in 1983 in the U. S. before going to Mexico to Ciudad Juarez across from El Paso.

Now back to bread. (Sorry that I got distracted from what I had wanted to say about bread). We are more than a school that teaches regular subjects. We also teach agriculture, veterinary science and gastronomy, so we will involve the kids in their classes in these three subjects in what we do with what we raise and process for selling. We make about 5 or more products from our milk (cheese, yogurt, ice cream, now milk with fruit tastes, and a drink made from the liquid (suero) that remains of the milk after the solid part that makes cheese is taken out. Then we must also teach them to sell the product. All this

is our educational process here. Unfortunately our school is the only school that has this capability, except for two others that deal with other products (bee honey is one of them. Of course, we have this also, but we give only a short course of bee-keeping for those who wish it while the other school (very small village) has only bee-keeping as a technical course.

With this lent going on I want to recommend a few things that I use (not only me, but many others). First for adults I recommend fasting. This practice helps strongly to control our desires, many of which are not so good, not even for our health at times. We live in such a pleasure-oriented world. And we must all admit, we just don't need all we desire, either in food or other things. Secondly prayer, but I have a slightly different idea of prayer than many others. First prayer for me is LISTENING to OUR GOD through reading of Scripture, especially the 4 Gospels with the Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ. This involves concentrating on the Person of Jesus. Let His Personality and Grace penetrate our own being and thinking, seeing life from His point of view. Then we can respond from our point of view. Thirdly, and the most important, our lives must include personal acts of charity. Several of our early Fathers of the Church teach us this as the most important. Without acts of love, the other two are more empty. See First Epistle of John 3,14-18, Epistle of St. James 2,14-17, but all of Matthew 5. But this year what hit me very strongly was Matthew 5,20. We priests at times become professionals in religion but lack this as the scribes and Pharisees (professional religious) of the time of Jesus. The example of Jesus so strongly shows His Total Love, but strongest being His Total Giving on the Cross, always thinking of us, giving all. May Our Lord so change us today, especially in our families. We are forming the next generation there, that which our world so desperately needs. May Our Lord so bless each of your families with this DAILY, PERSONAL CHARITY. You will see the happiness in all the family as this becomes the rule!

I must give much THANK YOU with prayer daily for all of you who so generously contributed to our work here in the month of January. MUCH PRAYER BEFORE OUR GOD FOR ALL OF YOU! We are on the road to survival, by large cutting in our expenses, but also earning money for our costs from our own activities here. Actually, we are close to having cut over one third, close to one half actually, of what we had two years ago. We need to go further yet and hope to do so with a center of more production, but mostly selling, in a center we are building in Santa Cruz. This is on the lot of our student house there where students can live free (no food offered and the students pay the water and light). The lot is large and most of the land is behind the student house where we are building. This should be finished by the end of April if not before. We are anxious and need your prayer for all our efforts there. If all goes well, we will see a great help to our maintaining the high school. Maybe I have said this before, but will repeat this now. Of all the education services we offer, only the regular high school is in danger if we fail. All the other programs (special education, adult high school with technical courses, special dorms for those

students without families who support them—some 30 students at present—, our technical institute—like a junior college—and our university student houses) are not in danger. But we feel the regular high school giving a high school education is so important in the lives of so many kids whose families can't afford the regular high schools who demand school supplies, special clothes, and constant petitions from the teachers for special activities. So many families cannot afford this. We are the only school that offers them an education. And you all there continue to make this school possible with some help from us. Please do not abandon us yet. We are on the road to self-sustainment, but not there completely yet.

May Our Lord so Bless you all in your support of the poorest families here.
Your brother in Jesus Christ,

Father Bob Thames

We are volunteers supporting ETC Bolivia. The current contact information at the Diocese of Fort Worth to continue to support the children is: Dianna Rhoads (817) 533-3174 or via e-mail at DRhoads@adv-fdn.org The following link takes you directly to the Diocese ETCB web page for easiest access to donate on-line: <https://fwdioc.org/educate-the-children-bolivia> . Please reply to this e-mail if we may answer any questions.