

Fr. Bob Thames  
March 2017 Newsletter

I arrived back in Bolivia on March 22, went straight to a medical laboratory to have a blood check that later that day would be handed over to a doctor so that I could be operated on the following day, Thursday, March 23. And so it went. I came home from the hospital the next day (Friday) and have the privilege of recuperating at home. I must be careful not to walk very far, or lift anything at all that could damage the surgery.

I am saying all of this because of so much time in the U.S. away from the kids I am raising. This recuperation allows me to be with them again. It has not gone very bad, just that some of the kids who arrived here with very little or no discipline had decided to miss school, even up to one week at a time. Others decided not to do homework, choosing play as more of a priority. So it has given me some space to put some order again in their lives. This was particularly the case with 4 young brothers, orphans of 14, 12, 11 & 9. An older sister, now 16, must be included in this too, so 5 young folks but she is a good student. They lived with an aunt for 3 years after their single mother died, coming to me two years ago. As the aunt with her husband already had 5 kids of their own, just eating was not always possible, much less school. So the boys played more than anything else. Some in the small village knew of this and referred the family to us when we began adult high school education in their community two years ago. The village is part of our municipal area, but two hours from Cabezas by rough roads, impassible when wet. The older sister, now in the 8th grade is doing well; the problem is with the boys. At times they are a little rowdy, a type of play that usually ends in one of the youngest getting hit too hard and brings on crying. But play is yet an attraction. They are coming around again, with a little strong word from me. Clementina, who is known by some of you all there, a university graduate nurse lives in the house with them, but is not always obeyed by some. I believe I have spoken of this family before, sorry if you remember all of this. Even Mayerlin, 6 years old and in the first grade, about whom I have written before, is another one who has had problems getting into homework. She is now responding well.

I now have some figures on our number of students in the grade and high school groups. There are 358 in our own high school, with some still coming in. We may have 360 by next week as a young woman will search out two teenage girls of Abapó who are orphans, living with a lady for whom they are working. They told the young woman, our school secretary, that there was not enough income to buy school supplies and books in Abapó. She will try to bring them to us next week. This is our apostolate, for which our school was founded, and which your help to us makes possible, lifting up those who are down, as did Jesus in His time on earth, and Who, through us, His Body, continues to do so today.

Our small kids dorm up near the public school has 10 young kids, 6 girls and 4 boys. We are yet awaiting a young blind girl, Estela. Carla, another special education student who lived here before, now lives with the kids in our regular high school dorm. She now feels at home there, accepted as one of them, a great accomplishment, as very low self-esteem is part and parcel of special education students when face to face with other young folks. Carla can now cook, write simply, read also slowly. She is advancing and so senses her equality with others. When the school had a type of welcome home for me last Wednesday night, she came to give me a big hug and smile. I have said before this problem of low self-esteem was made worse by her sisters who are some of the best students in their class.

The Mora dorm has 45 students of elementary and high school age, just living there, while attending the public school. I don't know what will happen to this program when the new priests, pastors, will arrive, any day now. The dorm is on the church property and may not be to their liking. We are waiting to see. The two came to visit in January and met with me, but later told the bishop that they did not want my presence in the parish area. But with the young folks I am raising and the schools that need constant attention, with my status as retired priest, I decided on my greater need to stay.

Something that I have never tried to tell much about one aspect of the schools we have is to talk about the villages the people come from, how the families live,

where they have come from. I thought a little of this might be of interest to you. To start with this time around it might be interesting to go into the history and the actual living of two villages that are close together called St. Isidro 1 and St. Isidro 2. First you see already that not a lot of creativity was used in selecting names. These villages are located to the north of the municipal area of Cabezas, just off the paved highway. There is another St. Isidro called St. Isidro Area along the highway itself, so the names were taken from that evidently. In those days rural education was up to the 2nd to 4th grade, mostly for the boys, and many girls growing up never learned to read and write, and were sent to the pasture with no fences to guard sheep and goats all day. The people that first settled the area were originally from a rural area to the south and a little east of Sucre, the legal capital of Bolivia to the west at an altitude of some 9,000 to 10,000 ft., much cooler than here. That is part of the Quechua cultural Indian group, (ancient Inca) which language they all spoke and do yet today among the older folks. The first ones came in the late 70's and early 80's, looking for land. Back west all the land was taken by the older generation, so the younger generation needed to look elsewhere. Three Ortega brothers came and raised their kids in the St. Isidros, whose kids are now married with kids of their own, and even a third and fourth generation are there, although most of this last group has moved elsewhere for better opportunities. Most of the plots of land are small, about 24 to 35 acres, not really enough to maintain a family, obligating the men to look for work among the Mennonite community that is just to the east of them when drought or heavy rains at harvest make it difficult to survive. But there is a great emphasis in education among these two villages, and almost all of the kids who finish the 6th grade in their village schools come to our high school, some 25 to 35 students at any given time. The emphasis has paid off, with a high percentage of their students doing very well, responsible and detailed with homework and class participation. And 4 or more of the last 6 to 7 years the top student was from one or other of these two villages. They have gone on to the university or technical training, and are doing very well there too, some now professionals also doing well. It must be remembered that these young folks worked their way through higher studies, paying all their own expenses of lodging and transportation, and studying at the same time, not a easy thing at times in the city of Santa Cruz. As

you might guess the Quechua people are very energetic and resourceful, not afraid to take chances. Quite a few of the younger families are now owners of taxis that run between our area and the city. This type of work allows them to take time out for farm work when needed. It is these people that are called campesinos as opposed to an Indian community such as the Guaraní. I have spoken before of Marita, a young girl from St. Isidro 2. Marita could not hear, but now hears with a hearing aid which we were able to get for her. Her Dad is an Ortega, and is crippled, needing a hip transplant to correct his problem. The family has only 24 acres (10 hectares) with a few animals, one being a horse that pulls the wagon, their transportation. The mother runs a small store from their house but few people live nearby to buy from them. Most others of the two villages do not have much more in material goods. But they do not lack for initiative and hard work.

A news item while in the U. S. one day really caught my attention, at least has made me think a lot. It was the comment by the American military officer who is in charge of the regiment of U. S. troops in Nigeria, fighting the radical Islamists there (can't believe they are really Islamists from what I know of it). He mentioned that if this group of terrorists were defeated tomorrow, by the next week there would be another group starting up, as the society there is completely disintegrated, no education, no health service, no functioning operates that makes for human, community living. This struck me because it is something that has plagued me for such a long time too. What is it that makes for a truly human community, what elements are necessary for people who then feel well situated, free, and able to carry on a very human existence, and I want to add, as Our God-Creator meant for us to live? This is not something new at all, these thoughts. Aristotle wrote about around 350 to 400 years before the birth of Jesus. Other Greeks had pondered the same, using the human body with its many parts working harmoniously together as a model to explain effective community living. St. Paul, who had been educated to some extent in Greek culture, would take up this way to explain the Believing Community called the Church in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. We believers of course find our ultimate plan in the Life of Jesus Christ, His teaching and above all, His Living, a total giving over for the good of

others. We call this Love, even Divine Love, also called Grace which takes our loving to the extreme possible. But when human society is completely torn apart by warring groups, bitter and violent divisions, famines with no resources for human bodily existence, education is nowhere to be had, so no hope for the future as adults, when families are disintegrated, separated, living constantly in fear or hateful discussions, children growing up in such conditions, not in just one generation, but in 4 to 5 generations in a row, what kind of person, and what kind of human community results? And where do we begin to plant a foundation for a new society with all the elements of stable family, food production, health services, education in humanities, technical, and especially moral formation that binds all together in family and community love? This is the question that I am trying to bring to our school here in Cabezas. It may be better said to our schools (grade school, regular high school, adult high school, technical institute.) I have proposed a symposium on this topic for our teachers on the various levels. How does our Faith in Jesus Christ, our desire to follow Him more seriously result in example and verbal teaching, whose elements are picked up by the students? Will it be able to be lived enough by them and make a dent in our region around us? If the Church is to be Leaven in the mass of dough, the Light to the world, the Salt of the earth, HOW DO WE LIVE SO AS TO BE THAT LEAVEN, THAT LIGHT, THAT SALT? May Our Lord Jesus so form us, so lead us!

May Our God bless all of you!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Fr. Bob Thames