

March 29, 2018

Family, all of you there, Greetings! Here is the March letter which I hope and pray finds all of you doing well.

Today is Good Friday, raining since about 2 AM which will make the Stations of the Cross and the Good Friday celebration more difficult. But that is life and glad for the rain.

I Thank all of YOU who helped us during my time in the U. S.

Today, Holy Thursday, 29 March, I am looking back on 53 years of active pastoral ministry and through it all, my relationship with Jesus Christ that is intimately involved with pastoral service, I see how I miss it all. (know that I am 54 years a priest, but now retired from being pastor for one year). Being involved with families directly, being in their houses on visit, seeing their kids grow up, visiting the sick at home or in the hospital, all of this yet clings to me, makes me wish I was a little younger again, not too young as to be again so naïve on so many fronts. Experience does teach a person and pastoral work teaches a lot, what makes people tick, fight, love, forgive, even separate, leaving kids scarred and afraid, but also seeing folks grow inside, deepening their relationship with Jesus Christ, making strong marriages, more understanding, kids well developed and ready to take on the world, ready to give. All of this is privileged pastoral observance. It has been my privilege as priest to be a part of all of that. And I am grateful to Our God Who has been so carefully patient and waiting on me to grow, mature, to be able to help someone along the way. This day, Holy Thursday, the Feast of the Holy Eucharist, has been a very pivotal part in my personal life, Symbol and Reality of the Total Giving of Our God to us weak, so sinful, humanity with which I identify so easily. When I have been discouraged, frustrated, not knowing where to turn, Jesus in the Eucharist has got a hold of me, held me, rebuilt me, and made it possible for me to continue. And it makes me wonder how many of you have had moments of the same type?

Could receiving Christ in the Eucharist, meditating on Who and What Action is involved, and how all is Total Gift of the Divine to us, never saying no to us, only strength-giving, compassionate, uplifting. Again there are reports of sightings of UFO's and it makes us wonder what else is "out there", and how big is our universe that seems to be ever expanding, and our Faith teaches us about the Creator of all Who is Bigger yet and Knowing all, yet becomes so humble, so small, and so giving to each and to all of us in the Person of Jesus Christ, Visibility of the Father, Gifted by Power in the Holy Spirit. If Our God is on our side, who can be against us!

I arrived back in Bolivia on March 15, (seems so long ago), and immediately put into things going on. So many things going on I can't remember all of it. What I do remember is the number of welcoming-home events that filled me with joy and my stomach with empanadas (type of cheese roll or sandwich), cakes and so many other sweets. So much for my intention of lessening my beltline and potbelly after eating so much in the U. S. But I really enjoyed the folk dancing, all the other things that were part of it, the hugs and handshakes and looking directly into my eyes and glad to see me here again. All Gift! and uplifting! And then telling me of this problem and that difficulty and what are we going to do about it that brings me back to the real world.

The biggest change this year is something that I wrote about in the previous letter, finally getting us set up to be a humanistic and technical high school. We have had technical courses since the beginning of our school more than 14 years ago. But it was more our doing and not so recognized by the Ministry of Education in the practical sense. What I mean here is that on the high school diplomas there should have been a definite note of technical, so our kids leaving here didn't have a paper that told of it, just their ability to do something beyond the regular high school regime. (This was the fault of the Ministry of Education who was not organized yet on how to do what was changed by law in 2011 and then also

March 29, 2018

not funded.) Now that is changing, at least for our school. We have a new district superintendent who recognizes that our school is the only one in the district that is capable to doing what was ordered seven years ago, not only with professors prepared, but also with workshops that can give the 70% practice which the law obligates (fields/machinery, animals, and honey bees, in agriculture, mechanics, cooking, sewing, secretarial, natural medicine and first aid, physical therapy, classical music). I am not sure if this coming year there will be on our diplomas a notice that such and such a course was taken or not, but we are on the path to it. What this means is that when going on to study further the diploma will show something that will put the student into a second or third level of formation rather than just starting from scratch in a institute or university in the same material. In other words the technical courses will be taken into consideration that will advance them from the beginning to another level. (Am I confusing you, as I am not sure either how this will work in practice, but it is what I understand now). And it must be something extra as the new district superintendent put her 14 year old daughter in our school, rather than the public school. And she is pushing all the other high schools in the district to begin what we already have.

Another new thing this year is a series of workshops for teachers (I hope for at least 4 if not more) to better their teaching ability. We have entered into the association of FE Y ALEGRIA (faith and joy). This is an organization that offers several services that betters the educational level of the school, which for me is the betterment of the ability of the teachers, at least the starting point. But there is more, just starting for us now. This organization was begun and is operated by the Jesuits in several countries in Latin America. It seems our package of application and other letters of recommendation that were sent in to the head office in late October last year never reached the national director, but he knows of us and after talking with him personally in January, we have been accepted, at least on some levels of help. I am just expecting much more to come, workshops for students to help them put goals and how to reach them, and who knows what else.

Our monthly retreats have continued, with 115 students this March. We are including our preparation for first communion and confirmation in these retreats as well as anyone interested just in the retreat itself. The retreats last about 9 hours each so 9 of them will be some 80 hours or more of class, but there will be some practice set for them to do at home or at school. This last retreat in March really went deep into the lives of many of the kids who ecstatically told me personally that this was the best one yet. We are trying to evaluate with them to find out which activity or dynamic most affected them so as to use the same again with changes of material. I must admit that I was skeptical with so many kids yet hoping for depth, but it is evident that I was wrong. It was the sisters who promoted the bigger numbers, who come twice a week to meet with a group of leaders and also carry out a religious service. We still don't have a cement floor over all the area (about one half now) but there are families who have promised a large number of bricks to be laid and cement poured over them to form an easy and fast floor. But the bathrooms are all functional and roof complete with some doors too. Our music ministry in the retreats is developing also to good quality, really important for the young folks, now guitars and accordion. We will buy a drum too to add rhythm and find someone with the special talent to use it. This last retreat did not have Sister Yacquelin, the Brazilian who is so good with teenagers, but she arrived last Tuesday. Her mother has been with some severe health problems.

This past Sunday, March 25, Palm Sunday, saw something again that reinforces the idea that our schools are helping in many ways. A group of 14 young adults who live in one of our student houses in the city (this one Santa Cruz) and mostly are graduates of our high school, came to Cabezas bringing food just to meet with me and chat about their lives and what our educational services have been and are now doing to make their lives different than what it might have been without it. There are 26 young folks in

March 29, 2018

the Santa Cruz house, all studying and most all working part time as their parents can't help them. But free housing there in the city, and the formation given in Cabezas opens so many new doors that otherwise would have been closed to them. This is the second time this has happened with a group of graduates, all yet in formation, that is, doing further studies to give them the career that they have wanted. All just to let us know here what we have meant to them.

We are just finishing our new adult high school building with bathrooms that includes an auditorium for general use, such as the Wednesday night religious service, and a place to show movies (hopefully of inspirational quality) put on by the senior class and charging one Boliviano (7 cents U. S.) that will go to their graduation expenses. The technical institute building is a little slower, probably finished in early June, with 8 classrooms and an office and store room for materials as well as bathrooms and showers for those who come from afar and need to spend the night here for next day classes.

While in Washington DC in February I met with a man, known through a nephew who lives there, who works with a non-profit international studies program. He mentioned the need for us to have an endowment that would maintain the educational services in the future. (Actually we have a small one in the Diocesan Advancement Fund of \$150,000 given by my brother years back.) Indirectly this put me to thinking of THE WHY OF EDUCATION AND ITS BENEFIT TO THE HUMAN COMMUNITY. Why a person would and should help educate young folks who otherwise would not have that opportunity. I have spent most of my priesthood in poorer parishes in the U. S. (a little less so), but in Mexico for 11 years and now in Bolivia going on 26 years. But I have seen what happens to adolescents who do not attend school for one reason or another and where most of them ended up, both girls and boys, but worse for the boys. Both in Mexico and in Santa Cruz, Bolivia large numbers entered into what is called pandillas (youthful criminal groups), some groups as many 150 members. The groups compete for territory and often are in small wars between them, with erstwhile citizens caught in the middle, all of this besides the constant robberies and other assaults. And I know that some of them end up in drug traffic or adult criminal gangs, and maybe in other parts of the world, in terrorist groups. I ask why and it seems that the answer is that they see no other door open to them nor do they believe in themselves, in their capabilities and possibilities of giving to others in the society around them. The future is as bleak as the past as so many came from broken homes with little or no self-esteem. Others came from very poor homes, even some from homes in which education was not a value promoted; usually meaning the whole family had low self-esteem. The constant theme that has resounded in my mind is the need to educate, for education best understood, is formation of character that builds up self-esteem, fine tunes one's abilities to make them useable, sets goals that are for a constructive and peaceful society, and maybe even more valuable, giving a sense that we need to give back to the community that has given us life. Seen from a Faith perspective this is the religious vocation of all people. Our gifts are meant for the common good – so we all are God-sent, each and every one of us, to accomplish something with our lives. (note: the word in the American Catholic Bible translation says "some benefit", but look up the Greek word in a Greek-English lexicon and you will see the word means "common good" as used in the time of the writing of the New Testament). (Remember Malala, the young Pakistani with Nobel Peace prize and now visiting Pakistan, what can we do who have Jesus Christ with us?)

March 29, 2018

So I am asking for your reflection and maybe helping us, renewing your scholarship donation if you have one and if not, giving one or some other donation. The cost is minimal for many of you, but it means a lifetime of value for our kids here. Education can and does change our world. Let us give it a try, world-wide.

And don't forget to pray for us here.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Fr. Bob Thames

**From the Fort Worth Diocesan ETC Bolivia Team:**

This has all been made possible by the grace of God, the generosity of the dioceses of Fort Worth, parishioners like yourselves and the dedicated staff of volunteers that manage this project here in the Dioceses of Fort Worth. All of the expenses including travel to Bolivia are absorbed by the individual volunteers. This assures that 100% of your financial contribution goes directly to fund the school.

Do you want to help lift someone from a life of poverty and change their life in a meaningful way? Help to educate them! Quoting FR Thames "all gifts of God to us were meant to be shared". Education is what makes those gifts operational". Would you consider sponsoring the school or a student, just \$1.15 cents a day?

We encourage you to visit our web-site <https://fwdioc.org/educate-the-children-bolivia>. Scroll midway down the page to the Tab labeled Sponsor a child, the school or make a donation and follows the instructions.