

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter  
March 2020

It is now the 31 of March and as all over the world the big topic is the coronavirus. I will cover this a little later in the letter, but I thought it might be a welcomed change to say something a bit rosier to begin this letter. I am using a pun, but I want to tell a little of what happened on March 8 in our chapel in Abapó. Rosa Aramayo, a young woman who graduated from our high school in 2008 made her second big step for becoming a religious sister, celebrating her commitment to enter the novitiate of the Sisters of Diocesan Pastoral. This is the group of sisters who work in Mora, founded in the early 1970's in Torreon, Mexico. I first knew the sisters in Ciudad Juarez when I was there for 11 years. I asked them to come to Bolivia when I was yet in Santa Cruz, then they came with me to the rural parish of Cabezas, responsible for the northern part of the parish with me. After graduation from high school, Rosa studied special education in La Paz, then while working with our program also studied her first love of music, now with two degrees to technical superior, just a little more than a junior college degree in the U. S. But she was also drawn to the religious life of service to the rural poor which is the specialty of this group of sisters. They have a commitment of living simply (with all necessities) as I do myself, being close to the people visiting the homes, eating with the people, responsible for the religious formation in catechism for the youth, and bible study for the adults, now doing all the religious celebrations as the priest rarely is available for Mass in the communities to the north. Rosa does well in all of this. The day after her commitment she left Mora in the night to board a plane for Mexico where she arrived the next day, now in Torreon with the religious formation program. Unfortunately, she is the only one in the program, no one from Mexico. At present the sisters in Mora are 4, two from Mexico and two from Brazil.

One of the things that I see as necessary for our sisters here in Bolivia is more education with a specialty in some area of service. The two sisters from Mexico are formed in Sacred Scripture, while the first one from Brazil is studying psychology in a university in Santa Cruz for her work with youth. She has a real gift for working with youth, leading them into prayer, into direct contact with Jesus Christ. The kids here just respond to her way of leading them. The second sister from Brazil is finishing her degree in music in Brazil, semi-present, doing her work here, only taking her exams in the university in Brazil. She teaches music in our high school two days a week. She plays the guitar, harp, keyboard (piano and organ, which she played in the Mass for Rosa's profession, beautifully done).

You must realize that now we have Rosa in route and also a seminarian from our school who is in his last year of theology, to be ready for ordination to the priesthood whenever he decides to petition it after some pastoral work in a parish. I pray daily for more, but it seems the youth here as in other countries see more of their future as seculars in an ever-increasing secular world.

Now back to our reality, rather sad as in just about the whole world, but worse in some places. Thank goodness Bolivia has not arrived to the worse yet, but we are on

our way. Our classes on all levels (from kindergarten to university and all between) were told to stop on March 12.) Our kids went home early the next day, except the ones in my house, which is also their only home, some 22 of them in my house, 5 girls in the small kids dorm and two or three more with the Sisters in Mora, for one reason or another, orphans, abandoned, abused, some working in our various operations of milking, bread-making, garden and hidroponía, hogs and chickens, sewing (we have been asked by the municipal government to make 2,000 plus protective face masks with special cloth for the police and military people who are enforcing the home-stays, as well for municipal workers and all our medical personnel in our hospitals and first aid centers as well as others.) At present the government here expects us to reach the highest number of cases in another 4 to 6 weeks. Our high school seniors are worried about the graduation. Personally, I expect the peak here to be reached about the middle of May, but it may be sooner. Unfortunately, Santa Cruz (the city) is the leader in cases of sicknesses and in deaths from the disease. One big cause is our international airport and Bolivians returning from abroad, especially Spain and Italy, both of which have many Bolivians. Worse yet in two cases people arrived from Europe and immediately there a big reunion of their family and a big feast. The two from Europe already had the virus, which was then transmitted to other family members. But now we have enough locals with the disease, so that we don't need anyone from outside to help us spread our problems.

There is another problem for us as we must buy food wholesale in the city. So, a special permit must be obtained and then pass through various checkpoints to get to the city. But in the city the branch neighborhood bank we use is closed, and the only one of this type is the big one in the city-center. But as many employees are at home, the bank is not totally functional or very slow. But it is the end of the month and we must pay salaries of those who are working, so more money must be taken out. Then we must drive the truck to the big farmers market, also going through various checkpoints and come back home with enough for one or two weeks feeding all our group. All of this must be done and be back home in Cabezas by 12 noon. Our savings and loan cooperative too are closed, but the word is that it will be open the first 3 days of April. We will see, that will be Wednesday to Friday of this week. We normally change the money to Bolivian money and deposit it into the savings and loan which is just beside the small branch of the big bank that we use. Life is just more complicated now for so many reasons, so many parts of our society are not operating or are just limping along. See, all of us world-over are passing through the same trials.

With a change of pace in this letter, I would like now to share a little of the last two kids who came live with us: Deimar and Juan Jose, two brothers, age 10 and 12, both of whom are in the 4th grade. Juan Jose the elder of the two has learning problems so is behind his age group. Their mother left several years back, going to Spain and decided to stay there, living with another man in Spain. The father started living with another woman in a small town to the north of Cabezas on the pavement to Santa Cruz. But the stepmother has now her own children and was treating very badly the kids of the father's first wife, so much so that the Child Defense office twice warned the father of the bad treatment. So, the father brought them to us the last week of February. Now they do not want to return to their former home, feeling very much at

home with us. When school is going on, the two stay at the small kids' dorms up by the public grade school, coming to us only on weekends. But now they are staying with us during all of this. They are the youngest of the house now. Mayerlin, a girl of 9, whom some of you know about is staying with the family at the small kids' dorm as the lady in charge there has 4 girls with whom Mayerlin feels very much at home. In my house most of the kids are boys, the only girls are older, 5 of them, 16 to 18 years old.

We continue building our 2000 square meters of hidroponía, very close to 1850 meters<sup>2</sup>. But we want to put pipes in the last two sections which will require us getting them from Santa Cruz, impossible now as only food can be carried into the city and taken out from there. For now, we will be content with some 1600 m<sup>2</sup>. Our first harvest of tomatoes may be next week, which will be big plus for Cabezas, as of now all food is brought from Santa Cruz farmers' market, grown northwest of here in the higher elevations and with heavy use of chemicals.

Just a short note, on Saturday AM, March 7, with a good amount of stupidity by me, I tried to bend down turning sidewise to pick up a piece of trash. My right hip came out again, another emergency trip to the emergency room in the city, back the same night, and in the Mass for Rosa the next day, only assisting another priest who came to offer the Mass for me. Now at home with little movement for some 3 weeks, knowing that with more times dis-connecting the hip means it will dis-connect easier in the future. But life goes on, and our work of service to those most in need continues.

It must be the work of the Holy Spirit, some reflections that I have had on all the world' virus problem, are the same reflections had by others. I will explain. It seems to me the virus has shown the unified frailty of our one humanity. We are so divided on our own will by nationality, ideologies, economic systems, races, colors, religions and it seems Our Lord is putting out the Word of Oneness, all created in God's Image and Likeness, all susceptible to a tiny and powerful, invisible living virus, so easy to transmit, so easy to kill even the young as well as the older of us. Just this AM the news reported a baby with the virus died in Santa Cruz, and yesterday came the news of a 16 yr. old Bolivian girl died in Germany. I tell this to the kids in my house to make them more observant of the restrictions, but it shows we are all capable, liable, the same weak humanity. Now to show what others are thinking. Fr. Victor Codina, S.J., is the most famous theologian in Bolivia, rather elderly now, having taught Pope Francis when he was studying theology. He sees the same message in all this, although he put it much better than I in a column on internet. Then last week I received a letter from Lyon, France from our world headquarters of Prado (our voluntary diocesan priest organization), saying the same message. Our divisions are human made, not in God's Plan of Salvation, contrary to Jesus Christ, the Only Saviour of all the world, there is no other path. (see Vatican II document Lumen Gentium chapter 2, paragraphs 14, 15,16). We are called to be One by Our God so it seems we must look for means of doing this, of being this Oneness. May Our God grant us Grace to see the MESSAGE OF ONENESS IN WHAT IS PASSING US ALL IN ALL THE WORLD.

May Our Lord bless all of you who receive this and help us here to continue while it is necessary.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Fr Bob Thames