

## Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter

### March 2021

It is now April 1, Holy Thursday, getting ready here for the Mass in the chapel at Abapò at 6 PM today. All the kids from our house will go, along with a good group of kids from the small kids' dorm up by the public grade school, in all about 30 or more, those who stayed with us during this holiday. All who go home went for these days to their family or at least with some relatives. One of our trucks will be the transportation. This will be the schedule for this weekend, beginning today. The celebrations all will begin at 6 PM both Friday and Saturday with all our kids going there with me.

This has been a very good month for us, with our school functioning more than any other school in our district. With our schedule of classes giving 3 complete days of school (morning and afternoon). And we began technical classes this month, meaning gastronomy, agriculture, and veterinary (simple mostly) for all kids from our school along with the kids from the public school attending with us on separate days. The public-school kids of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade come on Monday, the 12<sup>th</sup> grade come on Wednesday, our 11<sup>th</sup> grade have classes on Thursday, and our seniors on Friday, all from 2 PM until 6 PM. The seniors all have practice, no theory, while the 11<sup>th</sup> grade is theory with some practice. I really don't know exactly what that means, other than the kids are there at milking time, some stripping one or other cow by hand, putting feed for the cows. Of course, during the year this will be more technical, preparing balanced feed for all the animals, maybe doing some tractor driving with silage cutting and storing it with cover of plastic and dirt on top, inseminating artificially of cows and hogs, learning how to produce green grass in the dry season with our system of hydroponic grass production, this all with our animals. Hatching chickens with an incubator. The gastronomy group is already cooking, some will be learning foreign foods as well as native dishes. The municipal government is buying much of our needs for this, including several ovens, stoves, pots and pans, mixers, blenders. Actually, I do not know all that is involved. Lots of the kids are excited and impressed with their courses. At least that is what I have heard.

This AM a new district superintendent of schools was installed. And a big surprise for us. It is a woman well known to us, actually a sister-in-law to a member of the council of our foundation. We have known her for some 10 years or more. She asked me to give a prayer before installing all the principals at the various schools in the district for the new school year. Actually, as you know, the school year started on February first, so this was more window dressing for the new district superintendent. She will continue the work of the one before her, but this one has more experience in the technical courses and as we have more of this than other schools, we will get some more attention, hopefully more government salaries. (PRAY THAT IT DOES!). Actually, each school

principal and the district principal (called that here) are a work of 3 years, then an examination is held and the best grades on the examination for those applying for a particular place is the one who gets the job.

We have also started catechism classes for First Communion, with 40 kids in the high school, another 15 or more in my house and the small kids' house. Here in Bolivia a kid must be 10 years old or more, and for Confirmation 15 years or more. There are only 20 kids in the Confirmation classes (I had hoped for more, but some more with kids from my house. This will go all the school year, ending in November. Our kids from the school will all be confirmed in the chapel in Abapò as last year. The Bishop of the Vicariate of Camiri (mission diocese in the Catholic Church) will come for that. He is really a pastoral Bishop, really close to the people and excellent in his way of doing things. Our Confirmation classes will be doctrine and service projects together. This will be a little new for us, and I am not sure now how it will work out. This will be visiting the sick, but maybe repairing a house for an older couple, maybe even building a small room for someone without any place of their own (we are capable of that), doing other things needed by the couple, things like that, maybe taking kids from very poor families to a party. I am just imagining now, to give you an idea. One thing that we will do is take a trip to the most popular Virgin Mary shrine, which is part of the Catholic life here. People who rarely go to Sunday Mass won't miss going to the Mary Shrine during the week of the feast the first week of December. It is in the blood of the people. And it will include a visit to a home very near the shrine for the worst cases of people with physical and mental disabilities. This is a Catholic home managed by a religious order which specializes in this. We want to show the kids part of the work of our Church and a possible work for them in their lives. This was done last year and both things highly impressed the kids who went. Of course, just the trip in the truck strikes the kids as very exciting, leaving early in the morning and arriving in the evening, along with eating out on the road or in some small eating place, so different from just being closed in the school, some of them all week, and week after week (those in my house and those in the dorms who live so far away that they never are able to go home except on a longer time off.

A little of Holy Week in the chapel across the river. But first we are being overwhelmed by the number of kids in First Communion in the chapel. With little or no religious activity across the river in a major part of the town of Abapò, it seems that so many of the families are coming across to our place for First Communion. We now have 50 registered and are studying, mostly at home with parents and a biblical related study book, with meetings with us with several catechists who have come to help us now with the overload of students. We never had so many First Communion students in the big church across the river. Now back to Holy Week. On Palm Sunday again the group acted out the Gospel with much reverence and effectiveness, and the chapel was packed in seating (around 130 or just a little over). This caused us to bring

in 10 benches from our school auditorium, each a little over 11 feet long for the services starting Holy Thursday. It was the right thing to do. Again, with no services in the large church across the river our chapel was filled, all benches used and people again standing out the door, this time over 200. This happened again on Good Friday and Holy Saturday (even more so on Holy Saturday). It makes me feel sorry for the people, but the Archbishop does not accept that the situation needs to be changed. The number of people surprises me as the Evangelicals (here Protestants) have made inroads after I retired, but it seems that there is yet much attachment to the Catholic Faith, folks who have tried other practices and did not find what they needed. Again, the young folks and professors acted out the Holy Thursday and Good Friday Gospels to very good impact, all a very serious play that resonated with the people. I am using the idea of teaching by seeing, along with hearing. More will be remembered if they see in action after it is proclaimed in Word. Then I stressed some major points in a short sermon. We do not know yet how long will this attendance continue, but we do not expect it for too long. Although probably it won't keep the large numbers, I do expect more than before will come. Of course, Holy Week is special the world over, more so in Latin America. Holy Saturday does not need to be acted out. The ceremony itself is action and Word together, starting with the blessed fire, lighting the Easter candle, processing into the dark church, the lighting of the candles for all, the readings, the blessing of the Holy Baptismal water, the Baptisms with the renewal of Baptismal vows by all, so much going on with deep meaning, hard not to grasp at least some of it by the people of Faith. Holy Week just touches folks in their deeper parts, their soul, even if at times the understanding of it all is partly lacking. Jesus is just so present and so felt!

Although I am not of Hispanic by origin, I am very much into the celebrations of Holy Week. They all touch me so profoundly, have been so impacting in my own life. The Washing of Feet, more so the Crucifixion and outpouring of Jesus' Blood from the Cross (John 19, 28-35), knowing by receiving the Eucharist and other Sacraments, I am receiving the Power, the Sanctifying Grace, the Life of Jesus, so as to be more able to live the Love that Jesus gives me in order to love others, never so completely as Jesus, but ever to keep that goal before me. By prayer and Scripture (a chapter of the New Testament reading rarely ever failing each morning since I was 14) it just keeps penetrating and shows me plainly my weaknesses, my sinfulness, my ever-greater need for the Grace-Life of Jesus in my own life. And it's not just for me. I must be a light to others in this dark world, so materialistic, so this world centered. I have said before in letters asking you to read the New American translation of Genesis 3, 4-5. See how plain and effective the temptation of the devil is to Eve (our prototype in which we can see ourselves at times so plainly). "We then can decide for ourselves what is good and what is bad". How every day is this carried out in our world by so many folks, so great and so small, we are all a part of this ever-self-centered world. Jesus is our only Real Human Model and the Power to live

as He. We must return to our real source of Life if humanity is to be able to bring peace in a world that is increasingly dividing into combative camps again.

We yet need your help for us here, \$25, \$35, or more each month to sustain us. We are making some little progress, but we just are not able to do it alone, at least for now. Something that is new for your contributions, a 2% of any donation will be used for paying for the accounting of all the money coming in and going out. Please understand the need for this as Bolivia is just one mission for the Diocese, with several others in Central America. I am just not sure where all the missions are that our Diocese is helping, but it is not an easy task to keep track of all of it in its coming and going.

Let us pray for each other, let Our Lord penetrate more into our lives, our family life as this is the formation time of those who will be adults and so need good examples now.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Fr. Bob Thames