

Fr. Bob Thames' Newsletter March 2022

Here it is the 4th of April, and I am just starting this letter. SORRY! No excuses, just lazy in my old age even though I had prepared a list of topics to put into the letter, just didn't start writing.

The big news this month is the return to normal classes after two years of 3 days a week for one half of the students, then 3 days for the other half, including Saturday classes (called here semi-presential). The return was the 21st of March. Interestingly enough our first cold spell (it is coming into fall here) came the same week on Thursday after so many days of heat, and as a result lots of the kids had not brought their jackets or coats from home. Actually, it only got down to the upper 60's which for us is cold, not so for most of you up there. But we had quite a few kids down with colds, not one virus case yet in these two years of the pandemic. The professors are happier now that normal classes have returned, much frustration for the much slower learning processes with only three days a week then 5 days before they saw the same students again. Several professors had spoken to me of their frustrations, and they are really happy to return to normal classes. I again noticed the difference between our school and the public high school up by the highway. The teachers receive the same state salary, but for some reason our professors are more dedicated, or at least it seems to me, for the good of their students. One reason could be that we have more accommodations than the public school. Here we have a library, computer classes (with a salary from us as the state does not pay a computer professor nor does it provide computers for state schools), a very good chemistry lab, projectors and large TV's and screens when useful for a class with a useful DVD program, an auditorium for larger groups to gather when useful, technical courses with animals and fields, gardens, farm equipment for practice, equipment for artificial insemination for dairy cows and hogs, maybe more, but these come to mind easily. Unfortunately, the public school in Cabezas does not have any of the things listed above. The public-school students come to our school for some technical classes, as I have explained before.

Let me explain why we have a good chemistry lab. The national government gave very good chemistry equipment for the schools that were able to build a good room with requirements that warranted the equipment. We were able to do that as was the new high school building in Rio Seco (next town northeast of us). So, with Rio Seco we were given the equipment (microscopes, other equipment, etc. and I do not know what all as in the seminary in my days we didn't have all of this). At present this week or next our chemistry professor with some money from us will buy "re-activos" (again I show my ignorance as I do not know what this word means) that will be used to experiment several different things, again an advancement for us. But the private high schools in the city have all of this and a lot more, that gives the students who go there an advantage for university admissions. But these same students have families that can pay entrance into the many private universities in Santa Cruz (maybe some 12 to 15 or more), with small numbers of students per class and highly rated professors. Still with your help we have been able to give to our students many advantages that the public-school students do not have. We are so grateful for this, giving the poor who attend our school a chance not only to go a little further, but to offer more to their communities after finishing their studies. I have mentioned several years ago that

some 60 to 70 percent of our students go on to some university or technical institute after high school graduation, while only some 15 to 20 percent of the public-school students do that. (Several years ago, it was only 5 to 10 percent in the public school.) That is because of the motivation given by our teachers and ourselves. Most of the kids have to work part time to do this, or work a year to save some money, then go on to study, but they do it. We constantly challenge our students with that, with the spiritual sense of education, that intellectual capacity is given by Our God to be developed to help others, not just for our own advantage. It seems we are getting through to them in this regard.

Last week, on the last day of March, there was an official visit of most of the departmental (state level) heads of the various education offices of the state of Santa Cruz. The officials visited all the high schools that are along the highway (of the 10 high schools in our county -municipal area- only two are off the highway, one to the north and one to the south). We were rather favored in one sense as all the officials and many other important folks in the community were fed lunch at our place, then a visit to our gastronomy installation, the best in the county. Actually, we are in the process of building a new building specifically for gastronomy patterned after the technical institutes of gastronomy in the city. The reason why is that we are over-using our present facility for various productions of milk and bakery items that we need for selling, so that there is little space for the student's practice. And more, the state petroleum company and the local municipal government has given us so much equipment for gastronomy that the space dedicated to classes is really overcrowded with equipment (pots, pans, ovens, stoves, tables, mixers, etc.) The new building will be simple and used only for teaching and practice of students as the institutes in the city. (The public-school students also come to our school for gastronomy classes, giving us some 36 students for this class so we need more space.) With a builder who works with us (also graduated from our high school and now has a technical superior degree in civil engineering plus some classes in the state university in his area of study) we will do all the basic building ourselves, for around \$3000 or less for materials, according to his calculations. With the equipment we already have we will meet all the requirements and standards gradually as time goes on and we will be using the building at the same time. My hope is that sometime in the future, as the pandemic subsides, some folks from the U. S. can visit us to see all the improvements we are making and the new services we are providing for the education of the poorest of our area. Meanwhile you all can see all on our Facebook page and our foundation website. (Foundation Ñombori Opaetepegua, Our Lady of Carmen, Cabezas, Santa Cruz, Bolivia.) The name of the foundation is in the Indian Guarani language meaning Social Service, the dominant Indian group in our area.

This year has seen a little more rain than last year, but yet not as it used to be the first 15 or so years that we have been here in Cabezas. We just keep hoping for a return somewhat to what it had been. We yet did well last year, and it seems that we might do well again this year as we approach harvest time for corn and soybeans, our two main crops for our animals, and ourselves (we eat a lot of soybeans as milk and as "peanut soup"). We have already harvested quite a bit of silage and have more yet on the way. We keep praying and this year each time we pray, God sends some rain. The rains are spotty but this year the spots are on us. We have had quite a bit of very hot weather, around 100 degrees or just under that, broken up by two to three days of clouds and some rain. We are grateful!

I have been asked to give a little on how the money that you all send is actually spent. I will give a little more detailed maybe in the future to you all, but some this time as well. I do send a detailed report to the Diocese of Fort Worth each month, at least the report on what is sent to us through the Diocese. We are now gradually earning more from our activities here. With our school back to full time for all of our high school students, the cost has risen, mostly for the cost of food. This runs now about \$4600 to \$4800 a month. This along with salaries of cooks, dorm supervisors, librarian, computer teacher and computer maintenance, some electricity (state pays school rooms' electricity), we pay the rest and some adult high school electricity (about \$600 a month in all) and some adult high school teachers, especially some technical class teachers. But these technical classes are mostly open to all who want to attend, with this year the physical therapy with some 46 students (actually some 77 students registered, but not all are attending). With this impulse of the physical therapy attendance the state has given us a state salary for that course. Yet with all the students in the adult high school that includes the technical courses we have just over 500 students in that program. We are now just over 1000 students in all our programs. The university houses are not fully occupied yet as some university classes are yet being given on internet and telephone (virtual?). Other salaries are with the dairy operation, the vegetable production, transportation of students to and from the school, meaning 3 trucks with drivers plus upkeep on these old trucks, maintenance of our building and lighting, our other cars that we use, some limited pastoral work. I am a firm believer in organic vegetables as my dad died of chemical caused cancer, which chemical was later banned by the government some 5 years after my dad had died. We here raise quite a bit of our vegetables but have a way to go yet to do it all.

(Now April 6, Wednesday) My intent was to finish this letter and send it out today, but our electricity was cut off this AM and returned a little after 2 PM. I had a bible study with one group of workers this AM and another group this late afternoon. I hope to get some of what I want to say now, but don't if I will finish until tomorrow. This evening I have the Sunday celebration with all the school students who live in the dorms at the school. Only the ones who live in Cabezas do not have a Sunday celebration. We owe much to Our God Who has made possible all that has been going on now for some 19 years.

My mind keeps me on the violence of our world, the wars in so many places with no regard for human life, the violence in Central America and now more and more in Mexico, the hunger and sickness, that causes whole families to decide the necessity of leaving roots and look for another place to carry out their lives where it is all the more possible for kids and themselves to live in peace. But even in the U. S. with so much violence. It is all the more urgent that we return again to deepen our family Faith-Life in Jesus Christ. I say the "family" as that is where the formation of character begins, and moral values are first instilled. It is where people first learn to pray by example, these examples that must carry their lives into adulthood and pass these values on to their own kids. We must take the time to have family prayer and bible reading with explanations as we do here in my house. I do it here twice a week apart from the school. Most of the kids in my house come from disintegrated families and need so much more to replace what was never given in their early years. And I recognize my lack of ability to do it, just feel the necessity of doing what I can, as best I can. I hope and pray daily that Our Lord supplies my lacks. I just keep reminding the kids in my

house and in the school, close to 350 of them, of the example of Jesus as their needed Rule of Life. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14, 6). This so needs to be ingrained in all of us, if we believe in Faith in Jesus all the more important to live out in detail what we see and understand in the Gospel. If we do not believe in Jesus, who can replace Him in our lives? We need to search, find models that serve to bring peace that makes life possible in families that stay together in love and harmony, and influence those around us all the more. This is our vocation, our urgent need, "to live as lights in our ever more darkened world," where materialism and pleasure and desire for power over others has made us slaves to ourselves and "this material world."

I want to end this letter THANKING ALL OF YOU who so generously gave to us in November, December to January. I hope and pray that God so blesses all of you in your generosity. But PLEASE DO NOT FORGET US NOW either. Our needs are greater now with all the kids in school at once. We make it possible for so many whose only hope we are. Calls have come to me from several single Mom families who need to send their kids here this year. This will be possible only at the end of the first semester which is May 15. We will see who comes then. YOU ALL THERE MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO GIVE THEM A NEW CHANCE IN LIFE. May Our Lord bless all of you in your generosity.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames