

Father Bob Thames
March 2023 Letter
Cabezas, Bolivia

Father Bob Thames' end of March 2023 letter from Cabezas, Bolivia, follows below. The current link to ETCB's web page is located at the end of this letter. Please use this link for easiest access to the on-line donation page.

Greetings to all of you in this Holy Week, the beginning of April, for me the end of March for this letter, already April 4 and I am just starting this. You may not believe it for a person of my age but I and others with me have been running all over the place doing things that are necessary. And I THANK OUR GOD WITH SOME SUCCESS!

I don't know if the world financial crisis has affected you all there, but here it has caused havoc for us. The reason is the hoarding of U. S. dollars by all the banks here. Our money arrives in dollars, and we want to take dollars out of the bank, then exchange them at a good rate into Bolivian money to pay salaries and other bills. But to hang on to their dollars the banks here have been really stingy giving dollars, giving us instead at a very poor rate of exchange just Bolivianos, the Bolivian money. That is, until yesterday. We were told last week by a manager of the branch bank (where we do our banking) that we should go to the central bank to explain our situation and things will get better. He was right. The account here for all we do is in my name with Luzbaida Warnes as secondary. We both presented ourselves to one of the heads of the central bank and in a few minutes, she told us how to do all, with good success. With the code she gave us, we received a good amount of dollars that we could exchange for the best rate ever since I have been here, plus Bolivianos at the best rate again since I have been here. Every 15 days we pay salaries and other expenses, and this took a lot of weight off of us. We were losing money on the exchanges of dollars for Bolivian money. Our Lord must see me at times as a cry-baby, but with our crisis's each time I am pleading with Heaven, and just about all without fail God responds positively. This was the case again. So again, I am THANKING GOD; you can join me in this!

Our rains continue, not easy-going rains that we have had these last 3 years of drought, but at first hard rains, then a steady downpour to drizzle that lasts some hours. Areas to north of us are flooded, some towns and fields almost all under water. Sounds like some parts of the U. S. But no tornados here! Thank God! Again, we are grateful for the rain. We have all our land planted, even some being harvested and growing out again. Farmers know what I mean. But these rains have been coming every week, at times two to three times a week, and our poor cows are in a corral of deep mud. They can go out to a dryer place, but the food for them is in the deep mud lot, so to eat they have to come back. Our production came down. We are taking an idea from a big dairy that

has a huge shed over their feed troughs. We can do almost all the work ourselves, just buying materials. We are on our way. Why are the cows always in our feed corral? Back in January after the rains had started and lots of grass was growing in our pasture, we turned our cows out in the day. We found out that not only good grass was there growing, but some weed (still unknown to us) that the cows ate that turned their milk into a really bad smell and bad taste. Now we know that we have to control their feed. We had to throw so much milk out, including ice cream and yogurt, and even cheese. We are learning slowly, surely, by experiences.

Our first semester is slowly coming to an end, the first days in May with exams. I am anxious for the kids in my house, some of whom are not so dedicated. It does raise me up again to see some two or three putting on more interest and study that will produce better grades in May. Unfortunately, not all are at that place. I have thirty-three kids now in the house, way too many for being able to push enough for those who need it. My intention was to have about 18 to 20, but I fail to stay firm for so many who want to come to live here. We are crowded here more than in the dorms in the school, but the extra liberty here, I believe, is the attraction. I want the kids to have greater freedom, correcting them for infractions, but learning to manage their own lives in freedom. I had the experience in the seminar of too many rules that never gave the seminarians a chance to exercise their own judgement, at least for me, leaving some immature, taking some years to grow up (my opinion only).

We have been spared almost all the more serious diseases, but colds, some aches, coughs, sore throats have been common enough this month. Dengue was treated more than once, but it turned out a lesser evil, and a one-day recovery, not a week or more in more serious cases. About a week ago or more now our students were all tested for diabetes, having the hospital to come early one morning (at 5:15 AM) to draw blood from fingers. I don't know how this came out, as no report has been given to us on this.

In a related case, the state of Bolivia, as in the U. S., has a nation-wide testing of cows each year for brucellosis (or Bangs disease as I grew up knowing it). Unfortunately, we had four cows with this, three good ones sad to say. But we will try to replace these with the money earned from selling them and a little extra added.

Back to education, there are three young women, all high school graduates, who are more my responsibility (more raised by me, at least in the last years) who are taking a course in dessert-making in a very good private institute in the city. The course is 4 hours a week on Saturday AM. So, only one trip a week. The course will last 4 months. Some of us went to visit the institute and were amazed at the set-up for teaching, 100% practice. I have eaten a piece of one of their cakes and I agree it was very good. One of the girls is Noelia, now married to one young very active little girl of just over a year. Maybe some

might remember Noelia as having only one leg. The other leg had to be cut off just below the knee as a very rare bone disease was coming up her leg that would have killed her. She has a prosthesis, but not very well built or not adjusted very well. So, she rarely used the prosthesis, almost always in a wheelchair. She is married by church to a young man who also was raised here, going back to the beginning of the school in 2004. He has a study in electrical installation in buildings, maintaining our buildings and especially our electrical connections. After the good experience of sending the 3 above, I am encouraged to send two others of my responsibility to the institute. Who knows how long I will be around here to do the work and be able to pay for some. The training and formation I can give now will help those here to be able to handle their own lives. Without this formation they will spend their lives on the lowest web of work and even, maybe getting into bad things such as alcoholism from which some of the parents (both parents even as some of them are a result of) that caused them to be in my house. Others are here because parents with no formation just turned out lazy, without ambition to be able to support their kids in education. I will tell you the story of one of those families below.

It was a week before Christmas in 2004 that a lady showed up here with three kids, the oldest being thirteen, a girl, and two younger boys. I never knew how the lady knew of us as we had just started school at the start of 2004. The kids were not hers, but she knew of their situation. Both parents had recently died leaving all orphans and need urgently a place for them. There was another boy, now living in the street with other boys basically in a gang-like situation. The parents of the kids were of the type mentioned above and the kids never had much schooling nor formation. The girl with some real push had started some two or three years before preparing food to sell in the street, this all on her own, to help the family. Now with parents dead there was no other support. The lady told me about the other boy (12 yrs. old) with the gang, and I went after Christmas, found him in an abandoned house and brought him here with us. When school started in February, they were all enrolled with little enthusiasm as school had not been part of their early formation time. The girl at 18 married a young man in the church (few couples do this). He is now a lawyer, and they have a good living, with two girls, both being at the top or close to the top of their classes each year, living in a town near Santa Cruz. The two younger boys left here shortly after she married for Santa Cruz. The older of the two found a good job in a factory, was doing very well there, married a young girl (shortly afterward he brought her to present her to me as his dad) and had a baby. At work he touched an iron structure of the building one day that had electrical wires uncovered and electrocuted him. He was 19 or 20 then, maybe 21. The younger boy was already drinking heavily at 16 or 17, very close to his brother, committed suicide two weeks later. The older boy returned here with us, finished high school, went to various courses in electricity and has been working with us since then as maintenance head, married Noelia as I said above. They have bought a lot and are starting to build a home. To end these stories, I have raised some 80 to 90 or more young kids,

with only about ten or less turning out not what I would have liked. I will tell the story above to give you an idea. I do not have the talent needed to be with young folks, even thinking as a young man to entering an enclosed monastery without talking as I delight of being in silence all day. I always worked with parents in my years of priesthood. It is God WHO HAS DONE THIS WORK, dragging me along as best as only God can do. Now so many kids have been blessed here and are now doing well with God having done the work. I want you all to THANK OUR GOD FOR ALL OF THIS with me. So much too was done with your help.

We have started First Communions and Confirmations (actually starting the calls in February). It seems we will have about 55 to 60 in all, but now we are getting some adults who want to be included. So many adults lived far from any church or catechism in their growing up or just not being close to catholic practice. Now with the chance to do something that they now know is part of a Catholic Life, they want to be included in the course. We use a catechism that I have talked about before, made here in Santa Cruz by a priest and sister whom I have known for years (told before) that can easily be done at home, then bring the book (over 100 pages of work in the New Testament, centered on Jesus Christ and the Eucharist) here to show us. But our school Confirmations will include something new which I will explain in the next letter, no more space here. I will tell of Holy Week also in the next letter.

I want to thank all of you for your continued support now that has increased somewhat to make us blessed to give one more year to the kids who are so much in need. Please continue as you make possible so much in the lives of so many.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames

We are volunteers supporting ETC Bolivia. The current contact information at the Diocese of Fort Worth to continue to support the children is: Dianna Rhoads (817) 533-3174 or via e-mail at DRhoads@adv-fdn.org The following link takes you directly to the Diocese ETCB web page for easiest access to donate online: <https://fwdioc.org/educate-the-children-bolivia> . Please reply to this e-mail if we may answer any questions.