

Father Bob Thames' end of April 2024 letter from Cabezas, Bolivia, follows below. Please use the [link at the end](#) of the letter for easiest access to the on-line donation page.

I greet all of you (Monday, April 29), it seems so soon, like I just finished the March letter only last week instead of last month. I pray for all of you each day that Our Lord takes care of you all with your family!

As I noted last month our rainy season which is just ending (normally the middle of April) has been the driest since I have been here the last 21 years, only 3 small to medium rains (I don't have a way to measure the moisture now), one each month in January, February, and then March. None in Oct., Nov., and December, which was normal for rains in previous years. I don't know what we are facing this time as the year of '24 progresses. We are trying more and more to develop some irrigation, but who knows if the water in the ground will last. The large river just beside us is already at a very low level as the rainy season ends. Normally at this time it is bank to bank. One thing we do have quite a bit of hay stored up, and quite a bit of silage. We can handle this year at least and even into next year. We are into our late fall, and we are having heat waves, just like summer is continuing. I read that the U. S. is not without its problems of weather too, last night some 80 or more tornados spread across the middle section of our country. I grew up with tornados and our many nights spending some time in our underground cement cellar. It was April 30 (I think), 1962, that a tornado destroyed all our barns, and chicken houses. I was in Europe at the time, studying my last years for the priesthood, so my Mom wrote me of it all.

We in our school have been fortunate with sicknesses this year. Other schools, especially in larger cities, have canceled classes or have had virtual classes because of sickness, some dengue, others with influenza, including the university branch where quite a few of our graduates are studying to the southwest of here. Their classes are just today beginning again with students in the classrooms after two weeks of classes virtually by telephone in their homes. We have had a few sick but none very severe, not enough to stay more than a day in bed, then in class the next day. I have taken some kids to the hospital when our nurse was some place else, but again missing only one day. The same in my house, a person in bed one day, not serious, but the next day in class. Actually, in our high school and with our grade school students we are more particular with their diet. At times the kids don't appreciate the soup (twice a week), but it is healthy. Our diet has international approval by United Nation standards, checked on and approved three times a year by a professional nutritionist. I think that our standards are above the average home around here. But our area is not an educated area, more low to low middle class at best, most adults without a high school education. (the public school graduated its first class in 1999, just before our arrival in 2002.) There

was no public school transportation so limited to Cabezas, which explains the urgent need for our high school with dorms, so urged by all the people in other communities.

We have been planning for a while a retreat for our senior classes on a weekday afternoon, but my desire was not to have the kids miss a class, and yet have time for some 3 to 4 hours of retreat. Our interest was in having a retreat that would help the kids make a good marriage. As I have said so many times more than half of our kids come from broken families, mostly uneducated mothers (without a high school education, so limited in job opportunities). I had been told by the school secretary that Tuesday offered us more time in the late afternoon, only to find out we were wrong. But now is our time. Here in Bolivia May 1 is a national holiday (actually St. Joseph The Worker, Labor Day here). But the day is in the middle of the week (so no school, but the kids won't be able to go home for the day in our place. So, a free day for our retreat. My idea now is to have the junior classes with the seniors to make full use of the free (school) day, at least some 5 hours or more. The day will include types of games that cause reflection, values that are necessary for any couple to have a good marriage, some Bible study, time of prayer, too. We must ask the kids to dig deeper into their lives, their understanding, so as to discern what is necessary for a stable, happy marriage. Maybe I use poor language, but I say the union must go beyond the body union, to the soul union, meaning the most important spiritual values that many of the kids today only come to appreciate later in life. We want the kids to discover these deeper values now before any sexual union with their partner so that any marriage partner will last until death as Jesus so urges us along, with St. Paul (Matthew 5, 27-32; Matthew 19, 1-11; Mark 10:1-12; Ephesians 5:21-33).

Now it is May 2, Thursday. Although this is May, I will include May 1 in this letter as I mentioned it above already. I celebrate Mass in a very rural community about an hour south of Cabezas, the name of the community being St. Jose Obrera, or St. Joseph the Worker, in English. There are only a few Catholics, some 20 or so, but very faithful folks, mostly centered around 3 very Catholic families who do not fail. There was a baptism, I believe relative of one of the active families. It gives me a chance to explain a lot of things, then celebrate the Mass in the school classroom (only one classroom), not many students so only one professor. Actually, many rural families have two houses, one on their land in many small communities, then another in a larger town where there is a complete school from first primary all the way to graduation. This is the case in this community. Other families who can't afford this situation just move to a large town to find work and have a complete school for their kids.

After the Mass at 11 AM for St. Joseph, we were given food (too much food for me), then we drove to Abapó to receive the seniors for their marriage retreat. They arrived late, but we had all the retreat, really beautiful and effective. I

gave the Sacred Scripture talks and other folks from our school gave the other talks, but mostly activities that caused the kids to think a lot at the same time there was a lot of fun. I do not have that ability, more serious, but we have two psychologists, one of whom is a specialist for teenagers in activities that cause reflection on deeper subjects but having fun doing it. It is a real blessing. My hope is to have another retreat later in May and another in June for the senior class. Then after our winter recess (first two weeks of July) have retreats for the junior classes on marriage. This is a change from what I said above. The psychologist thinks it will be better, and he certainly knows more on this than myself. The effectiveness of the retreat yesterday really proved it. But we had an extra element in the retreat at the end of the day. Our gastronomy teacher served up his home-made granola put into yogurt that really was delicious and healthy at the same time. We have been talking of trying out new things to sell and/or just to serve to the kids. This proved our idea correct. (Please don't think that I was the one who figured this. Food is mine for eating, not really knowing what goes into it that keeps me going at age 85.)

The Feria (Fair) mentioned above showed me yet more on the effectiveness of our educational programs for this community. The adult high school includes several courses that I have written about before. But a new one this year really surprised me. The professor of computers is really prepared beyond the ordinary, teaching a course that is called systems "informatics" or something like that. One man, a professional and university graduate who works in an important position in the municipal government was there as part of the student group of the course. He tried to explain to me the importance of the course (why he was taking it), but all of it passed over my head. There are some 50 students or more in the two years of study. But there is more. Our class of physical therapy also includes professionals. Physical therapy has at least one doctor and several nurses who want to this to increase their capacity of helping others in health. Physical therapy is only now coming into Bolivia. When my car was struck on Good Friday in 2007, the biggest hospital in Santa Cruz did not have any physical therapy, which is why I yet have pain at times in my right arm and shoulder that was all broken. The doctor who is a bone specialist (and friend of mine) now recommends some of his patients to have physical therapy instead of an operation when there is some problem with the health of his patients. He told me this, so I know it is sound.

(now May 3, Friday) Now to give some religious reflections with which to end this letter. I have written more than once passages especially in St. John's Gospel that are the motivating forces in my personal life. St. John's telling of Jesus on the Cross suffering terribly yet only concerned for others (John 19). This hits me so strongly as patience is not one of my strong points. But another passage that causes a lot of anguish because I lack so much in living out what the passage tells me is 1 Corinthians 13 (all of it to the end). I have lived almost all my life working with married couples (adults) and now in my old age there are some 32 teenagers living in my house for whom I am

responsible. It is not at all my gift to work with such a group, now a little more than 20 years. 1 Cor. 13 is really a challenge that is beyond me most of the time. How many times I have meditated on these words, seeing how I should be handling one or several young person's here, but when the time comes to treat something that I consider wrong, my patience disappears or comes out weakly. And with so many kids I am confronting one situation after another so frequently. I ask your prayer for me, this old codger who is trying to do some good, but lacking so many times the patience with kids, most of whom have lived in terrible circumstances (that is why so many are in my house, abused, abandoned, separated parents, whose anger and physical violence toward one another cut so deeply into their sibling who happens to love them both). This is the time they need patient love and understanding from me and my reaction at the time seems not what they need at that moment. But I will continue as long as I can, God so willing and giving me the strength to confess my wrong and try again to do better. I recommend 1 Cor. 13 for all in your family. Read it together and reflect on it. God will give you Grace to have a happier family.

I need to end this letter now, again asking for your continued support for our work here. Please don't get tired of me asking. I see so many kids whose only hope is our school. I could tell stories that would hurt me telling and hurt those who hear what I would say. I just got the report for March, and I see that we need more of your generosity, not a lot from one or another, but a little from so many of you who read this (\$25, \$35. \$50 or more.) It does affect me to be asked so many times, yet seeing the kids personally makes me know it is worth it. It is not I who needs your help, but over 335 kids (now some 34 in grade school and over 300 in high school. Not only their future, but their presence here preparing for the future, all made possible by us here and you all there. May Our Lord help you as you help us here and be sure of my prayer for all of you daily.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames

(It started drizzling rain about 11 PM last night and it continues yet today, and hopefully forecasted for tomorrow. May Our God be so Blessed in answering our prayer!)

We are volunteers supporting ETC Bolivia. The current contact information at the Diocese of Fort Worth to continue to financially 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 ETC-B web page for easiest access to donate on-line:

<https://fwdioc.org/educate-the-children-bolivia>

To donate by paper check, make it payable to: Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth. On the memo line, please write, "For ETC-Bolivia, Fr. Thames Mission". Mail it to: Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth, 800 West Loop 820 South, Fort Worth, TX 76108-2919. Please reply to this e-mail if we may answer any questions.