

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter May 2020

Folks who help us here, make possible our service to the poorest of our area,
Greetings to all of you there!

Here we just passed Pentecost, the second most important feast of our year. We celebrated with a drama and then our religious celebration of the liturgy. We are yet very dry, luckily for us our corn and soybeans are in the north part of our area and there has been more moisture there than here in Cabezas. We are looking at a dry time evidently. Normally currently there are 2 to 3 days of mist and light sprinkle several times a month. Not so, not even one such time, this year. Yesterday in the internet newspaper it was announced that this year (our winter) will be colder than usual as in other years. We will see. (one day later--it rained last night at least a good sprinkle for some 6 to 7 hours. We are so grateful to Our God.)

Maybe the big event of this past month was the arrival of Nymfa, a very active two-year-old, younger sister of the other two children who came in April after Easter. This is the first time we have had such a small child. But it is working out fine, at least now with no classes. Our older kids of junior and senior grades are doing great as mothers. She is very much attached to them, not just one but several. Evidently discipline in her former home was non-existent, but she is gradually coming around. You might remember that her father beat up her mother (with mental deficiency), he now in prison, and she is incapable of taking care of her kids. She was pregnant and miscarried in the violence. No relative wanted to take the kids, so the defense office brought them all to us here. Clementina, the university graduate nurse, has offered to take the little one, but for now with no classes it all works out well with all the kids of the family together. The second child, a girl, whom we were told was 7 years old and with a birth certificate showing 8 years old, has not lost any of her baby teeth yet so obviously she is 6 years old or just turned 7 as her birthday is in March. The defense office agrees with me. (The baby has no document at all.) The six (or 7) year old was complaining this morning of a tooth hurting and maybe loose, so we will see. Thank goodness they have no problems eating our food. This brings us to 26 or 27 folks in my house, not a healthy situation with the virus. It could pass rapidly from one to another.

The virus has come to us now but limited. A nurse in the hospital in Abapó has tested positive, as well as a doctor in Cabezas. There are several cases in extremes of our municipality, but the towns along the main highway where we live have escaped so far. We pray it stays that way. But there is a real obedience to the rules in the population in our area, we also, strictly in our house. I noticed a reduction of new cases in Santa Cruz yesterday after a large increase last Saturday. Hopefully we are on our downturn.

As I have said before our classes might start again in July, but no sure word yet. Surely it depends on the virus situation at that time. It will be a lot of virtual situations as already announced. But exactly how much we are waiting to see. Our teachers have all had classes in virtual teaching, just lack the practice. Only exams must be taken in person before the professor.

Our hidroponia is doing fine, with tomato plants heavy with tomatoes, mostly yet green although we have harvested some, eaten some and sold some. There are some hybrid plants that seem to be growing to 9 feet or more, making it necessary to build supports for them. Even our regular tomato plants are almost 6 feet and one I saw yesterday was loaded with tomatoes (all green), making it necessary to build supports for the plants also. We are finishing up on another part, maybe 1300 or more square meters, giving us now built by us of some 2300/2 plus space. We yet await word from the government if they will enter in to build another 3000 sq. meters. Outside of the hidroponia we have loads of beans, onions, beets, achocha (sorry don't know the English word), and we have eaten a lot of eggplant which I adore fried in a flour and egg batter. We can do a lot more with the kids helping us, the girls being better workers than the boys (hombres, so sorry to say it).

We had a new arrival on May 18th of a new baby. Monica gave birth to a baby girl. I raised Monica since the second grade, now 20 years old and with a young man whom I also raised since the 5th grade. He, Andres, is studying in the university in Camera (second year) in computer science, but here with us now, also 20 years old, both graduating in 2018. Basically, neither one has another home except ours. Monica is studying in our technical institute in sewing now called clothing design. (sorry, the translation just does not come out right- it means she will design clothes, choose appropriate cloth, etc. now with a 3-year course ending with a technical superior degree.) On the same day another girl I raised from the second grade, Isabel, now 22 yrs. old, gave birth, but she lives in the city.

We do not know the future now for our world, with the virus that is changing all things, including schools. We here are under a severe lockdown with no school of any type since March 12, except virtual classes for some who have the way to do it. It will change significantly our way of operating, with no final word from the Ministry of Education. We are awaiting some word, and classes are scheduled to open possibly again in July. But not the way as before. With fewer students here, others might be in their homes with internet, phone service, and TV. Others in their villages with quite a few students there, they might gather some place according to their grade with others to see recorded classes put on a flash memory or DVD. Only those who are without electricity or telephone service might come here. Unfortunately, Santa Cruz state and its capital city Santa Cruz and urban area of small towns around it is the major center of the disease with about 2/3s to 3/4s of all the cases in all Bolivia. So far not any in our small community of Cabezas. Education is one of the most basic elements of any society today in our world. But how to do it today? That is the question. (Correction as of PM 29 May 1 case in Abapó, a nurse in the hospital and 1 case in Cabezas, a doctor in the hospital).

Some notes on our schools. When classes were suspended on March 12, we were serving some 1069 students with all our 7 programs. In our regular high school per a questionnaire made with registrations this year as school started, of the almost 400 students in grades 6th elementary to 12th of high school, 83.7% were from families which earned less than the minimum wage in Bolivia. 43.4% came from families who earned less than 50% of the minimum wage, which means that they were not eating some days. This has been our mission, to educate those who could not attend another educational institution. We have changed the lives of thousands in our time here. By God's Grace we hope to continue. But we also provide spiritual formation with a center just for retreats, and days of reflection near the river. Each week there are classes of First Communion and Confirmation. There just are not any religious services nor contact with a priest or religious in the greater part of the 60 to 70 communities and villages from which our students originate. We are their only source of contact with the Catholic Church.

A little story of my family, actually before I was born. In 1932 my family moved to a farm just north of Dickens, TX, in the midst of the depression to stay 5 years. There were two Catholic families out there at the time, and the priest came from somewhere west of there to give Mass twice a year, one time in my family's house, the other time in the house of the other family. My parents gave catechism of First Communion and Confirmation to my older brothers and sisters according to their age then. Why would I tell this story now? I read recently an article from the best theologian in Bolivia, a Jesuit priest who also gave theology classes to Pope Francis years back. Of course, he is older than the Pope, but active in thinking. He brought out the need of much more formation of our families, the need that they give much more religious formation to their kids, maybe even preparing them for the Sacraments. But this means that our parishes would have to give much more formation to parents, not just doctrine, but on actual living of Jesus Christ today in a world so lacking in Jesus Christ. The actual turmoil in the U. S. (and maybe in all areas of our world) shows the lack of this formation. Faith and moral formation (living the Faith) is basic to any civil society. Otherwise we fall apart, maybe taking several years, several decades, but destruction will come (has come?). It is obvious to any serious thinker, any honest observer of our world today, that God absent in the practical sense (daily living on any level: family, community, national, world) means disintegration of living habits and disintegration in world relations. God-belief in practice is essential!

Thank you for all you have done for us here,
your brother in Jesus Christ,

Fr. Bob Thames