

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter May 2021

It seems that only last week I was writing the April letter and here we are at the end of May. Here it is Sunday, Feast of The Holy Trinity, the same as last week of Pentecost and we were not allowed to have services (Masses) for the people, two grand feasts of our Tradition from Jesus Christ. Of course, there are Masses on TV. And I have had the last two Saturdays that Masses were allowed. We had an upsurge of virus cases at the end of May that caused this here, the third wave, as they call it here. We are a country of 11 million folks and almost every day there were some 3000 or more new cases. This time it was the capital city of La Paz that led the way for new cases, not Santa Cruz. In fact, we are down a lot, and we hope and pray it stays that way until the situation is under control. At present we are far from that. We were having over 3000 new cases each day only last week. We are down below 2000. I have not gone to the city for two weeks and perhaps again this week, if someone else will buy my medicine, which is running low. I do have the prescription so others can buy it for me. The people who work with me prefer that I not go because of my age. Actually, I have already had two vaccinations for the virus, this in April and early May.

Just yesterday the Ministry of Education announced that our winter vacation of two weeks which is normally the first two weeks of July has been changed because of the virus. It will start now on June 1, this Tuesday for two weeks, hoping that with this break in contact with others, the situation of health will be helped. It is not just the virus, but the lack of medicine, oxygen, and other necessities that we lack here in Bolivia that slows our improvement. I do not know if this will help as most city schools have been working virtually, not even semi-present as we here are doing. We have been very fortunate in our school with no cases up until today. Other high schools around us have not been so lucky. In fact, we were to continue this week with classes until the vacation was announced, the only high school in all the district of some 8 high schools that was yet functioning. I believe it was because we were much more careful in our conduct (all persons entering the school must have face masks, hands sprayed with alcohol, including students, teachers, visitors, etc.) and the spraying with disinfectant twice a week of all our areas, classrooms, dormitories, kitchen, bathrooms, etc., including my house in all its areas. We paid for all of this, even though the municipal government was supposed to do it. Actually, they did not help in any of the schools.

We have one emergency this past month. A high school senior of ours from Cabezas was taken to the city with severe side pains, which turned out to be an appendicitis that had already ruptured, spreading infection through his abdomen. The family, rather poor, waited so long to take precautions for lack of money. In this case we helped quite a bit, but also we have an agreement with a clinic that does things cheaper, but are very good too, with lots of equipment that allows them to handle lots of cases too difficult here in the country. We did have some simple operations here back a year or so, but cost caused our operating room to close. There were also cesarean sections, but the doctor of this too was let go. I personally went this past week to talk to the municipal council and the new municipal head to ask for re-opening of these facilities. The head man (here called mayor) promised to have it soon, after getting all settled in. He just took over May 3.

Because our catechism classes are so tied to the school, the classes of religion will have to stop also for two weeks. Our kids are from all over, except those in my house, which of course will continue. But in my house there are only the First Communion classes. Our Confirmation classes are with the high school. In all there are some 65 to 70 kids adding up both classes and my house too. We have another group of First Communion classes in the small kids' dorms up near the highway. There are some 10 or so kids there in First Communion. I mentioned last month that with our parish church in Abapò there are over a hundred with First Communion and Confirmations there added together. Here the ages are very different from the U. S., First Communion is from 10 years old on up, the Confirmation classes are from 15 on up. I believe this is the practice in all of Bolivia. Actually, I favor this here as the confessions have much more depth in them, different from a 7-year-old or 10 yr. old for Confirmation.

It is now June 3, THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI. We will have Mass this evening in the church in Abapò, also serving cake and refreshment to make it more important. In Bolivia this is a national holiday, no work. Several workers have expressed a desire to go with us for Mass, so our truck will carry those who want to go along with a car or two. (As told above, Sunday Mass has been forbidden the last two Sundays of May, not sure in June). Actually some 10 kids went to work with men on the land near the mountains on Monday, May 31, and have not returned yet. Two girls went to cook for the guys, included in the group, 11 in all. They were harvesting the last of our soybeans that the combine did not pick up. Something that U.S. farmers left long ago when I was young was a hay binder, that makes bundles of grain or hay that then was carried to a thresher. Older folks will remember. Then the combine came in and hay balers with the big round bales, half ton of hay. But the Mennonites brought the hay binder here from the U. S. and it is yet very popular. The hay bundles are easier to handle by hand, the grain if there is any as in sorghum maize, stays, and the hay does not pick up much dust. We have decided to go that route also, putting our old hay baler for sale, buying hay bundles to store for the dry season now going on. We have had no rain in Cabezas since mid-April and it looks like a repeat of last year's drought so far. So, we are storing up some more hay. Hopefully, with God hearing our prayers, there will be some rain along the way. We did have a small rain on our land near the mountains last Sunday or Monday. There we have some 6 hectares (some 14.4 acres) of sorghum maize planted for silage, just hope it is able to grow to harvest.

Our desire always was to be a part of the Church of Bolivia, but when the Archbishop of Santa Cruz told us to form a civil non-profit foundation to manage the schools, we thought that this put us outside the Church. We are now entering again under a national group of Catholic schools that were founded and yet all operated by the Jesuits, called FE Y ALEGRIA (Faith and Happiness) and under the Catholic Conference of Bishops. The new district superintendent reminded me this week that actually we have always been part of the Catholic Conference by having the adult high school called CEITHA. This type of school was founded and is yet operated by the Catholic Conference under its Catholic School Office and functions all over Bolivia. Actually, our CEITHA is the largest student graduating group with over 700 who have received their high school diplomas. Our regular high school has graduated about 650 students. Bolivia is only recently in its history developing a more extensive school system that includes high school that reaches into the smaller villages. Our schools were formed at the request of parents precisely to help solve that problem. This means

that before us the great majority of folks did not have a high school education, so they are entering our CEITHA, even folks in their 40's and 50's. But another advantage is the number of technical courses offered, some seven different courses for women and men. And I might be mistaken, but I think that our CEITHA is one of the largest if not the largest (in attendance) in all of Santa Cruz state. We operate in 6 different locations in the municipal area of Cabezas (like our county). I have told you in a previous letter that when schools were stopped last year we had some 1069 students using one or more of our educational services.

As mentioned above today is the Feast of Corpus Christi (Body of Christ) and a national holiday in Bolivia. I would like to share some of what has been one of the most important elements in my own priesthood. I might have shared this before, not for sure, hopefully not boring anyone with any repeated narrative. I was ordained in June of 1964. About 4 years later a good number of the priests in the Diocese of Dallas-Fort Worth as it was at that time, were leaving, good priests as it seemed to me and several good friends of mine. It caused me to begin to question my own staying. Maybe they saw something that I was missing, being happy in what I was doing. I was offering Mass one day in Blessed Sacrament Church in Oak Cliff section of Dallas where I was stationed at the time. The parish had a large Spanish-speaking population, especially combined for a couple of years with St. James parish where mostly I worked. As I spoke Spanish (not so good but could get along) I was stationed there. As I said I was offering Mass one day and holding up the Consecrated Host after the words of Consecration, it just struck me that here Jesus continued now for over 2000 years, giving Himself for me and all the world, then how could I after only 4 years want to abandon my own giving, so poor as it probably was at the time. What type of person was I to do such a thing! As the years have passed and God's Grace has worked in me in so many circumstances, some so dangerous as I have lived in, all the more has Jesus' Total Offering in the Eucharist held me, raised me, kept me going. I see the Eucharist as the Total Giving of Jesus for humanity in His Crucifixion, this Total Love that is passed to me, re-enforces me, pushes me, to keep going, knowing that any love from me is participating in this Total Giving. It is not just me, but Jesus working in me, through me, to touch others, to help others, to raise up others, to help heal others. This last, "heal others" is so important in what I am doing now, in dealing with kids who have been abused, abandoned, left orphans, scarred emotionally by little or no love, beaten unjustly and unmercifully by an alcoholic, cursing parent, thrown out into the street, to live there in really inhuman situations. Healing patience when words fail me, trying to understand when this never happened me, imagining what could have happened inside this young person, girl or boy, hoping some of that what Jesus has given me in Love by parents and other persons in Healing, might touch that person too, praying over that person, a sign of the cross on the forehead. I am speaking in part about the last young girl of 13 who has come to live with us. Abused since she was 8 in 3 different homes of her mother and other relatives she feels totally destroyed as a person, has moments of wishing suicide, and has to be watched if she goes into these moments of depression that lead her to think such. Also, a young man who came last year. His own mother went to Spain to work when he was 4. Obviously, it was an escape from her husband. There she married another man and has stayed there. The father is living with another woman who is evidently difficult for him, at times violently against him. He and his younger brother both are here and rarely want to visit their former home, even though the father wants them to come. He is only now beginning to study, seemingly before not able to concentrate on

studies, 14 now and in the 6th grade with his younger brother. We thought at first he had some deficiency mentally. Now we realize it was only emotional and he is coming out of it. I was never trained in this, never imagined me doing this, having worked all my active priesthood with adult parents in bible studies, thinking that that is where kids are formed, molded into adults. Now I am working with the results of disintegrated families, working with the kids who have suffered so severely when adults have failed them.

As I end this letter, I want to ask you all to consider helping us with \$100 or more as any can help. We need your continued help so that we might help those whose families also need help when they have failed. Yet there are too so many good families whose kids are here in the schools we have. But many families cannot afford educating their kids, many times for a lack of their own education that would have helped them earn money to education their own kids. We do need you help here. At the same time, I want to THANK ALL OF YOU for this continued help over the years. MAY OUR LORD BLESS ALL OF YOU!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames