

Fr. Bob Thames
June 2017 Newsletter

Today is the first of July, Saturday, cloudy with projection of rain tomorrow, at least in the city of Santa Cruz. The rain might not reach here. This week it rained rather hard just to the northeast of us on the road to Santa Cruz, only about a quarter inch for us (you notice the farmer in me, giving importance to these things that affect the land.) We are in our first week of winter vacation, that is, two weeks usually the first two weeks of July. Our principal of the school asked the ministry of education person to schedule our vacation the last week of June this year and the first week of July, so that our kids would be here to participate in municipal anniversary celebration which is the 16th of July, the Feast of Our Lady of Carmen. When we have our vacation the the first two weeks of July we are just arriving at the time of the feast and not prepared to do anything for the celebration. I note that the wife of the principal is the secretary of the mayor or head of the municipal government, and might well have had something to do with this. I believe that the mayor asked her to try with her husband to get the district superintendent to change our vacation (not the public school, just ours) to one week earlier.

I complained somewhat to the principal because I had arranged a retreat for the people who work with us the second week of winter vacation thinking it would be the second week of July. Now I have the problem of having people with the kids when they return from vacation after the first week while we are yet on retreat. That is life for us, not an impossible situation but some trouble nevertheless.

One of the things that has interested me is something that the sisters of Mora have done with a type of one night retreat with the kids who live with them (part of our apostolate, live there and go to the public school, some 46 students at present) and others of the communities around them in their pastoral area. They call it a vigil, but really is a night full of song, bible study, Eucharistic adoration and other prayer, lots of dynamics, small plays that help reflections on bible stories, trying to raise questions with the high school age kids on how we live today with its worldly values in contrast with the Gospel way of living the same situations. It basically is a retreat of one night. The sisters have had much success with this and some of our student leaders from our school in Cabezas, some 13 leaders, but more from villages around them who come to our school, also attended the last

one and came back really on a high. So we are planning such a retreat for 22 July, a Saturday night into Sunday morning as 23 July is friendship day here in Bolivia a little similar to Feb. 14 in the U. S. We are thinking of concentrating on personal friendships as a theme, starting with our friendship with Jesus Christ as model of our human friendships.

I am saying all of this also because we have a new religion professor, a young woman just out of normal school, but have a background of participation in types of retreats like this in Santa Cruz with the large charismatic parish (building holds some 7000 people seated). Interestingly enough this parish was formed by a Father Chris Gaeretts, brother to Fr. David Gaeretts (name could be misspelled), who was Abbot of the Benedictine Monastery of Pecos, New Mexico during all the 70's when I attended there once to twice a year on retreats and spiritual direction courses. Fr. Chris was a Dominican missionary here in Santa Cruz, stayed until he died some very few years ago and is buried here. They have a youth ministry known to our religion teacher and we are asking their help with our first retreat in July if they are available. If this works as we think it will, we have the potential of forming our own music ministry and others who could help direct such retreats here in Cabezas at our school. We have everything necessary physically, and quite a few folks with the spirituality to do a good job. I have wanted something else to increase the quality of our religious formation, and this might just be the thing. Pray to Our Lord so it comes about! We could then have this type of retreat once a month for some 15/18 months or more (during one and half years), including formation for First Communion and Confirmation in these as basic themes, and it will be a fun thing for the kids, hopefully at the same time. This makes me think of some youth retreats of the late 60's and 70's, but now probably will be a little different too. I don't think of participating too much as at my age as I don't see my mentality at that level as it was 45 to 50 years ago, but who knows what might happen.

Back to our winter vacation! Most of the kids went to their own homes, although a number of them are working here with us, and some others in other places, including Santa Cruz, even if for just two weeks. In the country folks are harvesting corn with big combines with a special head for corn, but these leaves quite a bit of corn left. So a lot of kids, both boys and girls, are gathering this corn left behind by hand. On our own land the kids gathered some 50 sacks of 100 lbs. each, in just 3 days. We are plowing the land that had corn now so as to plant the

soy beans finally. Another field without corn already has soy beans up and growing. And I would like some sun flowers planted (a big crop east and north of Santa Cruz, for cooking oil manufacture). Here my interest is our honey bees that get a lot of nectar from the plants. There must be some 10 to 12 kids, mostly boys, but 3 girls included, are on our land near the mountains northeast of here now working on all this. Probably they will plant opinions too, and get the weeds out of the potatoes growing there. There is a 3 room house there and a big stream of cold water that comes down from the mountains near the house. The kids took pots and food for cooking with them. A neighbor asked their help in gathering his corn after the combine left, so they are doing more than just ours. Some of the kids from my house are also working here with us, two in the garden, one in maintenance, and one in the clothes making shop. The cooks have Sunday off so our kids are cooking on Sundays not only for us here in the house, but also for the other workers who watch over the school property, milk the cows, take care of the goats and feed the pigs, etc.

This really has nothing to do with our schools here in Cabezas, now with some 1221 students, summing up all programs, but for me very relevant in my own life and other priests in the Diocese of Fort Worth, although only a few of those who remember are yet alive. Fr. Stan Rother of Okargie, Oklahoma, a small town northwest of Oklahoma City, will be beatified on the road to sainthood, or canonized to sainthood; I'm not sure which, this September. Fr. Joe Scantlin and my classmate, Fr. Phil Johnson, Fr. Jim O'Toole, and even some other lay folks in Most Blessed Sacrament parish in Arlington knew him. Fr. Stan was a seminarian in San Antonio, TX while several of us were there in the late 50's. As all who knew him can verify, he was a very simple man even then, but very faithful in all he did. He could not get the Latin language, a necessity in those pre-Vatican II days, finally had to go to another seminary to finish, was ordained a priest and volunteered to go the Oklahoma City Diocese mission in Guatemala. Some of the older folks will remember Pope Pius XII, and then St. Pope John XXIII asking catholic priests from many countries to go to Latin America to help out. Fr. Stan was there for a good number of years, and even though he could not get the Latin in the seminary, he was able to learn the difficult Indian Language, even translating the New Testament into his peoples' language. When conflict arose, while he lived with very poor folks, was accused of being a radical or rebel (contrary to all who knew him), he was assassinated some months after Archbishop St. Oscar Romero in El Salvador (March 1980), in 1980 or 1981. I was

in Bolivia at the time, and within a few days of St. Oscar's death in El Salvador, a Jesuit priest, Fr. Luis Espinal, in La Paz, Bolivia was also killed. So all this brings back rather vivid and personal memories. But I must confess that all this helped me to deepen my relationship with Jesus Christ, being ready to die in my post to serve the most vulnerable part of the population. God uses all kinds of events to bring us closer to Him. So I must THANK OUR GOD for all this! Putting Jesus above all else as is the Gospel of this Sunday, XIII Sunday of ordinary time.

Our seminarian, Ismael Rivera, graduate of our high school and now in first theology is with us for a couple of weeks. His Dad works with us. They too are on winter break. Here there is only one year of pre-philosophy, two of philosophy, and 4 of theology, so seven years, not 8 as in the U. S. He is doing really well, but there are so few seminarians, with only one companion in his class for the archdiocese. We had two deacons to be ordained this year, but both left in the last few months. I credit the very poor spiritual formation, also siding with one of the auxiliary bishops, but to no avail. I wrote my opinion of a good spiritual formation program on 5 pages and gave it to the bishops, but not accepted. The archbishop is satisfied with the way things are and wants no changes. Our population in Santa Cruz continues to grow rapidly as the major economic power of the country is here. We are in desperate need of priests and religious, and these mainly should come from here, not imported from outside, but we are failing miserably in this. One other young man in my house is interested, but is only a sophomore. I will see what he thinks in two years more. We had one young woman, a graduate of our school, who enter the convent this past February as I have said before. I am aware that the celibate and community life is not the only way to serve, but it does give full time and personal support to a person who wants to give themselves totally to the good of those most in need. If I had a personal family, it would have been difficult if not impossible to raise the first 11 kids I have taken in, and the 9 that are with me now. Jealousy and friction over resources could have entered in, making life more difficult for all. This is apart from being full time in a parish of 38 villages scattered over some 90 miles long and 40 to 50 miles wide, with very little time at home most weeks. I just can't see how it can be done effectively with a personal family. I am for married priesthood, for me very urgent today to have, but not for me. I seriously considered the hermit life as a young person and also like my time alone, to read and pray, although with so many kids in my house (some 29) it is hard to have much time alone.

I want to thank Our God too for the short visit of Gene Sessa about which I will write more in the July letter. I close this letter now praying for all of you each day, and for all the parishes who are helping us to keep going, serving. I say THANK YOU to all of you and even more to Our God Who inspires you in your daily lives. AND ALL OF YOU PRAY FOR ME!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames