

Dear Family all of you there. Here is the July letter, a little early as I enter the hospital in two days for an operation and did not want this letter pending. It is a little long, and I had to open the margins to get it all in.

Keith, what would you say about each letter including some 2 or 3 photos of the students in the sending, photos that you have there? Maybe I should then reduce the size of the letter? Would this make the letter more effective, especially if I added a note or two of the kids in the photos, knowing ahead of time which photos would be selected, maybe just now some photos of the graduating class? Let me know what you all think of this.

Thank you for all you do for us.

Down to freezing, just almost unheard of in our part of Bolivia, but on July 17 we did it for the second time in almost 15 years that I have been out here. Worse yet most kids had just returned to school after the Winter break. The ministry of education hurriedly the day before to send out a notice on internet that schools were to open an hour later than normal for the projected cold. Somehow the notice escaped out principal and our kids came earlier. The day was clear so the sun quickly warmed us and the day was a little hot by the afternoon, making me remember similar days in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, so many years ago. But this is Bolivia, where this is not common, yet in the tropical lowlands of South America. Now the weather has warmed up, and we are again in typical warm, windy and dry weather, common for this time of the year. A rather strong dry spell is now in order, so some say. Our potatoes and soy beans were affected rather badly near the mountains. I had thought that soy beans were able to take the cold, but probably just the kind planted by us, as the technical institute has soy beans at Cabezas that are doing well.

Back in June of this year (I had written of this before) the sisters at Mora held an all-night retreat for teenagers, with a good number of our students in attendance. The kids came back with much enthusiasm; it seemed to us just the type of thing that would help us deepen religious formation for our kids. This started us working on a plan, which we experimented with on July 23, a Sunday, but also friendship day in Bolivia, something like February 14 in the United States. It could have been better, but the kids all liked it, and made us more than ever convinced that we could do this here. But at the same time the barrio of San Sylvester (local community across the river from Abapó) which has a plot of land in its center, just up from the river Rio Grande, had talked to us about moving the Mass we celebrate there each Saturday afternoon to this lot when a type of metal roof would provide some shelter from the sun. After some more talking and looking, it seems that the community is very open to our building a type of building there (probably only a big tin roof with restrooms) that could serve for their Saturday Mass, and other community functions, plus serve us a retreat center for our school and Mora, and probably even youth functions for groups in the city of Santa Cruz. The center is only a 5 to 8 minute walk to the river which has a large, sandy beach on their side of the river, excellent for a bonfire session at night that could easily lead into prayer sessions. After talking with the kids in various places there was a lot of favorable responses. Today, July 29, I will have the communities' response to go ahead with this. It is very probable as the leader there (president of the barrio) is very close to us and the head of the small grade school in the barrio. It would benefit his kids in school as well with better formation. There is a small chapel there where we have Mass each Saturday, but it is too small for the people, and we always take the benches out under the trees in front. To celebrate as the heat becomes unbearable, as well as being so crowded. Another problem for the chapel is that it is closer to the river that allows the river in flood stage to cover the chapel as has happened before. So the folks there were

looking for higher ground. This all seems to be working for everyone involved. The chapel will remain, first built in 1964, so a memory for so many (year of our class ordination to the priesthood), but as before my time, very little used. Back to the lot of land above, there is a basketball court beside it that provides a space for activities in the possible retreats, and other traits that make it good for our purposes. Speaking to the president of the barrio yesterday, he was to have meeting last night with the community to see if they all would accept it. I will know today. If all goes well, we could have our first retreat there, just about 10 hours or so, by the end of September.

I have been concerned for some time for the need of a deeper formation program for our students, but with the whole parish to work, had little time to dedicate to it. It looks like the moment to move has come, with so many elements coming together at the same time. I have written before that it seems to me that education should be humanities, technical, and moral. The first two we have had, and even now will be able to deepen the technical (to be explained in another letter to see if what we are planning comes about), but moral is not that easy. We are talking about kids from small rural schools of very poor quality of education that many times it takes one to two years to bring them up to standard, then trying to go forward. Also religion being a part of the secular regime, it seems to me to be more something less than what I would want. More knowledge rather than living the Faith, if you know what I mean, more memorizing statements rather than seeing how to live out Jesus Christ today in our world society. And religions books are for the several religious backgrounds of the students. Of course our retreats will be strongly catholic, maybe even including ways to have first communion and confirmation classes integrated into them. Later with this letter I will let you know what the communities' response is. The community would put up some part, mostly the pillars with

steel re-inforced cement, and I would be responsible for the roof. The floor as is common here would be dirt, at least at first, with some bathrooms at the back of the property. We want then a contract of use for some 30 years of the property to guarantee our use of it. Probably my enthusiasm is showing through what I am writing, yes, I am very excited. Our kids today are so exposed by cell phones to so much materialistic and secular values, some even dangerous to my mind.(instruments of suicide) We urgently need a way to deepen our Faith in Jesus Christ Who wants of us a lifestyle that goes against the grain of so much of our society. Most of our kids don't have live TV, but do have access to so many videos of soap operas and movies that to me are terrible. Pray for us that all of this comes to fruition as we desire. I presented this yesterday afternoon to the principals of our various schools in a meeting with them, all who agreed with me, of the need for more moral formation. So many of our kids and adults are after the three P's, (pleasure, possessions, and power) which so easily captivates and enslaves us. Even some adult students will participate in the retreats. This is different from the time we started out here in 2004 when the country communities were much more isolated from influences of the city culture. The motorcycle, a few cars, and especially the cell phone, have changed all of that. All the more need to put a lot more into spiritual formation.

Yesterday too, July 29, the second semester report cards were given out, even though the second semester ended almost a month ago. With the winter vacation the professors didn't have time to fill them out. As always the parents are invited and the report cards are only given to parents or someone in charge of them. There are some parents or guardians who never come and these are the students as a rule that do the worst. Parent interest influences a lot. I will see all of the ones in my house for whom I

am responsible on Monday. There are some of the best of the students in my house, but also some who are having a hard time getting going. I am eager to see some of them as there are two more semesters to go for them to be able to pass the year. Even one failing grade means repeating the year. At the end of the year the final grade of each semester is averaged to get the final grade.

Interestingly enough tomorrow, Sunday, there will be academic regional exams held in Cabezas and some of our students have been selected to take part, only in math, chemistry and physics, with our governments' emphasis on science. You might have seen that a team from Sucre, the legal capital of Bolivia won recognition as being one of the best of Latin America in the recent robotics competition in Washington. The students of high school age were from catholic schools, one of St. Ann and five of Don Bosco (Salesian order). I am glad because Bolivia is not known in Latin America for its quality of education.

On a personal note I will have a hip replacement on August 2, that will keep me some few days in the hospital, then some 10 days or more in physical therapy in our own center with some of our students and the teacher giving me therapy to put me back on my feet. I will live there in the center until I am able to live alone in my own house again. But I will be able to do a lot of things anyway, with a laptop and telephone, and hopefully a lot of reading. I thank Mike Wuller who has been able to get some books on Jesus combined with books that are the results of much digging and study of old documents discovered since about 1945 in the Holy Land.. They help a lot to put actual living conditions at the time of Jesus' life on this earth. I would recommend the author Bargill Pixner, a Benedictine monk who lived in Jerusalem, maybe dead now, who did a lot of research into documents from the time of Jesus to the second and third century, plus

participated in lots of digs that revealed a lot too of the life of the people at the time. His origin is northern Italy, but spoke German (Southern Tirol), came to Israel after the Second World War. It puts a lot of local atmosphere to the life of Jesus, showing so much that Jesus had much in common with various religious movements of His time, but an inside part of none completely except his own.

It is now Monday, July 31. The community meeting with the teacher turned out as we expected with overwhelming support for the idea. Anything that brings people in is good for a community and it gives a new facility for the community for their use most of the time, as we would use it very little, only on Saturday afternoons and night one to two times, even possibly 3 times a month. And as the people there see it, folks coming in will buy fast food that the people are excellent in preparing and selling. Some 35% to 40 % of the women folks here live by this method (Street vendors of fast food). So we will begin immediately.

I probably will repeat some of what I have said before, but I want to stress our Faith's insistence that we humans are made in the image and likeness of Our God. (Basic to us: Genesis 1,26-27) This means that while we are part animal and need all the material development and support, and while we have an intelligence that needs mental and emotional development, we have a spiritual dimension too that is so essential to our maintaining humanness. In all of history it seems to me that when this dimension of us has been left out by gubernatorial regimes or by popular culture our society begins its downward turn, decaying into self-destructive activity. For we are more than just animal and mental, we are made for God, and must strive to live the Plan of God as found in Jesus Christ, not fudging on this to adapt to

modern society, even less to economic pressures (bigger sales). St. Augustine said some 1600 yrs. ago that “we were made for God and we will be restless until we rest in God.” It is essential now in our day to understand this, the world needs it so urgently, examples of alternative living where God and our path to Our God take dominance. This means time for prayer, bible reading, but more importantly the living out of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, where charity, respect for all, and generosity, especially for the lowest in our world, in the line of Jesus, take priority over all else. Generosity here means the type shown by Jesus on the Cross, a total giving, whether it is in marriage and family, in our schools, in our work places or our markets. **WE URGENTLY NEED TESTIMONY OF LIVING FAITH.** Remember that the word for testimony in Greek (New Testament writing) is martyr. As St. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ, yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me,...I live by faith in the Son of God, Who has loved me and given Himself up for me.” (Galatians 2, 19-20). Please don't think I am living all of this. Just like you all, I am striving for that, with God's Grace. But not to be discouraged, we are on the Way of Jesus.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames