

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter  
July 2019

Dear Folks,

Greetings to all of you. Here is the July letter, hoping it finds all of you well and growing inside.

Here it is only the 28th of July and I am starting this letter, so early, but it is Sunday morning and I had the Mass last night (so a little free this AM) with a Baptism. It was a very beautiful ceremony with the Baptism of the child. It was of a couple who met here and both husband and wife work with us now. He is the head of our honey bee production and she works in our gastronomy detail, making bread, which I will explain later in this letter. Also the godparents are a young couple who also work with us, he as coordinator of our agricultural work, and she as our librarian in the high school, with the added joy that the godparents are expecting their first child towards the end of the year. There were a quite a few folks at the Mass from the local community as well which made it all the better.

We had a rather warm June and July (our winter) with some very warm days, a few that were a little cooler, but not a winter for us, never below 60 degrees hardly. That is, until this last week. Last Tuesday a cold, south wind hit, with clouds, then rain for two days, (that being very beautiful for us as farmers, steady and slow, all soaking in—several other farmers have told me of their joy too), turning colder, now just below 50 degrees in the early mornings. We are just not used to this normally. The Altiplano, or high plains in the west of Bolivia, all had snow, more than usual, and over 2100 schools were closed for the weather. Our students (actually our whole region) even were given the option of staying at home if they so desired, a favor that some accepted, even in my house, although most went to classes anyway. One thing that makes me happy is that with all our wet and cold weather, no one in my house and the whole school, needed medical attention. This is a credit to our bodies so accustomed to certain conditions which causes our bodies to build up antibodies of resistance. (Thanks, Mike Wuller, for the report on this from the U. S. which backs up my opinion on this). The truth is that most of our kids do not have clothes for very cold weather, and this goes for all of Eastern Bolivia. Actually, the state (departmental here in Bolivia) head of education was the district superintendent at Cabezas before being promoted to his present job and is known by all of us. He must have felt some of our anxiety for the weather.

But the real big news this month has to be the Feast of Our Lady of Carmen, July 16. This is not only the Feast of the parish, but the Feast of the whole town. It was founded some 250 years ago on this day and yet today is the feast that all celebrate, Catholic or other church affiliation or just civilians. As I have explained in earlier letters the town was founded by a diocesan priest from Santa Cruz, Padre Jose Mariscal, who gathered up a small group of Indian villages with a church and school for boys and another school for girls.

The importance of schools here among the Indians of the time, (as it was in the churches and schools around San Antonio, Texas) is that the lives of the Indians of the time mostly depended on hunters and gatherers for food, which was not always successful. The Mission churches grew food and taught how to preserve it for winter, as well as how to make clothes from cotton to protect from the cold. This is what caused the villages in our area to seek out the Missioners to come to their own areas. The Indians in this area never were conquered by the Spaniards nor early colonizers. It was Religion that turned civilization around. This is not to say that all was good, as humans are composed of bad as well as good. We still have work to do, so the importance of our work here, repairing the past and leading us into the future.

When we (our pastoral team) came here on assignment from our Cardinal Archbishop, a native to our area, the small town was just about abandoned. I am speaking here of Cabezas Pueblo or Old Town where the parish was erected in 1829. Most people had moved to Cabezas Estacion where the railroad came (1962), then the paved highway (1996). The big school had been built there later with its first high school graduation in 1999. There were basically only 5 full-time older families left in Cabezas Pueblo when we arrived in December, 2002. The whole municipal area wanted a high school then with dormitories, which resulted in what we have and are today. (the Old Town now has some 70 plus families living here) So when the Old Town elected leaders met to plan the 250-year celebration, they wanted us to be a big part of the celebration, giving us the major part. And we went in big. We bought some cheap canvas coverings and made stands to present our humanitarian, social and cultural work, and all our technical works, with our regular high school, our high school for adults, and the technical institute. The celebration lasted some 4 days, 13 to 16 July, but the big days were Sunday, 14 July & 16 July, when loads of folks came from the city of Santa Cruz and all the local area, probably over a 1000 each of those days. There were talks by officials from the local and state governments, all students marching as well as all the local organizations or associations. And we sold food! We had killed 6 hogs the Friday before and

all was sold out, folks asking for more. The same for our special cake of 3 milks (tres leches), something brought from Mexico by the Sisters from Mexico at Mora which has made a big hit here. A Secret (after all expenses taken out, including paying bonuses to workers) we cleared over \$1000. But we feel the big impact was on all we do for the area. We have now graduated about 1050 folks with high school diplomas (young and adults), so many with technical professions too and so many who have gone on to higher education, over ten times more than the regular high schools. Our kids are more idealized and more determined because they come from families who could not give them what has been given here in our schools. They appreciate what they have been given and go on to more, mostly paying their own way in technical institutes and universities, slowly but surely, sometimes over 7 to 8 years, but they finish. (A medical doctor and master degrees among them).

One of our projects that has gone well is the making of bread for the local market (Cabezas, Abapó, Rio Seco). We knew after so many people had told us that there was a shortage of bread in the local market. We began with 3 different types of bread, brought in by Luzbaida, a woman who came with us from Santa Cruz years back. She has completed a chef course of a year, but continues to take specialize courses to amplify her knowledge. This has gone over big, now between 1600 to 2000 pieces of bread a day, more on Saturday to cover Sunday. Students are involved in this, now doing a large part of the bread for the school students (between 100 to 150 lbs. of flour a day, mostly whole wheat. And in our commercial part over half are students who work from 7 to 9 PM and from 4 to 6 AM every other day. They too are paid a little for their time and interest, but we yet make a very good profit after all expenses. We also make cakes decorated for special occasions when folks ask. Luz now is preparing another kitchen at the small kids' dorms (the greater population area). to give classes for pay and make food commercially for special occasions.

Now August 2, Friday: Report cards were given out for our second of 4 semesters on Friday, July 26, to the happy expectations of most, rather sad for some few, even in my house. But out of 43 who live here I can't complain, even more because I have several from real difficult circumstances in their early life. It seems families with alcoholic problems, especially if it affects both parents, is a very negative impact on early life, leading into a very unstable personality, generating an inability to be consistent when it demands extra energy and commitment. This is necessary for studies, it seems to me. Day after day homework, preparation for exams, expositions, etc. just are very hard for them,

but essential in our school. Some in the same family are doing OK while one or other sister/brother has not managed it.

Studying the early Church, living in a very immoral atmosphere as was the Roman Empire at the time, even pagan writings show concern for what was being lived out. Read Tacitus' history of the first century AD, see especially his report on Nero, who was eventually assassinated by his own family out of shame for his life-style. There were several currents of new religions, some from the Eastern Mystery religions, Platonism (neo-Platonism) was on the come-back by the second century AD if I remember well. In the middle of all of this was Jesus Christ and Christianity, evidently finding home in so many folks, even though persecuted by the thousands, not only martyrs, but property taken away, exiled, etc. I want to ask why? It seems to me God was working overtime in the entire population, but more specifically in those whose Faith in Jesus and His Death-Resurrection, giving them the life-without-fear in their daily testimony. This Sunday's Gospel, Luke 12, 13-21, is straight to the point. If we want to be really honest in Faith, comparing the time of life on this earth with the Life After Death, the time for each, it just makes sense, even human sense, to shoot for the Life After Death portion, even at the expense of living more simply now, sharing whatever we have with those who have less, rather it be in material goods, or rather it be in time spent with those whose lives need our time and emotional support. Real Christian Love is in both, and it is our loving sacrifice that shows out as TESTIMONY. The Greek word for testimony (pardon my repeating it so often) is martirios. I am convinced that the Church cannot be totally renewed from above, even with a Pope like Pope Francis. It has to start from below, in us. Our television news lets us know so much so soon, but the testimony that touches hearts more deeply is the family relative or next door neighbor, or work companion who lives beyond the ordinary in time and quality of personal giving. I am convinced that this is where, when all is said and done, the world will be changed. As more and more personal decisions result from a hunger that leads to deepening in the Spirit of Jesus, interior that eventually is seen in the exterior, this TESTIMONY that strikes hard in the hard of hearts, softening others to wanting what so-and-so has, because it just seems so good. Probably this will be not just Catholic, maybe not even just Christians, but so many folks who do find Real Human Life in the Real God Who Lives Within ("The Kingdom of God is within you or among you." Luke 17,20-21—see note in New American Bible But also see the parables of the yeast in the leaven or light in the darkness, or salt that gives taste to the food – Matthew 5,13-14 and Matthew 13,33). This just convinces me all the more that real moral renewal of our world will start small and grow as more and more

folks get more and more turned off by what we see and live in, this world-wide, not just in one country. At the same time they see in the Gospel text, or next door or in the person near them with something that seems really human (what Our Lord created us to be and live) and good substance of character. This personal testimony will change the world, because God is with those, Jesus Christ lives in them, sometimes even without their knowing it. PLEASE LET THIS BE ALL OF US WHO READ THIS WITH OUR LORD'S BLESSING! Pardon me for using the same themes over and over so many times.

May Our Lord bless all of you there, your brother in Jesus Christ,

Fr. Bob Thames