

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter July 2021

Greetings to all of you there in the U. S., suffering from the heat, while we here in Bolivia are experiencing a colder winter than usual at present, but the days are about a week or so hot, in the upper 80's and lower 90's, then for week or so down to the upper 40's or 50's at night to the lower 60's in the day. Our bodies just can't get adjusted when the weather changes again.

The big-time events this month were centered around the 16th of July, which is the religious feast of our municipal area, but also the anniversary of the foundation of Cabezas, now 252 years in existence. You can probably understand this when I tell you it was a diocesan priest who founded the town, building a church and classrooms for boys and girls way back in 1769. There were already scattered Indian homes along both sides of the river then and the priest just put the chapel (a large one built of logs) among the houses. I understood that there was no concentration of Indian houses, just rather far apart.

Here and now, our town and all the municipal government celebrate this day with no work obligated and normally several expositions of various types, with carnival type games (merry-go-round and other rides along with the games). Normally it is our schools that make the expositions. All the games, expositions, etc. were canceled for the virus, but all municipal workers marched in parade, along with the graduating classes of the public school and our high school, along with our adult high school and the technical institute students. As far as I know, despite the large number of folks gathered, there has been no notice of any virus cases as a result. Also, here as in other places there are several important folks who give talks, although this year the sound system was very poor, and I could hardly understand anything. But it does make those who talk to feel important. What was important for us was the donations for our technical courses for the public school and our high school. These are materials for the courses of agriculture, veterinary, and gastronomy. All of these materials will stay in our high school as the public school comes to us for the courses. In my opinion the material given in part at least was things that past generations used for agriculture (9 wheelbarrows, shovels, hoes, rakes, in abundance), while almost all villages now have tractors, plows, planters and drills, and most harvesting is done with machines now. But the gastronomy course was given gas ovens, stoves, mixers, pots, and pans, and lots of other things needed. We were supposed to have been given these things back in March, but at least now they are all here halfway through the school year. Better late than never as the saying goes!

Another event that is of importance, the giving out of report cards for the first semester of school happened this month. Actually, this year there are 3

semesters, the first one ending at the end of May. Only now were the cards given out. For me it was really important so as to find out who is doing well and who is failing. Fortunately, few in my house are failing and some had very good grades. To my knowledge now only 2 who live full time with us had low grades. About 4 other kids who come for 3 days of classes then return home until the week following did poorly. All are new to us this year, probably needing to adjust to being away from home, and being responsible for themselves here. I can get behind only so many. 23 to 25 stretches me somewhat. But now at least I know who needs to be pushed. (All of this was written on July 28, Wednesday, what follows was written on Friday, 30 July).

Some really good news this month is that our school and our other activities are more than just a high school and other educational activities. We have First Communions of the kids in my house as well as the small kids' dorm up by the public grade school. These are kids who are full time ours and have been having classes since last year. The Feast we have chosen will be August 15, which is a very big Feast in Bolivia, the Virgin of Urkupiña, the large church in a fairly large town just outside of Cochabamba, but the Feast is celebrated all over the country, even though there are other Marian feasts in most of the larger towns. The Virgin Mary is so prized in devotions in Bolivia. Folks who rarely go to Mass, even at Easter or Christmas would have the Virgin of Urkupiña statue or picture in their home and would have special prayers or a type of novena for the Virgin. Of course, this year August 15 falls on Sunday, so we will celebrate this Feast with our kids, some as young as 9, although most are 10 yrs. or older up to 17, some 20 to 30 kids, I am not just sure how many. I should leave this until the August letter, but I am really happy that after so long a preparation we will celebrate First Communions on this day. (Our First Communions for the kids of the high school will be at the end of October.) Even more, on September 12 we will have Confirmations of some of the same kids who are 15 and older of my house, plus the kids from the high school who have been studying since February of this year, plus kids from Abapò. Our big church in Abapò is named Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose feast here in Bolivia is September 8. This date is during the week, so the bishop accepted to come the following Sunday. Our kids are from many places and the parents who will come will have to get up early to arrive for the celebration, now scheduled for 10 AM. These will include the kids from Abapò also along with the kids from our high school, 60 to 80 or more, again not sure of the exact number. There will be a weekend religious retreat over-night for all the Confirmation kids, on the weekends prior to the date of Confirmations, with the large group divided into two weekends. The point that I want to make with all of this, is that we are the main, and in many places around here the only religious formation, that is in existence. Just this morning I was up at the municipal offices and a lady from Rio Seco came up to me, telling me that so many folks there are losing their Faith and moral practice, as there is not any religious attention, not even Mass occasionally. This really saddens me after having given 14 years to all these town and villages, using lay and religious

with myself, having catechism (First Communion and Confirmation every year) in all the places plus a Mass every two weeks in over 30 villages and when I was not present, the lay and religious gave liturgical celebrations. (I had read of the African missionaries of the 19th century who did similar things, and following their example, that I did in the Diocese of Fort Worth in the 70's with permission of Bishop Cassata. (I remember Bishop Cassata cried when he announced that I, and another priest (Fr. Jim Miller), had asked to leave the diocese in 1979 precisely to do missionary work in places where the need was greater.) So, there was worship every week. It made me sad to hear the lady but am not able to do anything about the situation.

It is for these situations in all the world that Pope Francis is concerned and wants a Church synod to deal with these types of situations. The starting point was the synod in 2019 treating the need in the Amazon of Brazil, but this was just a starting point. Another synod was to have been had in October 2020, and maybe others to have followed. The pandemic has it put on hold for now, just waiting for the time to act. The lack of religious vocations must be Our Lord telling us to open up, to be concerned to what is happening in our world, and with the Presence of the Holy Spirit, figure out how to deal with our modern world. We have a history, especially in the early years of Church existence, of ministries that dealt specifically with their needs at that time and place (read the end of several of St. Paul's epistles), and now we must do the same. The real truth is that our world so desperately needs moral formation as so much of our past moral practices are no longer lived out. Our Lord is not absent, just we who are slow to open to the needs around us and God's Presence there. Let us pray that Our Lord nudge us onward. Surely Our God is waiting for us to "see with the Eyes of Faith" the openings that Our Loving God is showing us. Jesus had to deal with customs of the Jewish religious leaders of His time to reach out to so many who had been abandoned by rules and regulations that were not being changed to meet the needs of the people of His time and place. (You see that I get on my kick of missionary work, sorry for any offense given, hopefully not many or none.)
(Now Sunday, August 1)

Back to the catechism classes here. There is a priest and religious sister from Spain, but here in Bolivia for more than 35 years, who are specialists in catechetics. And after a large national Biblical conference that took place in Santa Cruz several years ago began to make new catechisms for First Communion and Confirmation that are centered on Jesus Christ in the New Testament. There are types of fill-in exercises, puzzles, types of games, and I don't know what all that requires the kids to read certain passages of the New Testament, especially the 4 Gospels, to be able to work the puzzles, etc. These now are the official catechism texts for here and are used widely in Bolivia. It makes me so glad as it seems many Catholics are slow to read the Bible, and even the New Testament. My desire is also that the kids take their books home to do some of the work with their parents and/or older brothers and sisters, to

get them all involved in reading the New Testament. I pray that it will help out some, at least. We just have to counter the social media of phones and internet that many times hold our younger generations' (maybe older ones too) attention that is not always the best for our families and our world. The population of our world so needs JESUS CHRIST. (Now 5 August) Of course this involves the whole world, but I am too practical to think that the national and international political people will want to think other than power and money. But I yet think it is possible that small neighborhoods and small villages and especially families could be serious about living as Jesus would want us to live. This would be difficult in our world situation with social media and other communications, but I must believe that there are groups yet capable. And these would be examples to others, seeing the happiness that is there and wanting to imitate what they see. For this I pray!

I am yet extremely grateful for your help these past two months, a few large donations, and very many small contributions that give us hope to continue our work here. I pray daily for all of you, that Our Lord may bless you and grant this happiness here in your families, and hereafter in the eternal reward promised to us and already given to so many great saints and so many other saints unknown to us but known by Our Lord and so enjoying the GREATNESS OF OUR GOD IN HEAVEN.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames