

Father Bob Thames' end of July 2024 letter from Cabezas, Bolivia, follows below. Please use the [link at the end of the letter](#) for easiest access to the on-line donation page.

I greet all of you there with this letter, the end of July and the start of August. It has been a cold month for us, more than I can remember of my 28 years in the eastern side of this tropical part of Bolivia. Of course, I spent some 3 years in the high plains, where zero weather was normal and expected. Now as we end this month of July it is again moderate and even hot on some days, not like last year when it was the hottest winter ever recorded here. This month was our winter school vacation, usually just two weeks, but again like last year, the vacation was extended to 4 weeks. I feel sorry for the kids although they really enjoyed it. Education is the future of any young person today and cutting short their days at school hurts their future (at least my way of thinking). The third week was very cold and understood to extend the vacation, but the 4th week was mild, not really justified vacation (my comment). One week has been added in December, but not the two weeks cut off in this July. But we are back at school since July 29, yesterday as I write this on Tuesday, July 30.

First, I tell of the corn harvest. Our corn with less rain also had been hit by high winds in June before we were able to get a combine into the field and a lot of corn had fallen to the ground. I was surprised by the amount. We had to gather it from the ground by hand and lucky that our kids were free the first two weeks of July, some 15 to 25 kids participating on various days. They must have gathered some 4 to 5 or more tons by hand (that is a lot) in all, a truck filled each day and brought to our big tin-covered shed at Cabezas. Lucky too, we have a machine that can de-grain the ears of corn, although up to the present we have done only a little of it. Lucky too the shucks and the cobs are able to be ground by our mill as part of our cow feed; the cows like it. So, we lose nothing, just more work for us to do. As we had a good harvest, we were able to sell some corn and will have more to sell yet after filling our two biggest silos with corn. I hope I am not boring you folks who live in the city, but my old country upbringing is coming through. Making the decision to be a priest was very hard, as my heart has a big part of it that has remained on the farm east of Decatur. Now looking back over the last 60 years, I made the right decision and am ever so Thankful to Our God for all that has taken place in my priesthood. Your prayers and the prayers of so many others who have passed on to the eternity, hopefully all with Our Merciful Lord as only Our God can know, have made my priesthood possible.

Back to the corn harvest by hand, a good number of kids stayed on the help us gather the corn, then went to their homes. Only a few, at the end only 3 stayed the whole time in my house and some 8 or so in the small kid's dorm up by the public grade school. Several whose only home is my house or the small kid's

dorms were able to visit other relatives so as to have a break, and some who had been taken from their homes for violence were able to visit some relatives with permission of the Child Defense Office. I am more concerned that the kids maintain contact with some relatives, as my age now (85, almost 86) doesn't guarantee the future over the long haul. Although I must say it does look more and more like our work will continue without me. We here all pray that it will as the need seems to be getting worse, not better in Bolivian society with more family violence and separations of couples. I personally think our leaving out family prayer and good morals example (most needed) and teaching (in second place), then giving in to more materialistic values (Pope Francis has called it "our new money god") are hurting us so much. There is Salvation Only in Jesus Christ, and that applies here to family happiness while still on this earth. Our Faith is essential not only after death into eternity, but a Living Faith of parents is so essential for our kids from conception until death while on this earth, not just in Heaven later.

The biggest event of this month has to be the celebration of July 16, the feast of Our Lady of Carmen. As I have written before, probably more than once, when a diocesan priest, Fr. Jose Mariscal, from Santa Cruz came to celebrate a Mass on July 16, 1769, for some 3 Indian villages along side Rio Grande (the big river) just a few hundred yards now south of where we are located. He continued with a large chapel and a school for boys and another for girls. This year we celebrated 256 years of the town's existence. I say this because in the talks by so many of the folks that day, this was mentioned over and over again. Not only were the local municipal authorities present, but various representatives of the state government, all who talked at least a little, mentioned the number of years of the town's existence. And in the talks our school was brought up too so many times. We have made a difference in what our town is known for. All of you there have been an essential part of that, making our schools possible. Again, as last year, the local municipal mayor that day again gave our school a very large truck load of food, more than last year. Probably a person can see some of this on our Facebook page and foundation site. The truck you see is ours which brought the food from the city the day before. Unfortunately, especially flour, could have some bugs before we use it all, but all of it is a big gift to our work here, and we are grateful. The name of the river being Big River hurts to be heard today, as the water level is the lowest ever, at least the memory of those who have lived here all their lives, 80 or more years some of them. The drought keeps going on and on, and I am afraid that the report I read back in 1996 or 7 about this area becoming desert seems to be in process, sadly to say for all of those who have planted roots here, even myself now included.

We also have just harvested our sugar cane. The cane is cut by hand, then fed into a mill that presses out the juice, which is then thrown into a large vat and cooked for some time, not sure how long. The pressed cane stalk then is to be dried and ground into cow feed. The sugar cane syrup is now kept and poured

over the cows' feed in the milk barn. The cows like it. I remember on our farm back in Decatur my Dad always bought sugar cane syrup by the barrel and used it the same way some 70 years ago.

At the start of the month of July, Our Lord gave us a big gift of rain, not a lot, but yet not so little either. It impressed me because the rain was not predicted but came anyway by our prayer (by a lot of people), we being ever so grateful. So far, this year has been the driest year since I have been here, now some 22 years this coming December. I had hoped that we would have enough hay with our corn stalks baled into bundles after the corn harvest. But the stalks were small for lack of rain, but then the bailer machine could not get around to us for about a month. Weeds grew up and the corn stalks settled on the ground. I am just not sure the bales will be very good after so long a wait. Which means we might have to buy hay for our cows. Our pasture gave out about two weeks ago, and we will shortly have to start feeding our silage. I know we are a school and I haven't talked much about that, but our farming is an essential part of our teaching by giving practice to the kids so necessary in teaching (this on all levels, high school, adult high school and our technical institute, now with over 1200 students enrolled).

Another event of this month of July was the final drilling of a new water well. I have told before of all of eastern Bolivia having the level of ground water going down. The state government has well drilling equipment and does this mostly free of charge for villages, asking only a small percentage for some cost. But they drill only for human consumption. My principal concern is to have for sure enough water for the students at the school. Now we have two other wells functioning, one just for the students. But we don't know the future and how long will the well be able to work at its level of drilling. If the water table goes down it would take a month or more to have another well dug if the well drilling equipment was available. But now the well has been dug and a pump installed, and electricity connected to it. What we lack is connecting the well to our system of pipes. But actually, our structure of pipes is not far from the well, so it won't be too much cost to connect all together. We had been after the state government to drill the well for over a year and we just kept getting one excuse after another. This made me afraid, remembering when our two water pumps failed at the same time back in 2011 or 2012. For 3 days no water and our kids running around the village with buckets even to midnight, just to have water to drink, not to bathe (a luxury too great, drinking water was first choice). What made the pretext of not drilling our well by the state government was at present we have drinking water, and we will use the new well right now for irrigation of vegetable production. I can understand their position, but we are educating so many young people without much cost to them, and the kids are their responsibility first and foremost (my opinion) and should have been taken into consideration as a priority. Anyway, Thanks be to God, a Menonite farmer with the well drilling equipment did the drilling and the installation of the pump,

now able to pump water and be connected to our system. Of course, we had to pay for it but without water where would we be?

Now Thursday, August 1: This morning myself and another member of our directive counsel of our work here met with the head of the Child Defense Office about becoming a center of refuge for kids abandoned, abused, or orphaned which means that the kids are in danger and must be taken from their homes immediately. But where to put them? The homes for this type of situation are in the city of Santa Cruz, usually full to capacity and with requirements that can take up to one month or two months to fulfill, making it almost impossible to take in new kids. Kids can't be left in danger while paperwork and various types of investigations are done. The state government does help pay for such homes, although at times a month to two months late in payments. The question was if some of our work might serve in this capacity only for our municipal area?

Every night I end my day reading the life of one, two, or more of saints declared by the Church or others who have sacrificed their lives in service to others. (My book is in Spanish by Lumen, Buenos Aires-Mexico, but the original was in English from The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York. Title: All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time) In the life of St. Martin de Porres, at the time a dark-skin mulato Dominican friar with talent for serving the poor with medicine, was told by his superior that he should not give so much time to the poor as he was in charge of the sick persons in the Dominican House, but at times he would bring into their religious house the sick of the street or other abandoned places, even putting them into his own bed. His superior told him to stop doing this. But he continued doing the same. When the superior found out, he again gave the order to stop. St. Martin replied "Pardon my error, and please instruct me. I did not know that a rule of obedience would take precedence over that of charity." I think the superior was left without words because from then on, he was given liberty to do whatever he felt necessary.

August 2, Friday: This inspires me, but all the more are the last words and activities of Jesus on the Cross, suffering so terribly, but only thinking of others. Read and meditate St. Luke 23: 26-43, then St. John 19:25-35. If our Lord and Savior so lived and died like this, only thinking of others and HE IS LOVE FROM GOD MADE VISIBLE (Epistle of St. John 4, 8 and 16) and is HE WHOM WE RECEIVE IN THE EUCHARIST, it seems urgent for me to continue to serve others as I am able, until my own death. All this if I am a true follower of Jesus and He shares this Power of His Love with me. Those with whom I live are my family, even though ever larger as new kids with urgent need are brought to my house or the small kids' house. That is how Jesus continually urges me onward as I sit before the Blessed Sacrament. It is a message so urgent now for our whole world in conflict and families in violence and separation. You all there help make what we do possible through your

contributions. Please continue to help us. Without you all would stop and so many kids would return to the darkness of a life without this LOVE.

Grateful for all you do for us here, Your brother in Jesus Christ, Fr. Bob Thames

We are volunteers supporting ETC Bolivia. The current contact information at the Diocese of Fort Worth to continue to financially support the children is: Dianna Rhoads (817) 533-3174 or via e-mail at: DRhoads@adv-fdn.org

The following link takes you directly to the Diocese ETC-B web page for easiest access to donate on-line: <https://fwdioc.org/educate-the-children-bolivia>

To donate by paper check, make it payable to: Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth. On the memo line, please write, "For ETC-Bolivia, Fr. Thames Mission". Mail it to: Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth, 800 West Loop 820 South, Fort Worth, TX 76108-2919. Please reply to this e-mail if we may answer any questions.