

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter

August 2019

Today is September First, Saturday, and we are celebrating two weddings in the chapel across the river in what is called Barrio San Sylvestre, a part of Abapó, but part of the diocese of Camiri (actually Vicariate of Camiri). The river divides the dioceses. Vicariate means it is a mission diocese in the Catholic Church, and receives some help from the worldwide mission collection on the third week of October. Actually this collection is spread far and wide and leaves very little for each mission diocese throughout the world. But every little bit helps.

I am talking about the weddings because they are so rare in these parts. Here people just do not make these types of commitments, not even civil marriage, just live together. But in their favor I must say that most couples here who join together stay together until death at a higher rate than many other places. These two weddings are older couples, more pushed by their grown kids who want to see their parents married by the Church. One couple is from the city, from the parish where I lived before, 16 yrs. back, the other couple is from the Cabezas parish to the north of Mora. Both know me well and wanted me to do their wedding, but something different too, as one couple gave about \$70 (US) so that the church would be decorated. This moved us to decide to have a marriage retreat for the juniors and seniors of the high schools around us, reflecting on 1) body attraction and union, 2) some agreements for living (housing, jobs, other agreements) or union of mind, 3) then spiritual union as found in Ephesians 5,21-33 (the last one my favorite). Then in the last hour and a half the kids will decorate the church with lots of fun decorations, balloons, etc., and serious thoughts on placards, all prepared as part of the retreat. We wanted to have the kids actually see a wedding and hopefully think seriously about having their own wedding from the beginning. Here we need your prayer over the long haul, hoping the kids who come will make good decisions about their lives in the Faith in Jesus Christ. But one young man, a sophomore, from my house who is 16 asked to come because he has never seen a church wedding, just was curious to see one of that kind. But he is more serious than most about life. His parents are one of those not married at all, just are together now for more than 20 years and 6 kids, and live high on a mountain ridge to the northwest of Cabezas.

As for marriage preparation I put much more emphasis on how the couples live than most other priests. I know that many couples know a lot about marriage but

do not live it. I am more concerned on how they live it, and if at this moment the living is very poor, and thinking that a marriage in church will help them, I ask them to think again. Let us work together a little more on how they live, and then think about marriage in church. (I do the same in preparation for baptism of kids, as so many parents know a lot about living but do not practice it. My concern is more on how they live).

I want to say a little more on living the Faith. As I have said before the home is the most formative element in my belief. So with the addition to our house, we are including a space for a small chapel area called an altarcito in Mexico. Not a few of the kids who arrive to live in my house have any Faith formation at all, half or more not baptized. And as they come many times from conflictive situations their formation has been of violence, not Faith in Jesus Christ. I have talked with them about First Communion and when the building is complete I have several catechism lessons of teaching and activities that will begin give formation. I must insist on things to do in which they are all involved so that they will remember and I can remind them when things are not going as they should in the house. At one time we were just 6 or 7 under my care full time. Now there are some 14 or more, including 3 young mothers and two more pregnant girls although boys are yet in the majority. All of this seems to me to speak to the need to give character formation, stress values that Jesus Christ has brought in His Living and His Words. For me what hangs in the balance are their future happiness, and their kids' happiness. Jesus and Faith in Him, lived out in the home, will bring that happiness; this happiness is what they have missed so far in their young lives. Hopefully God in His Grace and our collaboration can change that, make a difference for them. I pray for this daily. My gifts as priest actually were not to work with kids as I am now doing. I have worked more with adult couples. It is just that there so much to be done in this area, and no one else is doing it. You too pray for the success of all this.

This last two weeks have brought hot days, some very hot, but last night a front came in, bringing a good rain on our land to the northwest. We just irrigated our potatoes this last week, but God does a much better job with rain. It just sprinkled a little in the night here in Cabezas. Today is cool, not cold, that too welcomed. The kids seemed to take the cold and the heat much better than myself. The retreat, I hope, will not be affected by the cool temperatures. We did have two good rains in the month of August, very unusual and very welcomed. Now we are ready to plant. I went out to the land about 10 days ago and we took pictures of

some of the things there. We might be able to get a picture or so in this letter.

When I mentioned Noelia, the young girl in the wheel chair with the big smile, several people asked about her, and one or other sent some money to help her. We had scheduled an operation for the first part of July, but the university nurse who works with me also is into natural medicine (was a religious sister for 3 years). She had met a specialist in natural medicine who lives near the Brazilian border and took Noelia there to see him. He uses a lot of prayer with his treatment, asking God to indicate treatment of his patients. He is accepted in the local hospital and takes consultations in the hospital on two days a week. He prescribed treatment and it is helping miraculously. Noelia now walks some without a cane or wheel chair. She will eventually need an operation to straighten her feet but her bone infection is what is healing (or maybe already healed). She now experiences no pain as she had most of her young life, and seems not now to need to amputate her legs. I will have her checked with the orthopedic surgeon at the end to be sure. She is now so ecstatic as you can imagine about her situation. I hope to get a picture of her walking in this letter.

No one came from the U. S. to see it, but we had two events worth seeing this past month. One on Aug. 14 was a social studies exposition. It amazed me, the time it took to get all the presentations together; you can believe me, and it was very good. What was done was to get each room (we have two rooms of each grade) to delve into the ancient Indian cultures of Bolivia, some 14 or more, then make material, including foods produced and consumed, drawings of houses, and other elements of the people's lives, including their faith beliefs, where they lived drawn out on maps, their language, etc. It was very instructive for me at least. All of this was presented in our new auditorium on some 15 tables, just recently built. Some of the presenters (each room selected some of its students to give presentations) were dressed in the ancient way, and were well able to explain so much of the peoples they presented. The second event was two days later at night, Aug. 16, folk dancing of the various cultures of the people. Again the presentations were good, some better than others, but for me always enjoyable. The older groups just keep getting better and some were really excellent. Sorry you missed it. Maybe next year!

This has brought me to think maybe we need to plan specific things to do for visitors from the U. S. What if we planned some definite work in union with our kids, say, putting in a water pipeline from the water wells on the agricultural land near the school, connecting the water with the school system? Or it could be specific work with the cows or hogs, or work in the fields, some building, but some definite work to be done, planned ahead of time, maybe something with the special education students. Any other ideas from you all? Then also some dialogue on specific topics in groups with some students and teachers, maybe some things on family values of today, or the impact of social communications that cell phones have made possible, here as well as in the U. S. Would that interest any of you there to come to visit, to see what changes have been made, and the growth of our schools? We need you to keep going, to keep offering our unique services to the poorest and most left out of our society here in this section of Bolivia. We need your interest to continue.

Surely the international news of the sexual scandals in the Church has caused all of us a lot of pain, Australia, Chile, Ireland, and in the U. S. I would want to comment a little on this. The very center and source of all Christian Life is our direct contact with Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Who brings Divine Life, the Life of the Spirit, into our world. But to get to us personally we must open ourselves to Jesus Christ in a direct contact in Faith with His Person. This contact is through prayer, Scripture, and especially the Sacraments, but for this Divine Life to penetrate us, become a living part of us, we must consciously accept it, be open to receive it, and want to change our lives more in conformity with the Real Jesus Who lived concretely in our world. Our openness is our efforts to collaborate with Grace "to put on Jesus Christ", as St. Paul states (Romans 13, 14). God's Life in us depends on this openness. But if our basic attitude is one of selfishness, self-interest, then our door is closed to receive it. When one enters the priesthood for selfish reasons, wanting prestige or a comfortable life, or some worldly power that comes with position over others, then the door is closed to God. It may be that one enters with good intent, but along the way, through our own weakness, we lose what we originally started with, then our God-Life fades away. I think this can happen easier when position enters in, power over others, or prestige in the world, or the comfortable life begins to dominate our existence. St Peter warns of this (1Peter 5,1-4). Jesus was always the Humble Servant, living and teaching in such a way that the religious powers of His time rejected and persecuted Him. He is our model, our Way of Living, and our Source of Strength always. When we lose that Focus, that Center of our lives, the world so easily takes over, and self-

interest, self-pleasure, can so easily dominate us. This can happen to anyone. Yet when the person has a position in front of others, the results are much more disastrous as we see now. We must be reminded that **all of us are the Church, and if one in front fails, it is all the more important to deepen our own Living of the Gospel. The world needs us, for without Faith Testimony the world becomes worse, the lives Jesus died to save can be more easily be lost. We are all His Body and each of us is responsible for our world, not just leaders who have failed.** May Our Lord deepen us now in this time of need, and not let some who fail destroy or weaken our own existence in Jesus Christ.

Please keep us in mind with your help to us, keep us in your prayer.

Your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames





Noelia