

Fr. Bob Thames Newsletter
August 2021

Greetings to all of you there, hoping and praying that all goes well, without sickness and other major problems. I know that several passages in Scripture (Hebrews 12, 5-11; Ephesians 5, 4; I Corinthians 11, 32. And I believe St. James also has something on this as well as St. Peter in one of his epistles) tells us that problems are normal for us in Faith because it forces us to look more to Our God in Faith to overcome such. If all goes well all the time, then our Faith gets flabby and weak, just like our muscles if we don't use them. Our Lord certainly knows best.

Certainly, the big news of this month (I talked so much of this in the last letter) is the First Communions of August 15. As it was a Sunday it made all the more important. So many folks came, filled all our seating and some standing. Actually, I have no idea of how many as counting is impossible with so many folks. I was proud as so many of the kids whom I am raising were among the group, in fact, more than half, at least 10 of them. There were 21 altogether. I haven't even counted those of my house. As I had said earlier we had begun last year when there were no school classes and had a lot of time. Actually, the celebration was too much for me, hearing confessions before the Mass, and then baptizing some 7 before Mass also, then one baptism afterwards of a little 7 yr. old girl whom the parents wanted to baptize for her sickness, then the Mass. I am just not used to so much activity all at once, and it took me two days afterwards to recuperate my strength. I was weak and unsteady really until Wednesday. Old age is getting to me, but I enjoy so much what I am doing, just don't want to stop. I do sit down for the sermon and as I have a strong voice I can speak loud enough to be heard to the back. Actually, it is causing me a raspy voice now when there are so many people, especially on Sunday. I keep drinking a little water to calm the voice somewhat. I am trying now to get a microphone that transmits to a speaker to help me in this. A young man is looking for one for us here in the city, hopefully will have it before September 12 when the bishop comes for Confirmation. We have microphones now that are held in the hand, but this bothers me, so I don't use them.

Something that one does not see in the U. S. We have over 13,000 bundles (remember the old hay binders from the 1930's and 40's before combines came in) of sorghum maize in storage and as we are right on the edge of the forest that goes a long way along the river nearby, there have been times, sometimes daily, that monkeys come up out of the forest to the bundles to feed on the sorghum maize seed that is plentiful there in the bundles. And also, larger

parrots also come in droves, especially in the early morning, along with the monkeys. I don't think anyone has gotten photos of this, but it is interesting for me who has never seen this before in my experience on the farm back at Decatur. We do see the monkeys only occasionally along the highway, but I can't remember seeing the larger parrots before. There are many sizes of parrots in Bolivia, but I have only seen the larger ones when I was in Trinidad (more jungle) back in 1997 when I was there (apart from the zoo of course). In other places there are very large parrots, of many colors, many types some almost the size of a small turkey, some in process of extinction, as the parrots eat the corn, and the farmers shoot them even though they are protected by law. The big parrots can rip off the shucks and eat the grain on a cob in just seconds. They are experts in this. The monkeys usually take two ears of corn, tying them together by the shucks and hanging them around their neck and leave with that. I have seen this only once.

We began our sale of organic vegetables last Saturday, Aug. 28. This is a sale of only organic products, including our milk products and hog meat (didn't know that these last two were included in organic categories). We have applied to enter the organization and will have a complete investigation later of all that we produce that goes on sale with them to become a formal member. I was surprised to know that the organization has some 200 members already, although all do not come every Saturday. The sales are in two places, alternating each week. As I said before (I think) the sales are in areas of richer folks who with more education are more knowledgeable of cancer-causing chemicals as insecticides. We are completely organic, not using any chemicals with our cows nor our hogs, as well as our vegetables. We sold all of our vegetables, but not all of yogurt, which surprised me. But diabetics came looking for sugar-free yogurt (yet sweet). So, we will make yogurt for them hoping for good sales to diabetics. At present almost no company makes sugar-free yogurt here on sale in Santa Cruz. The Menonites use no sweeteners at all, but few folks buy it except in the Menonites themselves in their country stores. My reasoning for organic only: my dad's death by cancer back in 1966 was caused by our use of the DDT chemical for controlling the flies on our milk cows. We all mixed the DDT by hand in the water for a little over 20 years. Only my dad was there 12 months a year, while I was there mostly for a few summer months. Five years after my dad's death in 1971, the government announced a prohibition of DDT as it had caused a lot of lymphatic cancer (my dad's cancer) in so many farmers. A little late for some who had already died.

We just completed a new survey of parents whose kids are here in our school. This does not include the kids in my house. I want to give you all some of the data. The survey was done by a young psychologist who works with us, a professional in this as part of his specialty. A.) They should be said at the

beginning that the minimum wage in Bolivia (2100 BS or \$302.50), which is adequate for very small families and who have their own house (so many houses are of tabique, which means poles tied by wire to posts on either side, then mud with grass put between the poles to form a wall.) This type of room with a dirt floor can be built in 3 or 4 days, so a family can have their own home rapidly if there is a small plot available. The government has had a housing building program that has built many homes of 3 very small rooms with a bath with septic tank (all together about 150 to 160 sq. feet, or maybe less, I am guessing), with tile brick if the family provides one helper. Most of our villages have had this program. Only the poorest, mostly elderly couples unable to work were left out. B.) 29% are married by civil law (almost no couples are married by the Church, this is a cultural thing because so many couples are afraid of a permanent commitment, even those not Catholic. 52% are in free union, which causes fear in the kids with whom I have talked, thinking that their parents could separate if something strong comes up. But the majority of these couples stay together until death in my experience here, although this is changing in the younger couples today, but I do not know to what extent. C.) 65% of the parents only studied up to the 6th grade if that far, here this is primary or elementary. This means that the parents are concerned that their kids get more education. D.) 25% of the parents in our school have 3 kids, while 34% have 6 or more kids, which surprise me today. E.) About 37% of the families here with kids in our schools earn less than 1000 Bs or about \$144 a month, which basically means some days there is little or no food to eat or some scraps left from before. 52.5 % earn less than 2000 BS or less than \$288 a month, again on the edge depending on the number of kids and other family members such as grandparents or some incapacitated person who must live with the family as is very often. (There are a lot of incapacitated folks, and I can't say why, as we now have over 102 persons in our special education program and there are at least double those numbers who are not in our program. I have seen some very severe cases here in my times that have no help at all, and maybe there is no way to help them. I just don't know.)

To draw some conclusions from all of this, we are doing just what we wanted to do from the beginning that is to serve the poorest. This includes not only our high school (89.5 % from poor households), but also our special education program. Probably our largest program is our adult high school program with over 440 students in 5 locations. These are adults who are working, mostly with families already who now must use our adult program to finish high school. In this program we also offer 7 technical courses so that the students can have some profession when they finish the course in 3 years. Most of these adults had to drop out or chose to drop out before finishing and now want to finish. These classes are only on Saturday and Sunday as almost all have families now to support and must work, both men and women. All our

programs are free to the students, with the exception of our junior college-like technical institute which charges 50 BS (\$7.20) a semester (5 months) or \$14.40 a year. But no one is let go if they cannot pay the cost or only a part of it. To be totally honest in this letter, this year has a higher percentage of poor than other years. We were told at the start of the year, and we agreed readily, that if a family lived in another place that had a high school, that we would only take the children if there was dire need economically and/or social need (violence in the home or other severe situation). We begin this year afraid of the virus that is yet rather strong, mostly in the cities. We have yet to have one student with the virus. THANK Our God!

We are on drought again with no rain since April, still better than last year. We are sharing your hot weather, although maybe not as hot as some in the U. S. and even in Europe. Our day temperatures have been in the 90's. I don't think above that. We have fires again, but almost all in the eastern part of Santa Cruz, nearer the Brazilian border, less severe than last year, but less now with a rain in that part of Bolivia last week, unfortunately not here.

Probably the strongest trait of Jesus Christ on our earth back 2000 yrs. ago is His Humility. One cannot read the Old Testament texts of the future Messiah (especially end of Isaias 52 and all of 53) without coming to this conclusion, Jesus living poor among the poor of His time and place. But even more strongly in all of the 4 Gospels of Jesus' Life, birth in Bethlehem, migrant at 2 yrs. old to Egypt, builder in a very small village (archeologists digging down to the house foundations of the time of Jesus think maybe 150 folks), Proclaimer of New Life and Miracle Healer without His own roof over His Head, Dying as the worse criminal in the Roman criminal system of the time. All this by choice in the Plan of Salvation by Our Loving God Who brings Healing showing extreme and total love to a world so wounded by egotistical self-importance, seeking this-world pleasure and prestige. We so need Our God today amid so much self-seeking (so clearly put in the temptation of Eve and Adam, "...No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad." (Genesis 3,4-5). This means that then we can decide what is good and bad, not listening to anyone, much less to the Real God of Creation Who alone knows of what we are made and how we are to live in this very fragile world. What I say here is so prevalent in one way or another in our modern societies. We so need Our God in front again, as we destroy ourselves in our false illusions, a world disintegrating into types of dictatorships all around the globe to say nothing of the atmosphere that sooner than we think will suffocate us in our blind-sighted over-consumption.

We yet need your help, please continue to give the scholarships, and other donations. We have made and are making some headway but are yet far from

where we can sustain ourselves doing our work of education for the poorest of our place and time.

I thank all of you and pray daily that all go well with all of you there,
your brother in Jesus Christ,
Fr. Bob Thames