

***Father Bob Thames' end of August 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.***

Thursday, Aug. 29. Greetings to all of you at this end of August 2024. I am thinking back to my home in Decatur and our very small Catholic Church that was then in use. Every year on August 15, the Feast of Our Lady of the Assumption, the few families, including mine, would gather at the Decatur Reunion grounds to celebrate with food and play for the kids, the adults talking with one another (I think, very common time with small town and country folks). All this came back to me this August 15 when two young girls showed me their home parish in a relatively small town in eastern Bolivia. What was shown surprised me a lot. Here was a town far from Cochabamba which is in the center of Bolivia, but just outside Cochabamba, actually one does not notice any boundaries of towns going from Cochabamba to the town where a big church is which named La Virgen de Urkupiña, Our Lady of Urkupiña. I don't know all the history of this church, only that so many people all over Bolivia have had miracles attributed to The Virgen of Urkupiña, and so all over Bolivia the feast day of August 15 has special effects in so many places, so many people with gratitude for a miracle or asking for another miracle, mostly of healing from some unheal-able sickness. I probably have told this years back, but one small town on the highway about an hour and a half northeast of Cabezas and part of this municipality and parish, has the name of their church being Our Lady of the Assumption. And without any doubt the celebration there of Our Lady of the Assumption (or as the folks here tell it, La Virgen de Urkupiña, is the biggest crowd by far above any other town feast, including the civil feast of Cabezas, the first town established in the area by a Diocesan priest in 1769. It is Our Lady of the Assumption or La Virgen de Urkupiña that draws around 3000 or more folks to celebrate each year, usually two to three days.

Now back to the town in eastern Bolivia. What surprised me is that the Feast of Urkupiña there is celebrated some three days with the Virgin statue being carried around in front of large groups of men and women (usually separated somewhat), in ancient Bolivian clothes (now I would consider them costumes, but were the clothes in former times), dancing in reverence to music in what is now called folklore dancing and ending up at the Church (never in Church, only outside in the street through the town). What for me is so important is that so much of this type of dancing had some (I want to say most of this kind, but I am not sure to say it) of its origins in religious celebrations. It is not sexually oriented dancing in any way for the most part, although there are some might have been—I really don't know. What I know is the all-religious celebrations include some folk-dancing. It is just a part of the Bolivian character.

Now where does all this lead us? I was greatly shocked by the murder of a just-born little girl by the single, middle-aged mother in one of our towns nearby around the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> of August. The body was put into a garbage bag and thrown out at the big garbage field, there discovered by the garbage workers who noticed blood on the bag. I was called to give the funeral attended by most of the municipal workers, so many grown men in work clothes, with tears, including mine. I did not know the lady although two of her children are in our school. (The official autopsy revealed that the baby was suffocated after a live birth). This weight yet presses on me. Where is our sense of moral goodness and where is our horror of such evilness? There are wars and hunger all over, but this being just next door.

There is more to this story than what I am telling, but several of us began to ask ourselves what can we do to reach so many folks who will never come to Church (Catholic or otherwise), never hear an explanation of the Gospel of Jesus, never read the Bible to know what Our Lord wants of us, never consider what is right or wrong under any circumstance. And then we celebrated in Bolivia the Feast of Urkupiña, seeing the huge crowds all over Bolivia and with large groups of folklore dancing included in all of them (at least the ones I saw). And talking about this with several leaders it seemed to us one way to reach many folks at large would be include more folklore dancing in our feasts, as the dancers go through the street at the same time carrying posters (maybe other ways also) that illustrate right and wrong from the Gospel, centered in Jesus Christ, or at least taken from Jesus. So, at present we have a contest of making posters in our school that illustrate in some special way to draw attention to the moral of it, that hopefully will reach folks as the dancers pass by. Our hope is to be invited to so many towns for their town feast (religious or otherwise) and bring our posters to be carried by the dancers. (This thought was started in May 25 when our school sent two dance groups (without invitation nor posters) to a secular feast in a town north of Cabezas, and the leader there afterwards told us to continue this as it was so well received by the people.) So, we will see where we go with this. Please pray that all goes well and helps to make people think on their lives what is good and what is evil, and to know a little of JESUS as the REAL TRUE LIFE of our World.

(Now Friday, August 30) On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, the Feast of Our Lady, I was invited to Mora, a larger town and part of Cabezas area, to bless a new image of the Virgin de Urkupiña that has been placed in a new and larger grotto at the public hospital there. This is the second one as several years ago I blessed another one that was placed in a smaller grotto. The circumstance was caused by a big miracle of one of the doctors there, a woman, who told her story as part of the celebration. Not to be too long here, after not living her Catholic faith for some years, she had an un-curable cancer, so declared by doctors who were specialist in this area. She was faced with death that drove her to again

embrace her faith, and going to the big church near Cochabamba, praying and committing herself again to Our God with Mary. She was healed and now is stationed in Mora and wanted to tell her story to all who came to the celebration. (SEE, MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN! OUR GOD YET IS PRESENT AND ACTIVE!) This included the blessing of the larger image of Our Lady of Urkupiña and placed in the large grotto beside the smaller one, right at the entrance to be seen by all who pass by, entering and leaving the hospital.

Something a little lighter now. We are in a type of contest of soccer (called football) that all the classes in the high school are participating in. There are two rooms for students of each grade, so 12 teams in all, competing to be champions. No classes are canceled, but the games are played mostly every day after classes have finished. This has been going on now for two weeks and will finish the second week of September or thereabouts. It is interesting for me to see students, especially girls of each grade, whom I regarded as serious study students are also serious soccer players. But I am amazed also that some of the boys are fanatic players, very good quality. The games are not played on a big field of soccer, but rather on a basketball court, but not our own court at the school, rather on the basketball court in the public square in Cabezas Old Town where our school is located. This so all the local folks who want to see the games can come to watch. And I too go to watch, interestingly enough to see new sides of personalities of the players whom I have only known in other circumstances.

Another new thing we hope to start here is that of growing a type of cactus that has no stickers, so the cows can eat them. We here and all the area are facing the reality of a new desert that seems to be developing. Not more than a 5-hour drive from Cabezas is this type of cactus that grows naturally. This week (first week of September) we are planning to send a truck (actually have sent yesterday evening) with large sacks to be filled with the large leaves of this type of cactus, here call tuna. (Those who know, tuna is the name in Texas and Northern Mexico for the fruit of our local cactus if I am not mistaken in my old age.) We are doing this to help others around us to confront the drought that seems to be continuing and getting worse. Also, our chemistry professor is teaching making biodiesel in his class that will be the future of Bolivia. We just do more than other schools to prepare these kids for life as cactus will be cattle food for the future, at least some of it (not very full of vitamins for cows).

Along with the drought, maybe part because of it, so much of eastern Bolivia, always heavily forested and very humid, now mostly burned and being plowed, and worse yet, the western part of Brazil that touches Bolivia, probably more than two million acres now turned into fields. Each year thousands of acres have been burned, but this year worse yet, the news tells us that some 40% of Eastern Bolivia has burned. And it always seemed to me that our moisture in Cabezas came with easterly winds across western Brazil and eastern Bolivia. Now it is dry, so no moisture for us. My thinking! Just that after high easterly

winds at this time of year, we had rain in previous years, now just more hot and dry days with smoke-filled air.

(Now Saturday, August 31) We are making progress in our various activities of production to be more self-supported, but still, I think we will never be completely independent. The numbers of students from the poorest families around us, and each year families from further away hear of us through relatives or friends who know us, our numbers stay rather the same, maybe a little lower, then up again. Some younger kids come but can't stand being away at night from their parents, others who don't want the classes AM and PM, the extra classes of a profession, all that we offer that will give poorer kids a better future, sometimes it is just too much. Some just prefer less classes that are given in so many regular high schools. But it is that we want to make a difference not only in the lives of our students, but also in our society at large. For me education is ministry to the society. May Our God so bless us to keep going! Please continue to help us! I realize some of you have supported us for years, but please see if younger couples or individuals might be interested in contributing to help what we do here. So many lives already have been changed, and now with over 1200 students studying each week, adding up all the programs we offer, we continue to affect the area around us for the better. As I have written before, just \$25, \$35, \$50 or more a month from so many of you who receive this letter makes a huge difference in the lives of so many who come to us for help. God's Love is "giving always", even without thinking of oneself, as Jesus on the Cross in St. John 19, 25-27. I have given this so many times, but this passage keeps me going now on the road almost now 86 years. The truth is that I have received so much from Our God in happiness doing what I see the need to do. And Our Loving God just keeps giving. And it will be the same with you all!

I end this letter now concerned very much for the level of morals all over the world. The Sunday Gospel of last Sunday (Sept. 1, 2024, Mark 7, 1-23) in which Jesus puts very clearly what is from this world and what is of Our God. We put so much emphasis on exterior elements, the material things we want and ways to get them, while Jesus wants our hearts, our deepest desires of happiness that can only come from loving as Jesus loves, from the interior, from the heart, giving ourselves to help others, as Jesus is God-Love made human, that is, visible, imitate-able. Studying Jesus and asking for the Grace to imitate His Way to Live, **THIS IS WHAT MAKES HAPPINESS IN OUR FAMILIES AND PERSONAL LIFE!** Thank you all for reading this letter and thank you all for helping us here. I pray each day for all. You all pray for us here! Only Our Loving God can make possible what we do 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](mailto: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> .***

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