

Fr. Bob Thames' Newsletter  
September 2021

Greetings from me here to you all there although well delayed with this letter, now Wednesday, Oct. 6. Just let it slip my mind doing other things starting out this month of October. Sorry!

The big event of the month of September was the CONFIRMATIONS on Sept. 12. It turned out so much larger than anyone of us could have imagined. There were 27 young folks confirmed, and of course, many family members made the trip to Abapó for this Sacrament. But we could not have thought of how it turned out with the attendance. We had thought of maybe 300 or so and had prepared benches taken from our school auditorium in Cabezas, big benches of 3 and a half meters long that can seat some 8 adults and teenagers, not counting children in the laps of some family member. But all of these benches filled up and we asked for 100 plastic chairs from the local community organization which were brought and also filled up, folks stacked all around, and yet some folks standing at the back and around some sides. I just do not know why so many people came. Surely most were not related to kids of the Confirmation group. Some of the kids had families from far away and came in limited numbers. It had to be the folks from the other side of the river who came in great numbers. Probably the fame of this young Bishop who came earlier this year for other Confirmations. The Santa Cruz Archdiocese which starts just across the river from our Mission Center Church and includes the large metropolitan area of Santa Cruz, has such a larger population that even with 3 Auxiliaries and the Archbishop Confirmations are given in rapid ceremonies. Bishop Jesus, a Franciscan OFM, stayed talking after the Mass. for two and half hours with the people who wanted to stay around after the Mass was over. We also had lots of food to share with all who came, some planned, but many families just brought food to share, like cake, small cheese sandwiches (empanada) and taco-like food called a salteña, lots of lemonade and other flavored drinks, with cups that were carried around to all those seated. It was just really a community of Faith enjoying the Presence of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Father in this Sacrament. Afterwards, all the Confirmations kids and parents had their pictures taken individually with the bishop. After some 30 minutes I noticed that the bishop was tired of standing, but he continued until the last one. Then he sat down at the table prepared with food, inviting all who wanted to sit and talk, and had stayed yet to share with him. It really was the lay folks and we who wanted to return to Cabezas who were longing to go home after two hours. The Bishop, I believe, would have stayed longer, carrying on the conversation. He was also telling me what I needed to do in that area which has been almost completely abandoned for pastoral for close to a hundred years. There just have not been the priests, sisters, and other pastoral agents to care for the area so large and so far from a town where there was a priest. This Bishop is really a Pastor for His People,

and the people respond in great numbers as we saw that day. Lots of pictures were taken that day, and some may yet be found on our website and Facebook site.

We will have another Confirmation on January 9, 2022, probably fewer in numbers of persons to be Confirmed. This will include some adults and older teenagers who are in the class of 2021, but who will be leaving Abapó and Cabezas after finishing high school this year. We just do not want to have them miss out on the Sacrament. Here we try to give in Abapó a two-year course for Confirmation, using a catechism text that is centered on Jesus in the New Testament. Lots of reading of the New Testament, then answer questions and fill in blanks in the textbook.

On the last Sunday of September, we had a prayer for rain, so desperately needed in our area now. I prepared passages from the Old and New Testaments as I could not find the Rogatory prayers that we had so long ago when I was young. Then I with the Mass servers went outside as the people inside the church continued to sing and pray. I sprinkled Holy Water all around, asking Our Lord for lots of rain. None has fallen yet in our immediate area, although to the east of us in one section there have been lots of rain. There are yet fires to our East in areas where the rain did not fall. A man who works with me who has much faith in an almanac that he gets, tells me that there will be much rain in October, but dry November and December. If that is the case, we are getting off to a slow start for Cabezas at least. Santa Cruz, the city, does not really lack for rain, as again last week rain fell there, and even a little out our way along the highway, but far from Cabezas.

Another event that occurred here in Cabezas was a course given by the state (departmental) office of education for all the high schools in our province, some 50 or more high schools. First, let me explain again some of this. Several years back the whole country began four-year technical courses that are obligatory for high school students. The first two years are office-like work (like how to plan, file income tax work, maintain other records, etc.), then the third year is selecting their technical course and began working on it, in class and outside. The last year is almost totally practice. As I have said before, we are the school most prepared to have the classes with animals, fields, and kitchen area (for our three technical courses). And we have space that would serve for the meeting (our auditorium), so the workshop for all the high school principals of our province was held in our school. We also are the only school to have three technical courses that are offered to students. Most schools have only one course that all must take, some others have two options. We have three, but I would like more yet. How can a society survive with just two or three services that support the lives of the people?

The last new thing this month has been our starting to sell our organic vegetables, honey, and milk products in a type of open market that only allows

organic products. The market is just an open space along a major highway, in the case of organic sales, in two locations that alternate each week. Both spaces are on the north side of Santa Cruz, in the richer side and more educated part of the city. We are just learning how to sell, getting cards printed to give out that tell our products and give phone numbers. I just pray that all goes well with this.

We continue our semi-present classes with the same numbers as before, some 330 students, plus about 20 kids in our small kids' dorm up by the public grade school. It almost certain that if the pandemic subsides somewhat in Bolivia we will increase in enrollment next year. Our school year ends the 6th day of December, or so one announcement said. We have heard three different dates and really don't know yet which to believe.

Probably this letter will be shorter than others, as the time urges me to get this letter out. I want to end with a reflection on last Sunday's Gospel, so important for me and for our world at large in my mind, the very foundation of family stability that supports all the rest of our human activity. The Gospel text is St. Mark, 10,2-16. First of all, it is probable that St. Mark's Gospel is the first written, as most scripture scholars (catholic scholars at least, but in my reading most New Testament scholars who go deeply into the time, the original texts, and other elements seem to agree). Both St. Matthew and St. Luke seem to use some of St. Mark's text in their own writings. (Maybe some of you who read this letter might disagree, but I keep my own opinion here). St. Matthew in Ch. 19, 1-12 will basically repeat what St. Mark says, adding a phrase for exceptions that is not so easily understood, although there are many opinions. Here I am giving some of my reflections for today's world, so in great need of stable marriage and family life. First I want to emphasize the "two become one flesh" phrase that goes all the way back to Genesis 2, 24. From the beginning it seems to me that Our Lord meant for marriage to be a sacred institution patterned after the Holy Trinity "Oneness in Three". It is only something that Our God can do. It is Our God who unites the couple, so demanding Faith in God's Presence and God's Activity, and it seems to me that even if the couple are not believers, Our God yet wants this Holiness of union to the extent the couple allows. This is because God is so merciful and loving of all humanity. But we who believe and want to involve Our Lord in all our lives, even more so does Our God become involved. Of course, here we are not talking of two physical bodies becoming one, but two persons taking on a unity of spirit and understanding that is made possible by Faith that they so function as one person before Our Lord. This is the ideal, and we who live in a very materialistic world maybe never arrive at the ultimate union here on earth, but the closer to that union, the happier the couple in this life, the happier and more solid in loving emotions their children will be. My opinion after so many years working with and observing married couples!

Now one step further, sexual intercourse involved among a couple: reading the texts in Genesis and Mark-Matthew, and also Ephesians 5, 21-33, it seems to me that sexual intercourse must carry much spirituality in its essence. I say this in a world so materialized that human sexual intercourse today seems so void of significance other than immediate physical pleasure, or in the case of rape (so common in forced prostitution and other trafficked persons used in such a way that not even animals do this). It is an act of dominance, of forcing another under the control of another. It is beneath animals, better said, bestiality at its lowest.

But back to Biblical texts, it seems to me that Our Lord meant for sexual intercourse to be the seal of two persons united in spirit of souls that expresses this spiritual union by a physical act that involves the whole person, body, and spirit. This is commitment of the two becoming one until death. And by the Sacrament of Marriage, it is a work of God, this union of two who are now "one flesh" as the scripture reads, understood as "one person", two who act as one in love in all the two do together, making love (total giving to one another as Jesus so gives us Himself on the Cross). How loving and how serving, and how happy and stable are the children who are fruit of such a union that is God-made. In a society that is so lost in materialistic pursuits we need to regain this simple yet difficult understanding again to re-make our world, hopefully before we destroy it with our egotistical living of over consumption. May Our Lord bless all of you there, and help you understand my feeble writing.

Please continue to help us here with your contributions. We are not able yet to sustain ourselves although we are making progress. This year we will pass over 1400 high school graduates, and many with the ability to work to study further, or to maintain themselves with families for their lives. Our formation also includes spiritual formation as well, hoping to serve some in making more loving and stable marriages, so more stable children of the next generation.

As our last analysis has shown 90% of our students are from families who earn less than the minimum wage in Bolivia and just over half of this number are from families who earn less than one/half of the minimum wage. We serve the poorest in your name. May Our Lord so bless you all there who make this possible!

Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
Fr. Bob Thame