

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

It is now February 27, a small head start for this monthly letter. Hopefully I will finish this before too many days have passed. The new school year began on Febr. 5, the first Monday. In some previous years the first day of school was February first, no matter what day of the week it was. The minister of education changes often, not only to start the year but at times during the year, very political, and at times unstable. We have more kids enrolled this year than last, but we will see how many stay for the whole year. Last Monday (Febr. 26) some students, I believe mostly if not all from the city, returned to the city to study. I do not know their economic situation, but at least two came in good looking cars to pick up their belongings. The secretary told me that the parents had expected better conditions for living as the reason for leaving us. Actually, this is good for us if the families have the means for some other school, all the better for them, and for us. The ones who left this last Monday were all from the first to third grade of high school. This was not bad for us, as the first-year high school had quite a few more students enrolled than are allowed in our two school rooms, which is what we have here. I do not yet know how many students that stayed with us, if there are yet too many or not. (Here the school of study is divided into two elements: 6 grades of grade school, 6 grades of high school and that is how we speak of our basic education). As always, our desire is to help those most in need, those who without us could not, or with much difficulty, arrive at a high school diploma. And our school also gives a mandatory profession although not all stay with that profession. At least it gives the kids a start into life if they so want to use it. (I think I have told this so many times, it just keeps coming into my mind.)

(Now Wednesday Febr. 28) Some very good news for us and for all the students. We are managing to have this year and for the years to come a course in computer engineering up to the technical medio degree (a recognized computer degree here in Bolivia but is the lowest, but yet a good introduction into computer science). Actually, we already teach computer classes for 6 years, but this is something that is recognized by higher studies as this will appear on their graduation document and must be taken into consideration by any university. This gives us now 4 options, agriculture, veterinary science, and gastronomy. (I might have told this in the last letter, but our really great gastronomy professor of last year decided to enter the teachers' training school. If a teacher does not have this teacher training degree the teacher must be re-selected each year for the gastronomy position, and any teacher with the teacher training who also applies is then guaranteed the job. So, our really

great professor of last year decided to enter the teacher training school to guarantee his teaching position for life in his profession. That will be 5 years of study, with little hope that he will return here. He was raised and studied in the center of the country in the big city of Cochabamba, far from the small southern town of Cabezas.) But we have an excellent classroom for gastronomy waiting for some teacher. The position has been put on a national internet teaching positions site some 2 times and no one has put their name for the position. We are waiting, hoping, for some professor to sign up, no classes as of yet.

This school year we have been able to add a new community to our school roster. A small and relatively new and small community called "22 August" now has some 8 students in our school. The community is rather far north yet in the municipal area (your county so called) of Cabezas, about two hours from here. And when it rains, as it does more in the north than in Cabezas (town), the road is rather difficult to manage. It rained this last Saturday and Sunday, good for us in Cabezas, but more in the north and our trucks were not able to get through on Sunday to pick up students from five communities up there, some 30 to 35 students of high school age. The river that mostly is dry ran rampaging full, bank to bank some 80 to 100 yards wide (the driver of our truck took a picture on his phone to show me). And the water came furiously even to the bridge at Rio Seco ("dry river" in Spanish), a beautiful and rather rare site for those of us who live close to here to be able to view. But by Monday afternoon our truck was able to get through, and all students were able to attend classes. And we here pray for another rain like this last one in this our rainy season. Your prayers too are asked for this. So far, this our rainy season has started off dry and we are afraid.

We are off to another year of moral formation (catechism) also with our school year, this being classes on Tuesday night with a religious celebration then religious classes for First Communion and Confirmation. I have told this so many times, but we are the only possibility for Sacramental formation out here far from the city. When I was pastor, we were able to have classes in most villages with lay folks and 4 religious sisters. Now there are two religious sisters and no lay folks. I do not know why but the archbishop stopped this, but it leaves the greater part of the area only with us having formation. Several people from different towns want me to come, but at my age and the need of a driver (I let my driver's license go as I am not as alert as before. I yet drive in the small town of Cabezas with permission of the police in my small electric car. Actually, almost all motorcyclists here drive without a license as do many car drivers.) I am really worried about the lack of moral formation in our world at large, of which Bolivia is an active part. People without moral formation are more oriented to egotistical bents, after money and worldly attention, causing

broken families or at least poorly formed unions whose kids grow up following worldly ambitions only, not service orientated, not capable of understanding the example of Jesus Who gave and gives all, even today for those who are open to receive it and give it to others in return. We so need real LOVE in our world that participates in the Grace of the Holy Spirit that flowed from the SIDE OF JESUS ON THE CROSS (St. John 19, 31-37). Certainly, I am prejudiced, but in my 60 years of priesthood I stand witness to those WHO LIVED IN LOVE AS IT CAME FROM JESUS and those who lived without Faith in friction and violence, their kids scared emotionally by bad words and physical fighting. Just why can't we learn instead of getting worse? JESUS IS SALVATION AND HAPPINESS THAT BEGINS HERE ON EARTH. WE JUST DON'T HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL HEAVEN TO LIVE IN LOVE! IT IS AVAILABLE NOW FOR THOSE WHO ARE OPEN TO JESUS WHO LIVES HERE IN THE MIDDLE OF US, NOT ONLY IN HEAVEN THAT WE ONLY THINK AS BEING FAR AWAY. This is why we give religious formation in our school, especially with the majority of our kids who come from single mothers (also some single Dads), who struggle to put food on the table, and actually less time to be with the kids, talking from their own experience, explaining what it means to love in reality which blossoms from our Lived Faith in Jesus Christ.

(Febr. 29) A surprise visit came on Monday, 26 Febr. of a representative elected to the national government from La Paz from our area. He happens to be representative of the original peoples (how the various original Indian tribes are called here) on the national level. There is a promise of some help to us in education from a fund that he has some influence in. We will have to wait to see if anything turns out in our favor. He was brought here by a lady who was the local school superintendent of Cabezas municipality several years back who yet holds some affection for our area and favors our school for what we are doing with the poorest families. We will have to wait to see what happens from this visit.

I must admit being overwhelmed by your donations to us in the month of January. How Our God is moving in your hearts to do such a thing! I do not have a list of the donors, so I do not know the names of families, but Our God knows, and will reward you so much more than a Thank You from me. But I do pray daily (and now several times a day) giving Thanks to Our God Who so moves so many of you to help us so much. I have asked for donations of \$25 to \$35 or more from some 600 of you all, but the amount received had also to be several rather large donations. I am so grateful for this, hoping that those who gave will receive this letter, knowing that my prayer for all of you is being sent to Our God. I just hope and pray that your constant help of so many will guarantee the future of our school here. So many families depend on our offering of education, as poverty continues to deepen in Bolivian society.

Finally, the national government has admitted Bolivia's economic downturn and is taking some steps in union with various other national economic organizations to address our situation. National and regional protests, usually including highway roadblocks (the favorite method of protest here) come and go, and they continue now. Back when I was younger, I traveled by bus to various meetings of one type or another during the year, almost always religious, rarely educational. Roadblocks affected my travel a whole lot. Now sitting in a chair under the shaded trees by my house and reading about it on my computer news gives me a different feeling, but yet frustration.

(Now March 1, Friday) Just last night with the help of the Child Defense Office and Clementina, our university nurse/natural medicine person, 5 new young kids of one family were brought to us here. 3 girls of 14, 12, and 6, two boys of 10 and 8. They had been abandoned in a house (no doors, no windows, no electricity, no water) belonging to the natural mother, now separated and with another man, and angry at her former husband. The new wife of the dad had volunteered to stay with the kids, but the real mother threatened to come and physically throw the stepmother out, forcing the kids to be alone. The real Dad called the Defense Office who went with Clementina to bring the kids to us (we are the only alternatives as formal homes for abandoned kids in Santa Cruz demand so many documents and investigations that usually it takes 2 months of work to arrange). I tell you this to show what we do here for the most humble and needy kids. Our God knows us and knows all of you who make possible what we do here. Please continue! And just two weeks ago a lady brought two young orphan girls, 11 and 7, whose dad had just died, mother left 4 yrs. ago and disappeared. We use your donations with much love!

With my prayer for you all, 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>***

***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.***