

Dear Family and Friends, I hope this finds all of you well and growing!

Here is the March, and first part of April letter. I started this last week and only finished it today. I want to express my gratitude to all of you for your generosity to all of us here and in Mexico, and especially to me during my stay there. It is part and parcel of Our Life in the Body of Christ that acts out our unity in a more fraternal world.

Sitting down to write this letter, it seems first I have to make an apology for making a big mistake in the sermons that I gave while in the U.S. I repeatedly said that there were about 5 million folks in the Roman Empire at the time of Christ. Rereading this part in the book that I have, it actually says 50 to 55 million. Quite a big mistake! I was depending on my memory after having read the figures several years back (about 15 or so while recovering from my second heart attack). But this also re-enforces my point of how 120 persons present at Pentecost multiplied in 300 years to the time of the Emperor Constantine in 313 AD to recognize that over half of the empire had already become Christian believers. This was in the midst of persecution, at times very severe. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13,8); it is we who have not the same generous use of the Power that has been transmitted to us, to burn with the same Love that is contagious. Again one of the books repeats that it was the charity of the early Christians that more than anything else attracted others. I think this means that we do not share our time, talent, and material goods to the extent of the early believers, for where charity is present there is God Who converts. And even pagans and hard-hearted people of today are capable of recognizing it. We can change this world to a fraternal planet, which is God's will (1 Thesalon. 4,3) in our sanctity. With God the odds are in our favor!

We have just finished Holy Week, and all of us are tired, some with sore throats with our first cool spell having arrived. But it was again a beautiful time of Grace for all the parish. Sister Beatriz (or Sister Bety) organized the preparation for the mission that this year extended to 35 communities, with our pastoral team filling in the larger towns to some 40 or so villages. Our people are accustomed now and at least where I was present the young folks had all prepared for each celebration with materials and readers. For me it was a personal joy as last year all my plans felled through with my heart operation. And better yet, for several years now I had tried to get to some of the most distant villages at least one day. Either sickness or weather had prohibited this the last 4 to 5 years. This year was victory as on Holy Thursday some of us drove into Buen Retiro and Florida, the first being some 33 kilometers from the pavement, and the second 22 kilometers. There was water in both rivers we had to cross, but not enough to prevent crossing, and roads dry enough with only some mud-holes that had to be waded through. Buen Retiro is a new community, but Florida is a town founded in 1781. But the railroad and then the paved highway passed it by, and it never grew. Angela, a sociologist, and also head of our adult education program called CEITHA (our GED school), also takes care of these two communities pastorally, and her work is showing fruit. A crowd almost double of what I remembered assisted on Holy Thursday evening, filling the small church with people standing. The community was originally founded as a mission in the above date and was on the round-about road from Santa Cruz to Argentina for two centuries. But a straight road left it aside in 1962 with the railroad and again in 1995-6 with the highway. As we enter the dry season my intention now is to go twice a month at least to Florida, if not to Buen Retiro, on the second and fourth Friday afternoon of each month. There are a lot of young families in these two communities and a good number of the kids are in our school. And one who graduated last year after 6 years in our school is now in our university housing in Camiri studying law. Some progress is showing.

Speaking of the dry season coming in, it is really a misnomer this year. Since the end of January we have had very little rain, and that has been spotty, not general rains that have filled our rainy season in past years. There was a heavy rain in Cabezas just after I arrived on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, but that was really just on Cabezas, not very far beyond the town limits. It could sound like some West Texas rains where it rains on one side of the road and not the other. A lot of people who planted late have their harvest really hurt, and it will mean some will have to look for day work to make it through the year. The curtailed production this year will be a boost for some who planted sesame early. The price has risen to \$2000 a ton again because the harvest will be a lot less. For those who planted early with the few showers we had in late October and November will have a bonanza. Three years back it was similar (then heavy rains caused mold to set in, not dry weather) and everyone who did well then bought a small Toyota van that serves as our taxi transportation (from Santa Cruz to out our way and back) to work with when there is nothing to do in the fields.

Normally I have much to say in these letters, but this time is an exception. My mind seems to be tired or at least at a loss to say something pertinent to our work here. My thoughts in this time of Holy Week were more on myself and the relationship I have with my personal vow of simplicity, or poverty as we usually speak of it in the religious

life. It is more personal and not for all. But from this comes a total dependence on God, and much less on material or worldly power. I am so far from where I need to be in this regard at this stage of my life, and it is humbling to say the least. But not devastating. I too am a sinner and will be accepted into The Kingdom only with God's mercy as with everyone else. None of us can merit or deserve what God alone in Jesus Christ can grant in love to us.

Another item on my mind is the Prado meeting (Prado is the association of diocesan priests to which I belong- in no way to be confused with a religious order) next week here in Cabezas. I am in charge of one day with at least 3 talks or reflections that I will give on the foundation of Prado and its charism that through Prado is given to the Church as a whole. Surely I will have much more to say after the meeting, so do not want to tell much of this now. Cabezas was chosen because of fear of my traveling to a higher altitude, although I do well in Cochabamba which is a city central to all Bolivia at 8000 feet. With our retreat center we can easily accommodate the 10 priests or so that will attend. This is more than other times, as some other priests are interested from Santa Cruz, Camiri, and Sucre (each is another diocese in our area) that have not attended previously. As you might suspect from what I have said above one theme will be the place of simple life-style for priests who sense a vocation to work especially with the poor. It is Jesus Christ Who is our model here, but for the founder of Prado in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it seems we have so watered down what it means to live a simple life-style, almost anything goes and is OK in our lives of the church today. Our founder questioned this, and it for us to ponder what it means for us in our apostolic work.

In our pastoral work, we have begun classes of first communion and confirmation in many of the communities we serve. And a full round of retreats or hours of reflection has been given to all the high school students in almost all the parish. A second round of reflections will be started in May and be finished in June. This year we have only one psychologist (and 4 sociologists) who is overloaded giving reflections on alcoholism and drug addiction. It is especially a problem in Abapò, the larger town to the south.

In our school we are approaching the end of the first tri-mester. (our school year is divided into 3 semesters). The first report cards will come out in the middle of May. I am hoping for a better level of academic work for the kids of my house, which last year was rather dismal for some 10 of them.

As I end this I am really grateful for the priestly vocation granted to me, and the place of Jesus Christ in my personal life and in the life of the Church in the world today. I especially reflected on the passage in last Sunday's Gospel that said "Jesus appeared in the middle of them". For me Jesus is always in the middle of our human family, recognized or not, working our salvation. "Blessed are we who do not see and yet believe". And with our Faith the world will be better for it, recognized or not, even despite our human weaknesses and failings.

Your brother in Jesus Christ, Fr. Bob Thames