

SCHOLARSHIPS FOR BROKEN SOULS

Isis Miranda – Guatemala Chapter,
Caminando por La Paz*

One day in May of 2011, I decided to go to the scholarship department at the university to apply for a scholarship, even knowing that my grades were not a thing to brag about. After waiting for a while at the front desk, I was welcomed by the coordinator, and she took my student identification and checked my grades in her computer. By that time, I was already regretting being there because I knew what the answer would be. She looked at me arrogantly, told me that I was not qualified to get a scholarship, and continued in a brusque tone: “The scholarships are given to the best students. I mean, scholarships are hard earned—you need a 91 to be a candidate for a scholarship, so we cannot give you one with that 75.”

The coordinator continued talking, but I don’t remember what else she said because my mind was filled with my memories of Father Thomas. He never requested good grades of any scholarship applicant; for him it was really important, as he used to say in his homilies, to “understand the context,” assimilate what we have learned, put it into practice in our lives, and cause a change in a person from there.

Living in the most violent areas and having limited resources was enough reason to give a student a scholarship. If someone failed their school year in other institutions, the usual procedure would be to withdraw the scholarship immediately, but Fr. Tom used to send the student to repeat the school grade and would watch his achievement over time. Of course, there was scolding; we had to listen to him screaming angrily for a while, but he always ended the sermon by asking in a soft voice, “How much does your tuition cost?” And when he felt that we needed to clear our minds, he would take us out to eat or on trips to symposia, conferences, or exhibitions. Then he would talk long and deeply in his desire to “reprogram our mind” and/or encourage us.

Now, years later, I have understood that there were not strict requirements because the main goal of those scholarships was to give sense to the life of vulnerable souls—souls beaten by abandonment or discrimination, hurt and looking for love or attention, young souls in adult roles—all of them were broken souls. No doubt father Tom understood that it was not easy for these students to concentrate on school tasks when at the same time they were facing real problems.



In order to solve the problem of failed classes and school dropouts, he created the tutoring program, but who ran this program? Students with shameful grades like mine, ones who misbehaved during Mass, the ex-gangsters... we were the same ones because first, there was no one else who wanted to do it, and second, in the process of rebuilding those broken souls, other needs arose: needs to create leadership, responsibility, self-confidence, and motivation. It was also a process of self-discovery of one’s own talents. Then? Scholarships for good students? – No, scholarships for broken souls trying to be good students while daily fighting all kinds of battles. But was it worthwhile? Yes!!

I find this answer when I listen to the Gospel about “the parable of the Sower.” I think about Caminando por la Paz and all who collaborate with this mission. We are all planting seeds and trying to cultivate them in a land with stony areas and thorns, but also with fertile soil. So, no matter how many seeds were lost or did not bear fruit, we have deep faith that more than one will fall on fertile ground and bear fruit up to a hundred times more.

In this time of pandemic, our students have overcome many obstacles during their school year, especially because virtual learning was not something they were used to or prepared for. We have had students who failed in some of their classes but recovered during the year; others who did not make it and failed their school year. Our plan is continue supporting, motivating, and believing in them as Fr. Thomas did with us.

Thank you very much to our friends and sponsors who keep sowing and cultivating fruits with us.



*Established by Thomas Goekler, MM, maintained by Guatemala and Texas Affiliates after his death. See <https://www.fathertomsmmission.org/>.