*MISIONEROS MARISTAS*

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September/Spring Time, 2017

Dear Friends,

Here in the Southern Hemisphere we are looking forward to a change of season with the beginning of Spring Time. For us as Marists it is a very special time as we celebrate three beautiful feasts of Mary our Mother –her Nativity, that of the Most Holy Name of Mary and Our Lady Of Sorrows. As we visit our rural retreat/rest cottage in Pantipampa just outside of Tarija City we feel elated as we see the fruit trees budding and the land is blessed with the first rains of the season after a very long dry spell. Our campesinos brothers and sisters pray for good rains as they now go about preparing their small holdings for sowing.

Meanwhile the Marist Team is at full strength with the return of Juan from the United States where he had been invited to five dioceses to share with them our experience of “Church as Mission” and our pastoral with the Base Church Communities [CEBs]. One of our very important pastoral activities, as we have shared with you in recent years, is our production of our weekly radio programme that goes to air every Sunday on the Jesuit Network. We have now produced and conducted some 500! Our latest programme with Juan’s return and inspiration was entitled “To Live as Free Men and Women”. Juan having lived for several weeks in what often is referred to as “The Land of the Free” considered it appropriate that we treat the theme of liberty at this time. In developing this theme, we become aware that one is not truly free until one has developed the art of forgiveness. It is significant that as we put pen to paper this week our Pope Francis is in Colombia on a mission to seek forgiveness and healing in this country that has now for years been in a constant state of unresolved conflict. It so happens that the Franciscan Richard Rohr in his Daily Meditations that we received here by email has touched on this particular theme last week. So we wish to briefly share with you a summary of those reflections:

* *Let’s ask for the grace to let go of those grudges and hurts we hold on to, and let’s do it now and not wait until later.*
* *Nothing new happens without forgiveness.*
* *God does not love us if we change; God loves us so that we can change.*
* *To accept reality is to forgive reality for being what it is.*
* *Forgiveness is the only way to free ourselves from the entrapment of the past. The genius of the biblical revelation is that it refuses to deny the dark side of things, but forgives failure and integrates falling to achieve wholeness.*

Once we have arrived at the art of forgiveness we are truly free and now as citizens of this planet earth we can truly love and embrace each other and all of creation.

Before Juan set off on his USA Mission, here in our Bolivian Mission we celebrated the Annual Diocesan CEBs Encounter. This 9th Encounter was something really special. The Yukumbia Guarani Indigenous Community had accepted the challenge of hosting this year’s encounter. Yukumbia is situated some 5-hours’ drive from Tarija City alongside of the Pilcomayo River and at the end of the road. The community to survive relies on fish from the river and corn. They had no crops in the long hot summer and because of the dry spell the fish had not come down the river. Their likelihood is always precarious. In past years we had celebrated the annual encounter in one of the barrios of Tarija City or in one of the more established rural communities of the diocese. But upon the conclusion of the 2016 encounter, the cry was that in 2017 we celebrate there in Yukumbia so as to encourage the community. The meeting point for all the other CEBs of the diocese was the terminal in Tarija City and there we would set off together at 3 a.m. for Yukumbia, in the hope of arriving there around 8 a.m., take breakfast and inaugurate the encounter. To achieve this, those from La Mamora and the Sta. Ana Regions of the diocese had to leave their respective communities at midnight. Once successfully assembled at the terminal we filled three buses to take us wearily yet full of joy to Yukumbia. It was really a monumental achievement. It so happened that the long journey, principally over rough unpaved roads, was marked by extreme cold, but that did not dampen the spirit of these cheerful travellers. All arrived on time –this in itself is a miracle! The local community had prepared to receive the 90 delegates from throughout the diocese that was composed of people of all ages; a third of who were our youth. The Guarani community was so proud in hosting this important happening as it was for them the first time that any significant group had chosen and visited the community for some special occasion. In all, it is true to say that this was the best of the nine diocesan encounters to date. In all we were some 110 active participants. Our cultural festival on Saturday night was tops with each community providing a number. The women of the village saw to the cooking and we were very well served. The local men had spent the dawn hours fishing in the river that now was running with plentiful fish. It was a real treat! Each of the visiting CEBs had brought something to help with stocking the common outdoor kitchen. We all slept on the floor of the local school without complaints; fortunately the temperature had risen during the day. The 3 buses set off back to Tarija City later on Sunday afternoon, and then on to drop off the travellers in their respective villages; some arriving home at 2 a.m. having walked another 150 minutes from their drop-off point. As a Marist team, we concluded that this is really being Church and where the Spirit is today.

In July the Marist Team conducted another course for some 21 CEBs animators of the diocese with the following theme: *“Our Eyes, what do they see/Our Ears, what do they hear/ Our Mouth, what does it proclaim/Our feet, for what paths do they travel?”* Once again it was a great success and we are always overwhelmed by the participation and commitment of our lay pastoral agents, many of whom are young folk. It is a fact that other clerics in the diocese have a silent envy of us as we seem to be able to attract the people to live their faith with such commitment and as a consequence feel threatened as they go about with their being held captive to multiple Masses for the Dead, Baptisms and other sacramental preparations, along with a whole host of devotions…..that when all is said and done, the parishes become a place where people go when they realize that have some need to fulfill an obligation, and there is no true living of the Christian life as a faithful follower of that Jesus of the People.

When the Marists arrived at La Mamora in September of 1999 we set about promoting and forming the CEBs throughout this new mission. The people of Tarija have a popular devotion to the Virgin of Chaguaya and from August 15th through to September 15th of each year all the faithful make their way in pilgrimage to visit her shrine in Chaguaya, some 90 minutes from Tarija City in the countryside. After the first two years of going as the CEBs of the La Mamora Mission on pilgrimage to the shrine, we decided that we would have the Virgin come to us in our local communities. So from then on, on one Sunday of August we celebrate, by rotation, a Zonal CEBs Encounter in one of our village communities. This year it was that of Cachimayo that hosted the Encounter in which some 8 communities participated. It was indeed N° 1!

Presently as a Marist team we are in preparation for a very special workshop that will be conducted here for our CEBs by a young lay theologian from Argentina. Already we have some 27 confirmed participants from around the diocese. As CEBs on the level of Latin America we realize that next year will be the 50th anniversary of the landmark 2nd General Conference of Latin American Bishop held in Medellin, Colombia that changed the face of the Church throughout the continent with its option for the poor and the official recognition of the Comunidades Eclesiales de Base and they being the initial level of all church structure. So now on the Latin American level, our Articulation Team has developed a project to bring together the richness of the experience of CEBs over these 50 years and from there at the base, present a theology that is truly our own that is from the people and for the people. So the workshop will be a type of putting together all that richness that we have in our communities and interpreting it.

Another project that we at present setting in motion concerns our weekly radio programme “*Tejiendo Redes”.* For the past couple of years it has been our desire to produce a simple work that we can make available throughout our CEBs in Latin America that will be a type of manual that could be used for different facets of formation of the CEBs. We have entitled it “*Entra en la Ronda”,* which in English could somewhat be translated as *“Enter into the Round or Ring”* as when we as kids played. Our programmes will be composed of 5 modules and in all some 24 sessions. We have indeed set ourselves a huge challenge as our aim is to make it so practical and in everyday language of the people. We plan to go to air in October with the first of the series. Later we will then produce it in book form.

A lot is happening right now on the Latin American level of CEBs that will entail our participation. The Latin American Articulation of CEBs has convoked an extraordinary meeting of all the assessors of CEBs throughout the continent, and it is intended to celebrate also the 50th anniversary of the Medellin Conference of Bishop as earlier mentioned. So a Working Team has been nominated to meet together during the week prior to the scheduled meeting so as to process and analyze all the responses from the different countries and from there prepare the format for the said meeting of all, with the hope that we can come up with a vision for the future and vitality of the CEBs given the present reality in which we find ourselves. The present plan is for the Team to come together in Medellin, Colombia or Ecuador in the last week of February and then have the full meeting there with all the assessors throughout the first week of March. Juan has been asked and has accepted to be on the Team. Javier in his capacity as the present articulator for the Andean region will be present at the meeting. So we will not be idle!

The winter has left our beautiful haven of Pantipampa dry, barren and without water. The local farmers are desperate in finding fodder for their animals. The fount of water for the village is dried up so the houses have no domestic water at present. The first rains came on Sunday night but we still need some good downpours to fill the catchments.

From around our Marist community:

-Gilberto´s mum has now returned to her family in the Sud Yungas after 6 months here with us in Tarija where she received treatment and operation for a brain tumor. Maria is slowly talking and eating but still needs to be helped in moving her body.

-Gilberto turned 50 in April and much the wiser. Arminda works long hours at the stationary that she manages and at the same time taking care of Miriam who will turn 3 on September 14th. Miriam keeps us all busy at home. She is a real chatter-box.

-Juan Jose was home in July for vacations from university in Cordoba, Argentina as was his brother Gilbertito (Chiqui) who is at university in Sucre, Bolivia.

-Javier outside of his multiple pastoral activities is kept busy following Lupo and Paco in their respective sporting events and training. Both are stars: Lupo with A-Grade Basketball and Paco with A-Grade Soccer. Nair is truly overworked and underpaid for her nursing at the local General Hospital; they have not been paid since the start of 2017.

-And our Juanito missed dearly our community/family during the weeks he was away in the USA, having counted the days for his return.

In all, as we mentioned in a previous letter, we are truly blessed with such a beautiful Marist community that continues to grow and celebrate life together.

As always know that you are held dearly in our daily prayer here as a Marist Community. We look forward to hearing from you. Now with Internet and Whatsapts we can more easily communicate and share photos.

With all our love,

*Gilberto/Arminda/Juan José/Gilbertito/Marian-Javier/Nair/Lupo/Paco-Juan*