

## **MISIONEROS MARISTAS**

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[27<sup>th</sup> Anniversary de the Misioneros Maristas, Bolivia]

Dear Friends,

November is a month where in Latin America and especially in Mexico and Bolivia the people remember their dead through various traditions. The month begins with the celebration of the Feast of All Saints that runs a second place to All Souls Day [Día de los Muertos or Día de los Difuntos]. A lot goes into the making of special meals and the setting up of altars. Offerings are made to one's beloved deceased. Visits to the cemetery are in order and the graves are spruced up and adorned. If a priest can be found, then there will be Mass there in the cemetery, attended by the locals. This year in the midst of all these activities, there were actually two deaths in two of the communities of which we Marists are associated. The families concerned called us to be present and to minister. This reaction of our people has led us to reflect upon our vocation -our life and mission as Misioneros Maristas as we celebrate at this time another anniversary of our foundation here in Bolivia.

Our document that sets out our project of life and mission as *Misioneros Maristas, Bolivia* that we together formulated some 27 years ago has in its 1<sup>st</sup> Article the following: *1.1-Our identity is that of a community of believers, inspired by Mary -the first among believers, whose mission is to build communion and participation among the poor and margined; 1.2 -We seek to be welcomed and accepted by them, and to know the joy of true friendship. We will seek to love them, share their life, and live a profound communion with them. Our mission will not be so much one of speaking, but of living. We will invite the poor to enter our lives; we will sit with them, entering into a real friendship with them that is contemplative.* Then our consecrated commitment document further elaborates: *2.4 -We, like Jesus, seek to be hospitable, to welcome, to receive, to accept others;-We are to be present to others, like Jesus was, as true friends. We invite the other to rest awhile with us, to make the other feel our friendship, to make the other feel that he or she is our brother or sister, the son or daughter of the Father who really likes him or her. Sometimes we will just sit down and rest, and to talk about things seemingly of no importance.*

In the course of the year as we travel around there has been those who ask us: *"What parish do you have? O where do you officiate Masses? O what exactly is it that you do?"* It comes as a surprise to them when we try to explain what exactly we do o who we are as a Marist Community and Team. And the response at times is a *Hmnn o Ah!* In all that we live and do, we see it as a *Presence - Friendship -Welcoming.* Speaking of the two burials in which we were present in the first days of this month, we became aware of the manner in which at times we live out our Marist vocation.

We received a call from the family of Aurelio in Cachimayo, one of the villages of our former mission of La Mamora [some 85 kms from Tarija City where is our present residence]. However we maintain contact with the CEBs there throughout the year and meet with them every second month. Aurelio's sister had died after a 3-year fight with cancer; the present parish priest for the region had other engagements and he would give permission for another priest to officiate. So were we able to respond? Although we had other plans for the day, we were able to reschedule. We arrived on time at 9 a.m. to first celebrate the Eucharist. All the family were there gathered accompanied by a multitude of friends and people from the surrounding villages -the vast majority participate in the CEBs. With the Marist team, the CEBs animators (lay pastoral agents) from the different villages present conducted the liturgy. The intensity of the participation of those gathered was something you normally do not find in Bolivia, especially at funerals. Javier with his talents

provided the music. We then proceeded with the burial. [In our experience here, it is rare for the priest to go to the graveside for the Final Rites of Burial.]

The family of Aurelio invited our Marist Team along with those present back to their house to eat. It took some time for the people to walk there from the cemetery. As we had our pick-up and were later returning to the city, we were among the first to arrive. [We did fill the Ford Ranger with those most in need of a lift!]. Upon arrival we sat down and chatted with those present; the grand majority are people whom we have known since our first days in the mission some 18 years ago. Outside we were eventually served a community luncheon prepared by family members. The last to arrive back home was Aurelio -he is a very big and robust man- and with outstretched arms and his face shining brightly heartily he embraced us together and said: *Muchas gracias! You Marists have restored to us our joy after so much waiting and suffering. Without you presence.....A presence that has made all the difference.*

It seems that the good Lord this year was calling home a lot of his sons and daughters around All Saints and All Souls. Back in Tarija City, Juan took off to our new rural Retreat/Rest House in Pantipampa -30 minutes from the city - to prepare some of our upcoming radio programmes. Before getting to the house as he passed that of Abram, our local catechist and general secretary of our peasant farmers union, he saw a lot of locals gathered outside and asked what was doing, and was informed that Abram's uncle who lived alone next door had died. The family requested that Juan lead the vigil that night there in the home where the body was being accompanied according to the tradition here. So at 9.30 p.m. all was set to begin. A grand multitude of family and neighbours was gathered both inside and outside. Upon entering, Juan was enthusiastically embraced and kissed by all...young and old, men and women. *Gracias por estar aquí con nosotros. Ya eres un Pantipaño!* -Thanks for being here with usG. You now belong here with us in Pantipampa! The local priest who grew up in the village celebrated the Eucharist the following day but unable to stay for the burial, so Juan did the honours, and walked with the people some 3 kms behind the coffin to the new local cemetery at the foot of the surrounding mountains of the Andes. The locals have just recently built a chapel there. The view is breathtaking as it overlooks a wide valley. Juan has told the locals in one of the union meetings that he is to be laid to rest there and they have assured him that there is plenty of room.....no problem! The next day following the funeral Abram seeing that the three of us were there in the house just came in, exhausted, flopped into a chair, offloaded and profusely thanked us for our presence and support.

On Sunday afternoons, if we have finished early our pastoral activities for the weekend, we may head off to spend the night and Monday at Pantipampa. The local young men at 4 p.m. generally arrive at the soccer field to have a friendly game among themselves, so Juan is accustomed to head there and spend some time with them and with the older folk who gather in one corner to chat away and share cheap wine mixed with lemonade. Juan has been made honorary president of the club which is called *San Lorenzo-St. Lawrence*. At half-time the players greet him warmly and he sits there among them. They remain there until dark, having discussed the weather, the crops that they have sown and are awaiting the rains, the present going price for potatoes at the produce market in Tarija and solved all the problems of the country.

Talking of Pantipama and our rural retreat: the 200 pine trees that we planted around our lot have survived the harsh frosts of this winter and our small orchard of peaches, plums and apples are quickly growing. With good luck we may have the first fruits next summer. Our property is adjacent to the main country road that goes through the village so the locals continuously pass by herding their animals or heading off to work in their fields and stop to talk or come inside. There is a lot of good humour!

Well, what have we been doing of late with the rest of our time? [Some of the local clergy with their excessive number of Masses and Sacraments surely think that we do very little in comparison]. Since our last letter in September, we have made a round of visits to

the various CEBs throughout the diocese. We are now in the process of preparing for the last course of the year for the animators in the diocese that we will realize here next month. In addition, we are busy during the weeks when we are at home in Tarija composing the 24 radio programmes of the new series that we have entitled *Entra en la Ronda* and which we hope to eventually publish in book form. The first module of 4 programmes has now gone to air. We are conscious that this project demands of us much originality, creativity and in a popular presentation that speaks of a lived experience that has been ours over the past 27 years accompanying our people in different parts with the CEBs.

In the middle of November we set off to give a formation course in Muyupampa, Archdiocese of Sucre: This is the 4<sup>th</sup> consecutive year that we gone there at this time. It is a 9-hour drive from Tarija and most of the way is over rough unsealed country roads. Some twenty animators from various outlying villages had gathered and the majority had taken the 3 previous courses that we had conducted. So it was a touching time as we renewed our friendship. This year our presentations were more dynamic and practical, benefiting from our own studies earlier in the year in the area of popular education. It required a lot of preparation on our part and thankfully it was very well received. They have booked us for 2018.

The days before our anniversary celebration have seen us engaged in our annual evaluation and planning. In one way it is a tedious task but keeps us on track as regards to both our community life and our pastoral activities. In the process we review our economic situation and set our budgets for the coming year -one for our maintenance as the Marist Community consisting of 10 members and the other for all our pastoral activities. Here we do not receive any income from all the services that we offer and so rely on the solidarity of our good friends and contacts outside of Bolivia. This year we have been aware that each unit has had to tighten its belt considerably as the contributions to our common fund are ever fewer each year. But thankfully we have not gone wanting and realize that we are really blessed by those who generously share with us so that we can fulfill and continue our mission.

Around our Marist Community all is going fairly well. The wives, Arminda and Nair, are always busy at work and do not get much free time. The 4 boys with studies and sport are always occupied. Paco had his wrist in plaster for several weeks and had to sit on the sideline, but now is back on the field in his star position as goalkeeper. Once again he was selected to represent the state for his division. Lupo is finishing his 1<sup>st</sup> year at uni and when not at uni is passionately involved in basketball where he too is a star player. Juan José is expected back in Tarija any day as he completes his 3<sup>rd</sup> year in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Cordoba across in Argentina. He is the eldest of the new generation of Marists and turns 21 in two days [24 November]. There he has tried out for both Rugby and American Football, while giving his basketball a spell for the moment. Gilbertito ["Chiqui"] while preparing himself at the University of Sucre for entrance in the faculty of Physiotherapy has been whipped up by the soccer team there at the uni and is playing A-grade. We do not yet know when he will be home with us here in Tarija -all depends on the games yet to be played. And little Marian who turned 3 on September 14<sup>th</sup>. She is a chatter-box and tomboy and into everything, keeping her parents and *abuelo* Juan constantly alert. We now look forward to our annual recess starting December 22<sup>nd</sup> and finishing on February 1<sup>st</sup>. This will give us all time to be with family or friends and to enjoy some days at our farm-retreat. Today we are celebrating our anniversary at home [Casa Colin-Barrio Lourdes] with Eucharist and a BBQ. Our bishop is with us for the occasion.

Know that you are forever held in our thoughts and prayers. If you should have WHATSAPTS, our mobile number is 591-65813351. Take care and gracias for continuing there with us on the journey.

**GILBERTO/ARMINDA/JUAN JOSÉ/GILBERTITO/MARIAN - JAVIER/NAIR/LUPO/PACO - JUAN**