

# MISIONEROS MARISTAS

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Dear Friends,

The People of God throughout the Old Testament are told to *"remember"* and celebrate what God has done in their favour. Since our coming together as the community of Misioneros Maristas Bolivia some 25 years ago, we have been accustomed to follow this tradition –*"to preserve the memory"* and to celebrate those significant and grace-filled moments in our journey together. At this time I am aware that there are several of these moments to recognize and celebrate in our little Marist community. Firstly we note that this year we celebrate our Silver Jubilee as the community and team of Misioneros Maristas Bolivia – Gilberto, Javier and myself. On May 5<sup>th</sup> we remembered my arriving in Mexico some 38 years ago to start my missionary journey at the service of the Latin American Church. Within a few days (May 27<sup>th</sup>) I celebrate 44 years of priestly ordination. Then on June 25<sup>th</sup> I reach that magical moment, celebrating 70 years of blessed life with my community and dear Mexican friends. In the meantime here in Latin America on May 23<sup>rd</sup> we will have a grand celebration on the occasion of the beatification by Pope Francis of Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador who was martyred some 35 years as a result of his defense of his poor people during the country's civil war. (He represents for the Church of the Americas and our Base Church Communities (CEBs) the many thousands who were martyred as a result of their fidelity to the Gospel during the years 1970-2000 here in the oppressed and conflicted countries of Latin America.

Taking into account all these happenings I now take time out to share with you, who are part of our journey, my corresponding personal reflections. Undoubtedly my life is characterized by the vocation that I have received: Marist Priesthood. My vocation as a priest is to be a prophet of beauty, to remind people of the light within them; to reassure them that they are shining like the sun; my priestly calling is not to introduce something new to God's creation, but to reveal, purify and intensify what is already there. Beauty beckons us once we have recognized it. It points beyond itself. We know it is a sacrament of God because that is what the beautiful humanity of Jesus is. Beauty awakens us to our mystery and transforms us more deeply into it. It tells us our name and names our horizons. For beauty we are born. By beauty we are nourished. Without it we decay. Our seeds of beauty may sleep through many a winter, but they never die. And taking care of those seeds is priestly ministry. So as priest I have been called to be a sacrament of the mystical, a reminder for people of their divine loveliness. There is a beautiful way of celebrating Eucharist, of preaching the Word, of being present to the hurting, of embracing sinners, of dancing with the limping on this precious Earth. The people will then believe that by their very presence, every word and every meal they share becomes a small but vibrant sacrament of God's beauty, warming people's hearts when they grow too cold, and bringing the morning early, when the nights are too dark and too slow. And that is when people will start to have and experience or encounter with the God who is pure Love and Beauty itself.

If birthdays, anniversaries and sacred moments are celebrated in heaven, if ever the Lord of Life takes to the floor as Lord of the Dance, it must surely be at such poignant incarnations on this earth, of the everlasting beauty of our Tremendous Lover. Because, in the first instance, that is why the Word became flesh in Jesus, that Jesus born of Mary of Nazareth, Mary of the People, who carried the Word in the depth of her being and tenderly accompanied her Son from his conception to his glorification. Therein lies my vocation to Marist priesthood and cause for remembering and celebrating!

Much of my faith journey as a Marist priest I have in recent years expressed in an lengthy article that I was asked to write by the then Marist General Administration in Rome for its publication "Forum Novi". So here I wish to more briefly share with you some of the more significant moments in that journey. In my formative years, my dear parents hold a very special place, as do my educators the Marist Brothers. My seminary years were marked by that period of renewal in the Church and openness to the world brought about by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council. Looking back some 50 years later I know that I was privileged to have received my formation at that precise time in history and to have had Marist formators who enthusiastically imbued us with the spirit of the Council and its implementation. Unfortunately for the Church, the new generation of the ordained have, in general, received a formation more in the style of pre-Vatican or even Tridentine days.

From my earliest days I always had the desire of "*going to the missions*". So after my first years of priestly ministry in one of our Marist colleges in Australia I was given permission to go as a missionary to Mexico where I would collaborate in the ministries of our Mexican Marist Province. The years 1977-1988 in Mexico prepared me to audaciously accept a call in 1999 to be at the service of the Bolivian Church where I would be there as a lone Marist, having been given reluctant permission from my Marist superiors for such an undertaking. When one dares to be led by the Spirit into the unknown, one learns that the Spirit is full of surprises. Some 26 years later at the young age of 70 I am blessed with a beautiful mixed Marist community of 10 who is presently celebrating its Silver Jubilee of foundation. Over the years we have shared with our friends our continuing journey by means of our four Circular Letters throughout the year. So it is not my intention to recount here the details. However I believe that that journey has been made possible and continues thanks to the prayers, solidarity, encouragement and support from all our dear friends over that period and in different places. We have made our home here in Bolivia, even though over the years here we seem to be continually on the move, reaching out to the four corners of the country and beyond in different parts of Latin America. But I personally enjoy having a home too among my dear friends in Mexico, Australia and the United States where I am truly blessed to be considered as another family member. In particular, I mention my home with the Del Castillo Family in Mexico, the Dougherty Family in Australia and the Riojas Family in the United States. But I am sustained and know that I am loved by all our dear friends who in the words of Roberto Del Castillo who some 38 years ago upon my arrival in Mexico as a young missionary made me part of his family and in our now golden years continues to remind me of the quality of our friendship with the words in Spanish "*Cuenta conmigo. Cuenta con nosotros*" – "*Count on me...count on us*" in whatever comes into your life...we will always be there.

In my missionary years, yes, there have been some very special persons who have brought me to where I am today. To run the risk of making an exclusive selection, I have to mention three in particular and for whose guidance and encouragement I am forever grateful. There is Fr. John Wallis who in my visits to Australia when in Mexico and in my undertaking of the Bolivian mission was until his death my spiritual director. Then there is my fellow Marist and former Superior General, Fr. Bern Ryan who since my first year in Mexico when he came there on visitation until his death a few months ago has been my closest Marist companion on this journey in faith. When I would go to Australia every three or so years from Bolivia, Bern and I would spend some days together at the beach in Yamba and just enjoy each other's company and vision. And then there is my great mentor, Bishop Arturo Lona of Mexico. Arturo now lives in retirement in the highlands among the indigenous people of Oaxaca. He was our bishop for the years that we were in the Diocese of Tehuantepec where we had set up a new Marist mission among the indigenous peasant farmers of the El Porvenir region. Arturo, affectionately referred to by the poor as "*Padre Obispo*", is one of the great prophets of the present Latin American Church and has suffered attempts on his life over his years as bishop of Tehuantepec. Upon assuming his ministry as bishop in a region marked by poverty, exclusion, exploitation, oppression and domination by a ruling elite, Arturo initiated a new form of pastoral in the diocese with the Base Church Community model (CEBs). He brought about the formation of a church that is truly people and a people that is Church, where the pastoral agents (priests, religious, missionaries and lay) served tirelessly with a united vision and a prophetic voice. Arturo and I enjoyed a close friendship, having "baptized" me with the name "Juanito, el cangurito" (Johnny, the little kangaroo) –a name that still holds among the CEBs throughout Latin America. During my 5 years there under his leadership I was able to serve as a member of the CEBs Commission, the Diocesan Pastoral Council and one of the three members commissioned to restructure the diocesan pastoral around the CEBs model of being Church. What I have been able to be in Bolivia draws its inspiration from Arturo.

Finally, with a heart full of gratitude and admiration, I speak of our beautiful community and team of Misioneros Maristas. When I arrived alone in Bolivia in November of 1989, what could I imagine where the Spirit would lead me from there on? Not to be alone but to come together and form a new Marist community and team with Gilberto and Javier and to undertake a missionary journey that consisted in the promotion, formation and accompaniment of Base Church Communities throughout Bolivia and beyond. As we opened ourselves to the promptings of the Spirit, we were able to compose what we came to call our "*Marist Project and Consecrated Commitment*" that has been our guide to this day. Over the years we have been sustained by our daily community prayer, our three community retreats during the year, our monthly "day in the desert", our weekly evaluation and planning sessions, our weekly community night with Eucharist and recreation together, and by the prayers and encouragement of you our dear friends. Looking back on our earlier years we now say just how crazy we were. We had no security, minimal material belongings, got to isolated villages by walking and swimming across fast-flowing rivers of the Amazonian region, and then in the course of events accepted the additional vocation of Gilberto and Javier to married life and consequently the integration of their wives and children into our little Marist community. A journey together that has had its challenges, conflicts, crises, errors, weaknesses but the grace necessary to rise above these has never been wanting.

One of the very special graces for me was to have been there at the birth of our children. Moments of joy and overflowing love –what BEAUTY. When Javier’s Paco was born at 4 a.m. at our then La Mamora Mission, while Javier was off trying to locate the local doctor, there was Nair (the mother), the nurse and myself at the clinic and upon delivery the nurse had no one else but me to give the newborn Paco to while she attended to Nair. I received Paco into my shaking arms with tears of joy. What celibate priest has had that experience and joy? Such beauty! Today our boys are strong young men and I remind them that one day they may have to support their “*abuelo-granddad*” in their arms. As mentioned in our letter before the end of 2014, in September we welcomed into our community Marian, the first-born daughter of Gilberto and Arminda. For us, she is sheer joy and full of beauty.

In the course of years we have come to know each other so intimately and have helped each other to grow and to be accepting of each other as we are and to see the goodness and beauty in each other. Today some of you, our friends, have asked us: “*What do you see as your future from here on?*” To this we are unable to give an adequate reply, apart from saying that it is in the Lord’s hands and we only ask that we can respond to the graces we receive at the time. Our firm desire is to be able to continue in our mission together as a team and as a Marist community. We are fully aware of our vulnerability and limited material security. As in a previous sharing with our friends, we have pointed out that at the present there are no church aid agencies or religious institutions that we have approached who provide funding for the maintenance of a missionary team such as ourselves. Funding is available for a limited number of projects such as seminary formation, church facilities, self-help development projects. So presently we live on the generous sharing of our very dear and faithful friends in other parts of the world. Realistically we acknowledge that our group of friends number-wise is diminishing through deaths and age and, because of our isolation, we in recent years have not be able to make new friendships and likewise supplement the list of those in solidarity with us.

We are conscious that as I turn 70 many of my contemporaries are in retirement or semi-retired. However, I generally enjoy good health, am still up to the challenge and strong and humbly acknowledge that together we still have the best of ourselves to offer the people and the Church. For their part, Gilberto and Javier will soon reach the 50 mark. It would be unfortunate if they had to abandon their cherished vocation in full stream for our inability to maintain ourselves. Presently we have a new 3-year project of activities with the CEBs here in Tarija Diocese, nationally and in different regions of Latin America. Over the past 2 years in particular we have developed together and given several new courses and workshops that we believe respond to the ever-changing reality and times. We are aware that there are no other pastoral agents or teams dedicated to the CEBs model of being Church that is available for such promotion, formation and accompaniment other than ourselves. We see ourselves as having responsibility for the wealth of experience we have in this area and the confidence that the people have placed in us. We believe that the Marist way of ministering and being present to the people is more needed now than 200 years ago when the original Marist Project was launched.

As I celebrate my 70<sup>th</sup>, my 44 years of Marist priesthood, my 38 years as a missionary and our Silver Jubilee as Misioneros Maristas Bolivia, know that you are in our hearts and prayers. You have been with us on the journey and we ask that you continue to be there with us. GRACIAS! GRACIAS! May Mary of Nazareth intercede for us with her Son.

With all our love.....*John Hopkinson, S.M. [Juanito]*