



MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA  
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End of Mini-Sabbatical –January 31st 2019

Dear Friends,

During the month of January on SBS Television in Australia one could have watched a series entitled "*Go Back to Where You Came From*". Perhaps that is a fitting title to sum up my Sabbatical experience in my native Australia after some 42 years of living in Latin America; the past 30 being in Bolivia after Mexico.

I finish these days here at *Villa Maria Monastery* that was what one could describe as being the base for the first Marist Missions in the Pacific in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and today is one of the retirement houses for Marists of the Australian Province. This final weekend here I have spent alone my monthly *Day in the Desert*, where my focal points of reference are the little St. Peter Chanel Chapel and the Marist Cemetery on the monastery grounds. [Back in Bolivia, Gilberto, Javier and myself together have the custom of spending our monthly *Día del Desierto* at our little Marist Retreat property outside of Tarija City.]

The St. Peter Chanel Chapel formerly was on the grounds of our then Marist Seminary of Toongabbie where I had my priestly formation back in the 60's during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council and the chapel was brought to Villa Maria in the late 70's. Peter Chanel was one of the first group of French Marists who arrived in the South-West Pacific [Oceania] shortly after the foundation and approbation of the Marist Fathers in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Peter Chanel after some 3 years of evangelizing the people of Futuna was martyred, thus become the 1<sup>st</sup> Marist saint and 1<sup>st</sup> martyr of the Church of Oceania. His body was subsequently brought to Sydney, before being shipped back to France and it was laid during that waiting period in the present chapel. So it is here that I have now reviewed my mini-sabbatical of the past 6 months in Australia before returning home to my Marist community and mission in Bolivia.

In mid-August of 2018 I started my Sabbatical adventure on the North-West Coast of Tasmania. Some of this experience we shared in our last Circular Letter. Some have asked me: "*Why Tasmania? Don't you want to do some post-graduate studies or renewal in Europe or just enjoy travel around the globe?*". Well, I just loved Tassie [Tasmania] for the 6 months that I helped out there in our then Marist Parish of Burnie while being in Australia as a young, vibrant priest. So many good friends made my three and a half months there from mid-August through to the start of December just a wonderful experience as I was able to set myself up there in Ronda's shack on Hellyer Beach, and in the meantime do my writing project based on our experience with the Base Church Communities in the Latin American Church. I thoroughly enjoyed alternating with the present parish priest and good friend, Fr. John G, with weekend Eucharists in the 4 churches of what is now the Burnie-Wynyard Parish. The locals were just so good to me, many of whom knew me from my earlier days there. Needless to say, I was well taken care of and as a result I gained considerable weight! So I have fond memories of very beautiful sharings there with Fr. John, Ronda, Gerry & Dianne, Gary & Raquel, Paul & Marilyn, Jessie, Brian, Doug, Mirtha & Damian, Clem and many others. What a blessing!

Having managed to get myself away from Tassie and subsequently survive in taking the car on and off the ferry from Devonport to Melbourne and finding my way out of Melbourne to Romsey on the road to Bendigo, I took up the invitation to spend several days with Robert & Anne. Robert had been a student in his last years at Marist Brothers College, Ashgrove when I first started there in 1955 and in more recent years would spend some time at Yamba each year; Yamba being for me on my leave back in Australia every 3 or so years my adopted Australian home. I had not been in the Melbourne area since I was posted for 6 months back in 1976 to our then Marist Parish of West Sunshine before going to Mexico. So another enjoyable visit and moving around that part of Australia, being hosted so generously by Robert & Anne. From there I was setting off to Sydney, taking the coastal highway called the Princes.

On the way up, I took 3 overnight stays in caravan parks in small beach cabins. I would detour from the main highway around mid-day and go some 20 or 30 kms until the beach. Then settle myself up for a body surf and cook my supper, settling into a quiet night by myself among the natural habitat. This was part of my native Australia unknown to me. What beauty!

Upon arrival in Sydney a few days before Christmas, I would meet up with my Australian Marist confreres, my sisters Elizabeth & Margaret and my Bolivian family of Prudencio, Maria & Karen and some of my ex-

students' families from my days teaching at our Marist Woodlawn College on the NSW North Coast where I was a young priest, fresh out of the seminary. My sister Margaret has been confined to bed in a nursing home for the past 7 years so I was able to spend time with her there on Christmas morning and celebrate Eucharist with her. I was invited to Christmas Dinner and stay overnight at the home of Peter & Leanne whose close friendship goes back to our Woodlawn days. Their son Matt has recently married a beautiful young girl whose family came from Ecuador, so they were delighted to have the opportunity to speak some Spanish over Christmas dinner.

Once more I was on the road going north to spend a week at Yamba where I was to stay as I have done on each of my Australian visits over the past 40 odd years with my "adopted" family of Bill & Dot. I took a stop halfway at Port Macquarie to spend a day with Jim & Mary whom I had not seen for generations. Jim was in the seminary with me –a few years behind me. Before I went to Mexico I had the good fortune of concelebrating their Nuptial in Sydney. We had so much to share as we renewed our profound friendship.

Upon my eventual arrival in Yamba, Bill had the Bundy Rum ready with the Coke and cheese and crackers for our traditional Happy Hour. Since my early days in Mexico I had taken to having my *Cuba Libre* as we call it there in Latin America.....just what one looks forward to after running around in the heat of the day!!

We welcomed the New Year there at Yamba, celebrating together with their 9 off springs, grandchildren and great grandchildren when added up gets close to some 150 –and Hoppy, as they fondly call me, is just another member of this wonderful clan. Each morning at 6.30, as we have done each time I have been back on leave in Australia, Bill & I set off in our Yamba Surf Life Saving swimsuits to have an early morning surf on Pippie Beach in front of our holiday house. [Bill turns 90 this year and I will be 74 and the two of us can still catch those waves as we did some 45 years ago!]

There too in Yamba lives in youthful retirement my dear priest friend Rex. In previous Circular Letters we have referred to our close friendship and mutual encouragement in living out our priestly vocation that goes back to our first years as young priests in the Lismore Diocese. So there in Yamba we were able to celebrate together that very special gift of friendship that we received from the Lord.

I am now on countdown as I enter the last month of my 6-month Sabbatical. Brisbane –where I was born and raised- awaits me. On my way up the coast from Yamba I stop to spend 3 days with the family of one of my ex-students who live on a canefield in the Tweed Valley. Kevin was one of my star footballers at Woodlawn College back in the early 70's. He went on to play A-Grade Rugby in the region and he credits it to my coaching!! Kevin has a beautiful wife Rozie and two grown children. What a time we had together there on the Tweed! We had an enjoyable Sunday at the local horse races, but unfortunately did not get onto many winners to fill our coffers to take back to Bolivia. With Kevin's brother-in-law and another friend we had a 2-day fishing trip up and down the Tweed River, sleeping on the boat overnight and quenching our thirst with Tooheys New (the local popular beer). Unfortunately the fish were not biting; I caught a 1-metre long rare fish called a *Torpon*, successfully landed it, but we discovered that it was too boney to cook up and enjoy. Nevertheless we had a lot of fun! We did indeed have some success with the crab pots we placed overnight in the river, pulling up and cooking there on the boat 4 delicious mud crabs –a real treat and taste of heaven when helped along with a cold Tooheys!

Brisbane was considered a big country town when I grew up there –although it was the capital of the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest State of the Australian Continent. Today it is a vast metropolis. I made my base at the home of my youngest sister and her family. Helen & Kevin have 5 grown children -2 boys, 3 girls. With their extended family we enjoyed earlier a very special Sunday Luncheon in the ground of the University of Queensland. I, for my part, had to get to know some of my many grandnieces and nephews who really keep their grandparents active.

One of my Ashgrove connections where I went to school have kept in touch with me over all these years. Tom & Jeannine's son, Greg, went into medicine after he finished at Marist College several years after me. For his practical experience in his graduating year, he chose to come to our mission in Oaxaca, Mexico. From that moment on we have forged a beautiful friendship. So as in my previous visit to Australia, Greg made available to me for a week their holiday house on the Sunshine Coast, north of Brisbane where I was able to take my eldest sister Mary who is now 80 and does not easily have such opportunities to get away from Brisbane. After a restful week together there, I spent the night with Greg's parents in Brisbane where

they put on a seafood supper, knowing that I have a passion for seafood and that I will not be getting any once I arrive back in Bolivia that has no access to the sea.

Before leaving Brisbane, I was successful in making contact with Kieran from my school days. We grew up in the same neighbourhood and played *Cow Boys & Indians* in each other's backyards. In 1951 we started off together in 1<sup>st</sup> Grade at St. Finbar's Convent School, in 1955 we started at Marist Brothers Ashgrove in 4<sup>th</sup> Grade and finished High School there in 1963 and from that day on we did not see each other nor maintain contact. Kieran now lives in retirement alone on Stradbroke Island, offshore from Brisbane City. I got on the ferry across to the island and we spent 2 days there together, surfing, going around the island and as we quenched our thirsts in the evening we recalled those days and our classmates, some of whom have passed on, others who have not seen the best of this life and others who are still around and maintain some form of contact.

So I have to get back to Sydney and prepare myself for my journey back to Bolivia and our mission. Rather than take the quicker route on the Pacific Highway I take an alternate one that sees me spending a night in Armidale on the New England Tableland. In 1965 I did my Noviciate Year there in preparation for my Profession as a Marist. Back then our noviciate site consisted of a huge ranch where we had to look after some 4000 sheep, 80 milking cows, orchards of apples, plums, apricots, peaches and cherries. Our spiritual formation consisted in being good farmers –something I do not regret, especially as much of my life in Latin America has been living among the campesinos and so up to a point I can identify with them and understand their struggle to survive. Our noviciate year was marked by drought.

Finally I find myself to pass the last week of my Australian Sabbatical in Sydney at our Marist Headquarters where we have now 2 retirement communities and a parish community. The vast majority of our members live in some form of retirement or in special care. By the end of 2019 we will only have 2 official works in Australia under the auspices of the Marist Fathers –the Parish of St. Pat's in downtown Sydney and the Hunter's Hill Parish. When I was in formation we had 8 parishes –Ashgrove, Gladstone [Qld], St.Pat's, Hunters Hill [NSW]. West Sunshine [Melbourne], Belmont [Perth], Burnie, Claremont [Tasmania]; 4 colleges – Woodlawn [Lismore], Chanel [Geelong]. St. Paul's Bellambi [Wollongong], Burnie [Tasmania]; 2 Home Mission House –Ashgrove [Qld], Malvern [Melbourne]; 1 Adult Education in the Faith Centre –Aquinas Academy [Sydney]; 1 Seminary [Toongabbie, Sydney]; 1 Noviciate House [Armidale, NSW]. This in all amount to some 17 communities to which one could be appointed. Apart from those, once ordained, one could volunteer to go to our missions in Oceania or in Japan – our Japanese Mission was closed in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, I am the only present Australian Province Marist actively involved full-time in overseas mission.

In these last days here in Australia I am catching up with Prudencio and family in their home at Cambelltown where Prudencio [Gilberto's brother] is now a full-time teacher and counsellor to the staff of a special government secondary school for asylum seekers in Sydney. Also I will have lunch with 2 of my former classmates from my years at Ashgrove Marist College who live in retirement in Sydney – both of whom incidentally have had prostate cancer, as my other classmate Kieran whom I mentioned above. [While I was in Tasmania doing my Sabbatical Project I had a health check-up; so hopefully my return now to Bolivia sees me without any major concerns.] Before leaving, I am saying a last farewell to both of my sisters here in Sydney-Elizabeth & Margaret.

And now a final reflection on my *Desert Days* here on our Marist headquarters property at Hunter's Hill. Saturday morning saw me looking for the key to the St. Peter Chanel Chapel that I referred to at the beginning of this sharing. Someone in the community recalled where it could be found. I go with the key and finally get the chapel opened. To my surprise, it appeared that it had not been opened in more recent years so I had to go off to look for cleaning materials to make it presentable and conducive for 2 days of reflection and contemplation whereby I would dispose myself to let God gaze on me with His outpouring love. In this openness, I tried to listen to what He wanted me to let go of, to what He wished me to give myself to from here on and to what is keeping me from giving myself fully. It was a peaceful encounter! As I go back to my dear community and people in Bolivia I am confirmed in what I have come to believe in more recent years and to which we have to give priority in our evangelizing presence there: *Humanity needs a Jesus who is Historical, relevant for real life, physically concrete, like we are – a Jesus whose life can save us even more than His death does –a Jesus we can follow and learn from Him [incarnate] in practical ways and who set the bar for what it means to be fully HUMAN.*

[Throughout my months here in Australia in each of the places I visited it was the same story from all our good Catholics who have remained faithful and in some way feel that the institutional Church has let them down, does not listen to the People of God and has only mandates and customs that excludes and condemns rather than includes and is a welcoming church community.] It so happens that the Gospel Reading for the present Sunday is from Luke Chapter 4 where Jesus proclaims His agenda. We have to confess that we have not taken to heart in taking up the mission He assumed and invited us to undertake so that *"all may have life and have it to the full"*. Pope Francis in our day is calling us to rediscover the *"joy of the Gospel –the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth –Jesus of the People"*; however, the risk of doing this has its cost and few are audacious enough to take it to heart and shout the Gospel of Jesus with their lives as did the first Christian communities founded and formed by the Apostles in the Early Church.

Having shared all that experience of my mini-sabbatical here in my native Australia where I can truly say that I have *"gone back to where I came from"*, what is my conclusion? Firstly, I know that I have been and am truly graced by God and by so many in different places and times have graced me by their friendship, encouragement, example and support. Where I have come from and those whose lives have touched me at some point along the journey have helped in forming me to be the human person that I am today. The Human and the Divine are one. Divine Life is here –as Jesus expressed it: *"The Kingdom of God is among you!"* Let us recognize that Divine Presence in each and every human being and in all of creation –*Life is Beautiful, the World is Good, God is Alive and loves and accepts each human as one is*. God does not have to change, but perhaps we have to change our image of God as revealed for us in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. In our first days of coming together as a Marist Missionary Community in Bolivia [Los Misioneros Maristas, Bolivia], Gilberto, Javier and myself took as our motto: *"Nothing is more important to us than HUMAN LIFE, the HUMAN PERSON –above all the Poor and the Oppressed, who besides being Human is also D-I-V-I-N-E"*. Once we live in that Spirit, then another World is Possible and another Church is Possible!!

I am due to arrive back in Bolivia on February 1<sup>st</sup> and on February 2<sup>nd</sup> we have the hope that we will spend the day at our Marist Country Retreat in Pantipampa –some 35 minutes from Tarija City that is our present base and residence. We are aware that on this date we are to celebrate the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our official commissioning in the Bolivian Church as *Misioneros Maristas, Bolivia* by Bishop Aدهmar Esquivel who gave each of us our small wooden mission cross that he himself had carved and to this day I wear permanently. Also it will be the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my entrance into the Society of Mary [Marist Fathers]. We do not know what the future holds for us as a Marist Community and as individuals. In our journey, we have been accompanied and supported by you, our sincere and loving friends, over many years. Our mission is your mission too! It would not have been possible without you.

While here in Australia my Marist superiors have questioned me regarding my permanency in Bolivia and expectations for retirement. For my part, I call Bolivia my home and Gilberto, Javier and their families my Marist Community. We have shared our lives together and served the Church as the Team of Misioneros Maristas for the past 28 years. We are bonded and responsible for each other and will always take care of each other according to our possibilities. Today we are a community of 10; the oldest coming up to 74 years and the youngest to be 5 in September. With the local community of Pantipampa, when they granted us permission in their peasant farmers' union to obtain our community retreat property in the village, I told them in their monthly meeting that they would have to give me a place to be put down one day in their village cemetery. They assured us that this would be no problem –there is plenty of room and I can choose my lote!

As I write this sharing today, I had come back to my room after celebrating the Eucharist on the altar of the St. Peter Chanel Chapel referred to at the start. From there I walked around the nearby cemetery on the grounds where many of our very early Marists from Europe who went to the Oceanian Missions have been buried; looking at the gravestones some died at the early age of 40, while other lived to 80+ years there among the islanders, never to return to their native countries. They came out on sailing boats and with their few belongings were left on an isolated island to baptize the natives, as it would have been expressed in those days. We cannot grasp what it was for them to start up a mission and to learn an unknown native language and survive and *"convert the natives"*. That missionary spirit and courage perhaps is lacking today in our Marist World. As I stood there, I prayed to them that they would intercede for me before the Good Lord who is faithful to His promise to those who *"lay down their lives for the sake of the Kingdom"*.

With all our love----¡Gracias!

*Juanito (John Hopkinson, S.M.) & the Community of Misioneros Maristas, Bolivia*