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Dear Friends,

In these days our people here in the barrios on the outskirts of Tarija City are accustomed to participate in the Stations of the Cross that start from the parish centre, does a round of the barrio and then ends back at the centre. It may be that the scheduled time for departure is 6.30pm, but those leading the procession will wait until 7pm as few people have gathered in the meantime. As the Stations move forward, more people join in at each stop. Finally, after some 90 minutes of doing the circuit the faithful break off, returning to their homes until next year. Come the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday few have returned to celebrate this, the high point of the Christian Year. The Paschal Proclamation of Jesus' Resurrection is muted for so many who have at one time been baptized in Christ Jesus. Unfortunately, the formation in the faith of our people in so many places is very deficient and our ministers themselves formed in a model of Church that does not breathe with the spirit of the 2nd Vatican Council and Pope Francis. There is an African Proverb that we use in our Base Church Communities: *“Simple folk, doing small things, in places of little importance, realize extraordinary changes”*. With all humility, we trust that our little team of Misioneros Maristas is responding to the call of the Church in our day for a new evangelization: one that is *“new in its fervor, new in its methods, new in its expression”*.

Without a doubt, there are some who may question who we [Misioneros Maristas] are and what we do. We do not appear to be tied so much to the temple with Masses, Sacraments and waiting for the people to come to the parish office, but seem to be lost out there among the people in their barrios and village communities. Our annual recess period from Christmas through to the end of January showed us in some way just how we respond to our Marist Missionary Project and in what our presence and ministry as Marists consists.

This time we had the opportunity to spend some of that time in our places of origin. The ten of us of the Marist Community arrived in the Sud Yungas [the homeland of Gilberto and Javier] around midday on December 24th, after having driven some 1000 kilometers from Tarija. That same afternoon we joined with all of the clan of Gilberto and Javier in Irupana where Irupana [the home team] were playing in a national soccer tournament. The local team had coopted Gilbertito to play for them, so there was much excitement, even though the home team lost. Then we returned to Yabalo Village for our Vigil Christmas Eucharist out in the open, under the stars and surrounded by the ranges of the Andean Mountains. This was followed by a Christmas meal and celebration for all the clan that continued on outside until the early hours of Christmas Day. This was the first time in more than 20 years that our entire Misioneros Marist Community had been together there in the Sud Yungas to spend time with the families of Gilberto and Javier. A truly memorable occasion! For Juan it was something very special as he spent his first year in Bolivia caretaking the vast rural parish of Irupana before together with Javier and Gilberto we founded the community and team of Misioneros Maristas on November 22nd 1990 and undertook the foundation of the San Pablo Mission. We are here talking of our presence there among these people some 28 years ago, yet we remain alive in the lives and hearts of these poor campesinos. Before New Year we moved on from the Sud Yungas. Gilberto and Javier with their wives and children then drove on to our former Palma Flor Mission in the Bolivian Amazonia where the families of Arminda y Nair live. Another 1000 kilometers to the north. There our boys were able to get to know better their uncles, aunts and cousins and to go fishing, while little Marian won the hearts of all. Meanwhile Juan returned by minibus to La Paz to take a flight to Mexico.

You may recall that Juan on May 5th of last year celebrate 40 years of his arrival en Mexico, thus starting his missionary journey as a Marist. In Mexico City he was met by Marcos, Monica and family and stayed with them at their home in San Mateo on the outskirts of the city. This is where Juan was stationed during his first 6 years. It had been arranged that until New Year together with two other couples (Roberto & Blanca and Luis & Santa) they would have 2 night away at the

thermal springs some 2 hours' drive from San Mateo. There they stayed at the house of Santa's mum. The three couples were teenagers when Juan arrived in San Mateo, accompanied him in his pastoral ministry, later married and then became Godparents to each other's children. Some 40 years later they remain a closely-knit group and to date active in the ministries of the parish. It was a beautiful reunion with the sharing of many happy memories.

Then back in San Mateo for New Year's Eve Juan was able to celebrate the Eucharist for many of families who were overjoyed by his renewed presence among them. From there he was able to spend time relaxing on the coast with his good friend Roberto Del Castillo whose family had "adopted" Juan from his very first days in Mexico some 40 years ago when he was struggling with his Spanish. Roberto has been widowed now for five years and with Juan enjoys a lasting close friendship.

Next stop for Juan on this journey was his former Marist mission of El Porvenir, Oaxaca in the Diocese of Tehuantepec; a mission that he was a founding member back in 1983 and where he served for five years prior to his Bolivian mission. Having taken the overnight bus from Mexico City his first stop was Juchitan, one of the cities most devastated by the October earthquakes in Mexico. He was taken care of by two of his friends from those years -Father Ranulfo Pacheco and Brother Gaspar "Lobo". With them, he visited the neighborhoods. To see the people there still in the streets some four months later brought tears. In Ranulfo's parish alone, there are 6000 families living among the rubble in the streets; some huddle under huts of plastic sheeting. Ranulfo's parish house and chapel no longer exist. That night they attended a meeting of the lay pastoral agents of the town where each told his or her story so as to express their experience at the time and to share their feelings so that as ministers of the Church they could set about the healing and support needed by the members of their parish community. It was a deeply moving evening for Juan. Ranulfo explained that the first priority was not to get the parish back on track with its normal activities of Masses, Sacraments and Catechism classes, but to give new life and hope to the people.

Early next morning Juan took the local bus to get to El Porvenir. He got off at El Paraiso on the highway to Acayucan where Fr. Lino was waiting with his pick-up. Lino is the present pastor of the parish and in Juan's, time was a deacon and then ordained to the priesthood. The distance from El Paraiso to El Porvenir is 25 kilometers and fortunately the road is now sealed. Breakfast of freshly caught fish was awaiting them there in El Paraiso. The village had radically changed for Juan who had not been back to the mission since 1996. Their visit to the home of Jose Luis and Tomasa was very touching. They had been the animators of the Base Church Community during Juan's tenure and remained active until recent years. Jose Luis is now immobile in a wheelchair and very frail, but when Juan entered the home, tears poured forth as they recognized and hugged him profusely. They said that Juan had not changed a bit in 30 years; only that he was more filled out! Next stop before reaching El Porvenir were the villages of Zapata and Juarez. Again the short visit with members of the community who still held Juan as a close friend was very touching. Then finally, by midday we entered El Porvenir village, now quite modernized. Lino made Juan welcome there in his parish house and arranged a visit to several of known friends. For the afternoon, they did the tour of the village where Juan was again greeted with such affection. Lino said to his people; "How is it that Juanito still remembers all your names after 30 years away from here?" Next morning, they visited the indigenous villages of Arroyo Encino and Julio de La Fuente. For Juan, it was an overwhelming experience. The time factor did not permit visits to the remaining villages on the mission. The following day, others hearing that Juan had come, came into El Porvenir from their villages to visit with him. When Juan had to finally return from there to Mexico City, Lino had enough food and drink in the house for the next couple of weeks as in each place they had been deluged with gifts to take home.

Back in Mexico City and before returning to Bolivia, Juan spent the Sunday with Fr. Alejandro Muñoz, the newly elected Provincial of the Mexican Marist Province; for the previous 8 years, Alejandro had been Assistant General of the Marists in Rome and he and Juan had maintained contact. The two of them met for lunch and had a sharing of experiences. Upon departure, Alejandro expressed to Juan his delight that there was a Marist in Latin America doing the things that he was doing and so involved with the Base Church Communities [CEBs].

February 2nd saw us all back at base and on the job in Tarija. It, being the Feast of the Presentation, was the 27th anniversary our missionary commission here by Bishop Aدهmar Esquivel.

Before going into recess, our bishop had asked us as a Marist Team given to the responsibility of promoting, forming and accompanying the CEBs in the dioceses if we would consider providing help by means of the CEBs to the priest of the newly created parish of Santa Cruz on the outskirts of Tarija City. There are some 36 barrios, mostly settled in the past 10 years by poor campesinos who have migrated to the city in the hope of survival. The young priest has an impossible job alone and not up to getting out there with the people. In our annual evaluation and planning sessions we decided to accept the bishop's recommendation and to give all we can to the pastoral development of the newest of the barrios without attention. So our first weeks back in Tarija had us doing the rounds of these selected barrios with the local priest, making contact with their local presidents or leaders. Most of the settlements are illegal, although the people have paid exorbitant prices for their land. The settlements are an urban disaster: no planning, many without basic services of water, electricity, accessible roads -no infrastructure or planning. The area reeks of dire poverty and chaos. Just so sad to see how the families live. We have made a proposal to the bishop and the local priest as how we might initiate a presence there in these barrios with the hope of forming Base Church Communities. The green light is on and we have scheduled for after Easter a meeting with those contact people so as to organize an initial round of visits to each barrio.

Juan was quickly off again before the end of February after having just returned 3 weeks earlier from Mexico. This time to Bogotá, Colombia for a special meeting of the Work Group for the Latin American Articulation of CEBs. An intense week of meetings in preparation for the annual meeting of all the assessors of CEBs from the different Latin American countries. Javier joined Juan for the second week as he is the present articulator for the Andean Region of Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia. Hopefully our efforts will bear much fruit in the years ahead for the Latin American Church that is experiencing a time of particular crisis, in spite of the prophetic exhortations of Pope Francis, that unfortunately fall on many deaf ears here and meet with resistance from many ordained ministers in the various countries who have returned to a pre-Vatican II Church or Trentine Church, as one Bishop expressed it to us at a CEBs gathering.

Our first weeks after recess had been given also to the preparation of the annual Lenten retreat for all the animators of the CEBs of the Tarija Diocese. This was realized during the second week of March with excellent participation of 22 animators from all corners of the diocese. This was immediately followed by our own Marist retreat that we are accustomed to do at the end of every four -month term at our Marist Retreat in Pantipampa -30 minutes from Tarija City. Before entering into Holy Week we have completed two days of evaluation and planning for the 2nd term of our pastoral year. We are happy to know that our three boys doing university studies away from home have settled in well. Both Gilbertito [Chiqui] and Lupo have taken up residence and studies at the University of San Francisco Javier in Sucre and Juan Jose continues at Córdoba State University in Argentina. At home in Tarija Paco is in pre-final year at De La Salle and Student President. Marian, our 3-year old is at play-school in Tarija.

Well, friends, that about does it for now in bringing up to date with our Marist life and mission here in Bolivia. As always, know that you are held dearly in our thoughts and daily prayers. Please pray especially for Gilberto's mum in Yabalo who daily become frailer with her illness.

May you experience anew the joy of the Risen Lord Jesus in this Easter season.

With all our love:

Gilberto/Arminda/Juan Jose/Gilbertito/Marian - Javier/Nair/Lupo/Paco - Juan