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At this time of writing, I find myself in Minneapolis-St. Paul in the United States sharing here at the invitation of the archdiocese something of our 41 years of missionary journey in the Latin American Church and our promotion, formation and accompaniment of that model of being Church that we know as the Comunidades Eclesiales de Base [Base Church Communities]. For me, it is the start of an eight-month period of being away from our Marist Life and Mission in Bolivia. According to our legislation of the Australian Province of the Marist Fathers of which I am a member, every ten years one is expected to present to the administration a proposal for a sabbatical year. So after discernment with my Bolivian Marist Community and my superiors, I am embarking upon such an adventure, realizing that in fact my only real sabbatical was back in 1988 when I finished in Mexico before going on to Bolivia in 1989. In 2008, I was accepted for the three-month Marist International Renewal Programme in France and Rome. Well then, what is the accepted proposal?

Firstly, I have commitments in the Archdioceses of St. Paul, Minnesota and San Antonio, Texas where I am sharing our missionary life and mission experience in some 8 parishes. It could be seen as a type of reverse mission, an awaking to the mission of the whole Church and what we can learn from each other. Then on July 16th I leave the United States for my native Australia where I will be until the end of January 2019. Our proposal is that upon arrival I will first take time to visit with my fellow Marists, family and close friends. By mid-August I intend to move on to the north-west coast of Tasmania where I will be of assistance as needed in the Burnie-Wynyard Parish, especially on weekend with Eucharists and Sacraments in the small towns along the coast. For many years the Marists served this area when they staffed there the parish and college, but over recent years have had to retreat from both the college and parish given to their dwindling numbers. I was fortunate in my earlier years to have ministered there for a short time. So I am really looking forward to having now the opportunity to be back in the region where I hope to have time for reading, writing, making new friends and for being available in the parish. A family whose friendship I enjoy have a “shack” on the rugged and spectacular coastline at Hellier [about 30 mins. from Burnie] and they have made it available for my use, knowing that I love the sea and that in Bolivia I have not had access to it over all these years. Before returning to Bolivia in the New Year, I hope to spend some time in the north on vacation with family and friends. In the meantime back at our Tarija Mission, I know that my fellow Marist missionaries, Gilberto and Javier, will be attentive to realizing fully our current pastoral plan and living-out our Marist community life and charism together with their families.

As I embark on this time away from the mission for a mini-sabbatical, I wish to share with you our friends over the years something of the way in which the Lord has taken us by the hand and led us step by step, anticipating the needs of the Church and of her people.

The first need was that of poverty. I knew that whatever we did as a little group or community, we must be without material security....as if we were a type of “beggars”. Perhaps

before the turn of the millennium this among religious groups was not the thing to do. It was rebellion...going against the current or the system. However, in the Latin American Church after the 2nd Vatican Council and the subsequent 2nd General Conference of Latin American Bishops known as "Medellin", a small number of pastoral agents started to insert themselves among the poor and taking up their cause. They realized that you cannot be paternalistic toward the poor, that is, live somewhere else and just drop in once in a while and do some kind of social work. You have to become poor. Identification with the poor is identification with Jesus Christ. Again, this kind of thinking was radical and unique, even within established religious congregations. Such "radicals" were in fact pioneers. These radicals were questioned by their colleagues and friends who lived within the established order. However, one recognized the need to live by the Gospel, from the scriptures. My contact with such people convinced me that I too had to follow their lead and live accordingly in answer to the call that I had receive from the Lord who works in mysterious ways.

From henceforth the Gospel has been my rule of life. In fact, still today I always set out on my pastoral activities with my small battered Spanish New Testament in hand. The only answers I give people are from the Gospel, from the scriptures. I realize what the Church and the world need is the strong food of the Word of God. All those intellectual sermons and teachings, so prominent in many places, are getting the Church nowhere. I also realized deep down in my heart that the promotion of all the novenas, devotions, processions, massive demonstrations of the Catholic faith, First Fridays, excessive and multiple celebrations of the Eucharist for the dead [and rarely for the living] and the rest was not the answer either. Oh, there is nothing wrong with them, provided they do not take the place of the liturgy and the scriptures. This realization and one's consequent options produced an immense wound. I began to realize that anyone who accepts the Gospel without compromise will not only become a wound, but a wound into which some people will constantly pour salt.

One of my first "conversion" experiences upon arrival in Mexico in 1977 I will share with you here. I was alone in our Marist Parish of San Mateo on the outskirts of Mexico City...a parish considered to be comprised of mostly poor workers and their families. Padre Alejandro, my companion and the one in-charge, was away for several days. One afternoon there was a knock on the door of our rectory. Upon answering, I find four of the local lads who were carrying a feeble-looking man. Then upon inspection, I saw that he was severely dehydrated, semi-conscious, near death, filthy, smelly, wearing tattered clothes and probably an alcoholic. The lads told me that they found him nearby, lying along the roadside, and that they could not leave him there, so they thought that they would bring him there to the rectory. So what was my reaction and what could I do and what was I going to do? My inicial reaction was why had they brought this problem upon me but I realized I had to face up to the situation as it was not going to go away...it had landed in my lap! Alongside our rectory, there were meeting rooms so we laid him down there trying to make him comfortable as best we could. In the process of attending to him, together we sponged him down, changed his clothes, tried to get some warm chicken soup into his system once he started to respond. What was the next step for us? Where could he could to be adequately treated and restored to health? With much effort, I finally by phone got through to a social worker at the local council and when I related to him the situation he responded likewise: *"Oh, Padre, why did you have to get involved? We have these alcoholics all the time and die in such conditions and then the next day after they die there in the open, once reported the council truck will collect them where they will eventually be interred in a common grave."* Getting back to attend to our new "guest", I found that he was now sufficiently responding, so I asked him his name and where did he live. With a smile, he merely responded with the name "Porfirio" and nothing else. In a flash, I recognized that this Porfirio (who now has an identity as a human person) and whom I was embracing was Jesus, as I heard in my heart His word *"Whatever you do to the least of my brothers you do unto me. When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink....."*. After taking care of Porfirio for a couple of days and seeing that he could be moved, I called the sisters of Mother Teresa who had a refuge in the neighboring parish. Graciously they told me to bring him there and they would receive him. [As a footnote, as one of the Marists celebrated daily Eucharist for their community, some months later I had the privilege of celebrating there with them in the presence of Mother Teresa herself!]. From that experience on, I have become immersed

in the promotion and defense of human life and the accompaniment of all human life from conception to glorification, as was the life of Mary of Nazareth with Her son.

As my life as a Marist missionary at the service of the Latin American Church unfolded and developed, I sensed another need of the Church in our day: that of martyrdom. As Church History will recall someday, the Church of the Latin America in the 60's, 70's and 80's was persecuted for his option of the poor and the struggle for justice and human dignity and rights. Several of our countries lived under the tyranny of dictatorships and although now more than half the catholic population of the world lived here, 80% of the Latin American population lived in poverty. From my first days in San Mateo, having seen the lot of our people and the response of the Church to that reality, I tried to become acquainted with that model of Church that was being developed in some parts of Latin America known as "*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base -Base Church Communities*" [CEBs]. So in some of the small barrios of the parish where I had responsibility, I set about promoting and forming such communities. Then in the northern summer of 1980, I had the great fortune of being a participant in the course on CEBs conducted by the Brazilian Fr. José Marins and his team. There in one of our celebration we had a liturgy commemorating the lives of the now thousands of recent martyrs of the Latin American Church. I was captivated and deeply moved. I had heard in our seminary classes that the pride and glory of the Early Church were its martyrs, and here now again at the close of the 2nd millennium we were witnessing a new wave of heroic men and women in Latin American who gave their lives in defense of their people as a response to living out the Gospel message. Throughout the years I have come accustomed in our community to venerate our martyrs from some more well known as San Oscar Romero of El Salvador to some little unknown ones as Geronimo, indigenous catechist of the Tehuantepec Diocese of México were I served in the 80's. Some of these many thousands of martyrs I have briefly known, others have been personally known by my friends and colleagues throughout the Latin American Church and others I have heard their story or read of it as I have moved throughout the Americas over the last 40 years. Their lives and their commitment to the Gospel and their people always inspire me and have enabled me at times to be audacious and to risk myself in spite of the consequences. One therefore has known some of those martyrs who have literally shed their blood -after have been defamed, persecuted, threatened, ostracized, expelled, abducted, taken prisoner, tortured, and finally assassinated or simply "disappeared", or a combination of these. Yet there are numerous who are also martyrs in the broader sense. Not big spectacular martyrs but -little martyrs, little "beggars", poor people who live with the poor, pastoral agents who often have been misunderstood or even abandoned by their religious families. We see daily on television the new barbarism that has entered the world. And there in the midst of this distortion, stand firmly those who shout out and give witness to other values that are truly Gospel.

At this time, I call to mind two of these "little martyrs" with whom I am associated. They are the father and brother of Gilberto, my fellow Marist and companion in community for the past 29 years. Gilberto's mother who has lived her life as a poor campesino (peasant farmer) in the Sud Yungas of Bolivia in the later part of 2016 had, what was considered by local doctors, a mild stroke. After an initial operation, she returned to her home where her condition failed to improve; instead got worse. We at our mission in the far south of Bolivia arranged for her to come to Tarija where we had access to better treatment. Maria was accompanied by her husband, Felix and by Rene, the second boy in the family and still single, although now in his forties. Rene dedicated his life to supporting the family's small farm, especially now that Felix's health had weaken considerably. For some three months, Maria lingered in hospital, having undergone two more operations. Rene and Felix alternated in being at her side day and night to assist her. Rene slept nightly on a blanket on the hospital floor beside, attentive to her needs -as one was not in a position to have one's own private nurse. When it was determined that no further treatment could be given, Maria was released from hospital and brought back to our Marist lodge in Tarija where again assisted alternately by Felix and Rene, as well as by members of the Marist community for another three months. When it was considered that Maria could travel, we arranged for her to return home to Yabalo, knowing that nothing further could reasonably be done to bring her back to full health. This was in June of 2017. Maria lived at home, cared for on a daily basis by Felix and Rene until the feast of Corpus Christi of this year (Thursday May 31st) when in the early hours she was finally welcomed into the house of the Father. All of us of the community were fortunate

in being there at Gilberto's home in Yabalo for Christmas with the family where we were able to accompany Maria who laid immobile on her mattress on the ground there outside under the stars and surrounded by the Andean mountains as we celebrated midnight Mass in the open, followed by a traditional supper. We hear Jesus in the Gospel saying to his followers: *"No greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends"*, and so we can say that Felix and Rene with such great love for their spouse and mother have truly laid down their lives: they are truly *"martyrs"* like so many others among us.

And so we come to consider a third need of the Church in our day that I have come to discover: the need for prayer. We live in a world busy worshipping itself and not caring about anything or anybody except its own satisfaction and gratification, where unbridled capitalism reigns, having created its own god: a new culture that Pope Francis has called a *"culture of indifference"*. Through the daily social media we see how much we kill, how much we hate, how much we are willing to batter others just to get our own way. We step on the heads of others just to climb a little higher ourselves.

Ever since I became aware of the reality of the people whom I served when I first arrived in Mexico in whatever place I have lived, I have first set up in our home a small space for prayer, for which the Russian word is *"poustinia"* -the desert. Here in this spot one enters into the desert of prayer, where one is alone, where one can face oneself and experience a change of heart. It is here that *"kenosis"* takes place, an emptying, a stripping of oneself, a burying of the *"I"*. It is here that we begin to live more for the other as Jesus taught us, loving in depth both those who love us and those who do not. One here understand that prayer is needed to counteract the spread of this culture of indifference and individualism. When in the desert of our hearts we finally accept the solution of community and unity, it is then time to open the doors of our poustinia and journey forth as a pilgrim, to preach joyfully and shout the good news of the Gospel with our lives to others. Many of us in ministry have forgotten how to pray. We have forgotten that there must be a time when we are silent so God can look at us face to face and so that we can hear what God wants to say to us. It must be the prayer of two people in love with each other who cease to talk. Their silence speaks. Two people in love! You will enter into a mysterious silence and in that silence become one with the Absolute. Our oneness with God will overflow to all our brothers and sisters. When we pray like this, we will be overshadowed by the wings of a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit. On those wings our prayer of silence will be lifted into the hands of *"the Woman Wrapped in Silence"*, and she will lay it at the feet of the Holy Trinity. So the answer today to the salvation and liberation of humankind lies in this.

These three elements of our life -poverty, martyrdom and prayer - have sustained us and continue to sustain us in our little Marist Community in Bolivia. As I embark upon this mini-sabbatical away, I am confident that Jesus and his mother Mary of Nazareth will accompany and guide us on the journey. I know, as I am already experiencing, that I will dearly miss my community of Gilberto and Arminda, Javier and Nair, and our children -Juan José, Gilbertito, Marian, Lupo and Paco. As we have said before my departure from Tarija on May 31st, *"It will also be a time of testing for us"* as we continue to open ourselves to the Spirit.

Before signing off, let us bring you up to date on some of our recent activities at our Mission in Tarija. Before my leaving there, we had a very productive and busy time. A very successful diocesan CEBs Encounter that we conducted, radio programs and interviews, setting up of new CEBs in some new barrios of Tarija City. Our neighbours in Pantipampa where we now have our rural retreat/rest cottage were keen to have a celebration before I left. It was a great turnout on the Sunday evening before my departure.....They wanted to celebrate Mother's Day, my 47th Ordination Anniversary and Farewell me for my trip away. They had me do a whole lamb cooked vapour-wise in the ground over red-hot coals (Mexican Barbacoa).....a great success and no leftovers! Some 40 turned up for the fiesta....with music, dancing, cerveza, vino & cuba libre. What a night! On my return, they are likely to promote Padre Juan to being Secretary General of the Campesinos Syndicate (Peasant Farmers' Union)! Our boys continue with their studies and heavy involvement in sport. Marian will be four in September and is highly active, keeping each of us very alert. Arminda and Nair are kept busy at both work and home. Gilberto and Javier now realize that once you get to being 50 you are no longer a youngster, although still young at heart. There is still no news concerning who and when will be our new bishop. Bishop Javier has been a good friend and supportive of us and in the meantime has been told by Rome to carry on. Some

are knocking on the door to succeed him, and with humour, he has said to us, it would be hoped that they don't get to cross the threshold!

Well friends, please pray especially for us over the coming months, as we will continue to keep you in our prayers. Take care!

With all our love and esteem:

John [Juanito]

on behalf of all our beautiful Marist Community of

Gilberto/Arminda/Juan José, Gilbertito/ Marian -Javier/Nair/Lupo