



“MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA”
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September 12th [Solemnity of the Most Holy Name of Mary]

Dear Friends,

As we have done in previous years on the occasion of our patronal feast as Marists, so too this year we wish to share with you something of our Marist life and mission here in Bolivia. Some of you may recall that when we established our third mission in Bolivia –that of La Mamora- in September of 1999 the people there adopted as their patronal feast that of us Marists. As a consequence, the youth from our newly-born Base Church Community (CEBs) came up with the initiative of promoting a folk festival to honour the name of Mary, and so was born in 2000 what has become known as “*Festiprim*”. This year we celebrate its 20th version and today is quite a festival that is nationally acclaimed.

In our previous letter dated June 25th that was Juan’s birthday, we related our thoughts regards to the annual Diocesan CEBs Encounter that we had recently celebrated which had as its central theme “*CEBs: Church that reaches the heart of the people*”. Here we spoke of a church that welcomes, listens to and accompanies the people. Our Sunday radio programs at the time also focused on this theme. Then we as a Marist Community in our retreat in July at the end of the 2nd term of our pastoral year took up the same theme, reflected upon various aspects of the human heart. Here we were able to seat ourselves at the table of the world and decide what our heart would offer it to make it better. We were able to become aware of and value the great treasure that we possess with its multiple characteristics.

As our people of Tarija are very festive, one learns to adapt to their rhythm. The calendar is marked by a series of fiestas either honoring a patron saint of a town or village or commemorating some important date in their history. San Lorenzo [St. Lawrence] is the local saint of the village of Pantipampa where we have our retreat-rest house. So August 10th is their special day. The previous evening is given to a folk festival in which the surrounding villages participate and each presents a number by way of song, dance, comedy, etc. Then at midday on the 10th there is the solemn Eucharist. Juan turned up with the intention of concelebrating, but the parish priest insisted that he preside and preach; so at the last minute there was a quick prayer to the Holy Spirit for inspiration. The afternoon and evening saw plenty of community eating, drinking, dancing and a lot of fun-sharing. When Juan looks at his Australian roots, he concludes that the celebrations back there are rather bland in comparison to those of the Chapacos of Tarija. With tongue-in-cheek, Gilberto and Javier reckon that Juan has given a new twist to some of the local dances. The women do not let him sit out any of the different numbers. By the end of the night he has had a good workout and next day feels the effects! The locals claim him as one of their own.

Later in the month we received news concerning the deteriorating health of Padre Simón with whom we have worked closely throughout Bolivia with the Base Church Communities for the past 17 years. Some 18 months ago parts of his stomach were removed due to cancer, and although it was considered that the cancer had been contained, recently it resurfaced in his bones and chemotherapy has been an option. On hearing of his condition, the three of us took time out from our busy schedule and hopped on the overnight bus from Tarija to Santa Cruz to visit him for the day in his parish. Then we hopped back on the same bus at night to return home – [12 hours each way]. We found Simon well-disposed at this stage of his journey in life and determined to carry on to the end to the best of his ability. [During the past weekend, we learnt that he had been taken to hospital fairly debilitated.] Simon was surprised by our visit and deeply moved by our fraternal support. As a Marist community over the past 30 years we have learnt to care attentively for each other; here unfortunately among the local clergy there is not that same closeness and concern. In Simon’s case for the past 17 years since we have known him and at the same time he was appointed by the Bolivian Bishops’ Conference as the national assessor of CEBs, a service that he has faithfully and effectively

carried out, often with little support within the Bolivian Church and more recently with changes of responsibilities with the Episcopal Conference, he has suffered at their hands. So we have assured him at different times to *"cuenta con nosotros"* [count on us] –he is not alone, for which he is extremely grateful. At the conclusion of our recent and brief visit we invited him, if he can get away and on a plane, to come and spend some days with us at our Pantipampa retreat-rest house. As Javier and Gilberto have written elsewhere, *"people in the Church today of this generation with their vision of the 2nd Vatican Council and of a Church that reaches the heart of the people are fast dwindling"*.

Last weekend saw us conducting a Workshop for the animators of all the CEBs of our Tarija Diocese. For our part, a lot of hard work went into its preparation and promotion, and so we were blessed with a terrific and very satisfying response. Some 30 of us grappled with the theme *"Protagonismo de los Laicos y Laicas: Defensores de la Vida"* – *"The Laity as Protagonists in Society and the Church: Defenders of Life"*. We found resonance with many of the exhortations of Pope Francis with regards to our caring for all forms of life in our planet which is our *"Common House"*, with regards to clericalism in the Church, with regards to being a church that goes out to where the people are in their daily lives and that welcomes, listens to and accompanies them –that does not exclude, that does not turn in on itself, that lives the *"Joy of the Gospel"*, that brings the people to an experience of that Jesus of Nazareth –Jesus of the People. The objective of the Workshop was to arrive at what we have called our *"Manifiesto"* [Manifest] that would commit us as the CEBs of the Tarija Diocese to take a certain path forward over the next 2 years, conscious of the proverb that we have adopted in the CEBs – *"Simple folk, doing little things, in places of little importance, bring about great changes/transformations"*.

Meanwhile as we go about daily promoting, forming and accompanying the process of CEBs in the diocese and elsewhere, this final term of our 2019 pastoral year sees us testing the waters in the extensive rural parish of Tomoyapo where the new parish priest has invited us to collaborate in the hope of introducing CEBs. Zenobio is one of the very rare young priests here in Bolivia who wishes to dedicate his pastoral activities to things other than celebrating Masses and the Sacraments. So we are keen to encourage him. Also there is the indigenous Guarani village of Mokokomal that now has us visiting them regularly to form there a Base Church Community [CEBs]. The community has a dynamic couple as leaders in the persons of Iverth and Alejandra. Both participate in the formation courses that we offer to our animators during the year. Indeed, *Good News!*

Another *Good News* of recent months is that the Foundation ACLO [Acción Cultural Loyola]- a Jesuit entity that is dedicated to the cultural and social welfare of the poor campesinos [peasant farmers] and workers, has invited us as a Marist Team to collaborate together so that our services may be mutually enriched and thus better unite the daily life of the people with their faith and their faith with their life. For the past 10 years we have produced and conducted a half-hour weekly radio programme on evangelization and concientización for their network here in Bolivia and being available for live interviews on issues that affect the lives of the people or concerning Church matters. This Jesuit foundation has recently adopted the process of CEBs as one of their main priorities and value the contribution that we as a Marist Team can offer them in achieving their objective. Apart from their radio network, ACLO dedicates its work to the formation of local leaders and provides technical support to the campesinos involved into different self-help projects. Our main areas of joint activity will be in the south of Bolivia incorporating the Dioceses of Tarija, Potosi, Camiri and the Archdiocese of Sucre. We have already given workshops for ACLO in Tarija and Potosi. Next week for their national radio network we will be involved in a live national round-table conference of Justice and Peace where we will be speaking from the perspective of the CEBs. So our daily pastoral involvement continues to multiply, in spite of the ageing with both Javier and Gilberto past the 50th mark and Juan in his 75th year!

Our Marist family-community is full of life –the 4 boys kept busy with studies and sport, Marian at kinder and a host of activities around town, the 2 wives busy at their posts and us men with our pastoral activities as the Marist Team. Bolivia in recent months, like so many places in the world today, has had its share of natural disasters; here in Tarija with gale-force winds that did considerable damage to our house in Pantipampa. Until the next sharing...With all our love:

GILBERTO/ARMINDA/JUAN JOSE/GILBERTITO/MARIAN-JAVIER/NAIR/LUPO/PACO-JUAN