



MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA

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Dear Friends,

Yesterday, as we prayed together in our Marist Community the Morning Prayer of the Church, we realized that it was the feast day of Pope John XXIII whom Pope Francis in recent years canonized. Many of us will recall with deep affection the years of his pontificate and how he embraced the world of his day, opening the Church to the joys and hopes of all people who inherit our planet. His gentle spirit and vision live on in those of us who today endeavour to serve the People of God and strive to bring about a world where all belong as sisters and brothers and live in peace, enjoying life to the full.

Our new bishop who was installed as the Bishop of Tarija at the start of the pandemic is relatively young and a member of the Dominican Order. In the two audiences that we have had with him since, he has raised his concern as to our visibility here in the diocese and what it is that we do and what it is that one should be about as pastoral agents in the diocese. For our part, we spoke of our Marist Spirit, of Mary's presence in the Church at its beginning and her life there in Nazareth. We quoted our Marist founder who described it in these terms: "*Ignoti et quasi oculi* –Hidden as if unknown". For us, it is what we **are** that is important, and not so much as what we **do**. It is a **presence** there in the midst of the world, of its people. It is a presence that welcomes, listens to and accompanies the people, building community and solidarity. It appears that he cannot see where we fit into the accepted scheme of doing "churchy work".

In our previous letter, dated June 21st, we referred to Juan's 77th birthday celebrations here and how that implied his now entering into that new stage in his life's journey that involves the process of retirement. Gilberto also shared something of the reality and plight of the Guarani Indigenous Community of Mokomokal that we accompany and were the victims of a tremendous flood that destroyed their village last February.

During the months of July and August, Juan was away in the USA where the Archdiocese of San Antonio, Texas had invited him to share our missionary experience with the Base Church Communities [CEBs]. It was what can be described as "*reverse mission*" – helping the local church community to see that the Church as such is "**mission**" and our responsibility for the whole mission of the Church.

Meanwhile back in Tarija, Gilberto and Javier continued our programmed visits to the CEBs throughout the diocese and collaborated with the Jesuit Foundation here known as "ACLO" with the development of a project to supply water to the Mokomokal Community whose water system was destroyed in the flood. Humbly we can claim that our Marist Team was one of the first groups to respond in assistance in the immediate days following the February flood, as described in our June letter. Once we could get into the village, we were there, having brought a total of 5 pick-ups loaded with food and clothing collected from our various CEBs throughout the diocese. In turn, civil authorities from the 3 level of government (council, state and national) and much later, our religious authorities, arrived on the scene with the social medias, and made their declarations of immediate and forthcoming assistance. To date, nothing has transpired. The Community of Mokomokal tell us that we Marists and ACLO are the only ones who in fact accompany them and look for ways to rebuild their lives and village.

Our first priority is to provide immediately a water system that is permanent and well-constructed that involves construction of a 5-kilometre pipeline and storage tanks, bringing water from a village higher up in the valley. It is now more than 8 months since the village has been without its own water supply, relying on a tanker supplied by the local council

bringing water each month. This water is dirty, not fit for washing, let alone for human consumption. The villagers have started to get seriously sick.

In recent days, as a Marist Team we have met with the director and technical team of ACLO to agree on the stages and timetable of the project, as well as the way we collaborate as regards to the funding of the project. [As an ATTACHMENT to our letter, you will find a full outline and costing of the project in English, which Juan has translated.] As all the promises by the different authorities who visited the village following the flood have resulted in absolutely nothing, each of us together have pledged a certain amount to initiate immediately the project, with the commitment to see that the whole project is completed in the time-frame indicated. Being our friends over many years, you realize that our Community of Misioneros Maristas, Bolivia receives no salary or funding to maintain itself from the institutional Church and relies for its existence on the unsolicited and generous donations from our friends who believe in us and provide the financial support necessary for us to continue in our mission. From our own fund on hand, we have allocated an initial amount of some \$10,000US [present exchange rate being \$1 AU = 60 cents US] of a total contribution on our part of some \$14,000US. ACLO for its part will provide the logistics and financial aid from a non-government organization (Unidos). The villagers of Mokomokal will provide the labour. The total amount needed to finance the project is \$26,000US [Bolivianos 178,347.00]. The Water Project is the immediate priority for the rebuilding of the village.

Meanwhile the families are living, for the most part, out in the open on dirt floor and under corrugated iron roofing. The advancing summer temperatures expected to be 38°+. Yet to speak of mosquitos and the question of sanitation.

We 3 Marists [Gilberto, Javier and Juan] revisited the village on Monday of this week to animate the community and to give them news concerning the commencement of the project. Now it is for them to get organized and start work. They received us with such affection and joy. The Guarani People in the history of Bolivia have suffered great discrimination and neglect both by governments and the Church. In recent years as Marists, we have won their confidence and deep affection. Our dream is that by the end of the year, there is running and drinkable water in the village and in the New Year they can look to the question of proper housing and cultivation of their lands that presently remain idle.

As of the middle of November, as a Marist Community and Team we have our annual evaluation and planning sessions, along with our retreat to inaugurate our new year of Marist Life and Mission as of the 1st Sunday of Advent. In recent times, we have undertaken a period of discernment as to our future here and how we see ourselves in continuing our specific mission in the light of the changes in the diocese brought about by the incoming bishop that will affect us. It is time then to make certain decisions and engage on a path that is productive and guarantees a certain autonomy for us in our Marist life and mission.

To end, we share with you something of the joy of our visit to our former mission of Palma Flor in the Amazon Region of Bolivia that we undertook in the last week of September. Gilberto with wife Arminda, Javier with wife Nair and Juan took off in our 4x4 Ford Ranger double Cabin Pick-Up from Tarija - a round-trip of some 4,000 kilometres and 3 days each way. We had 6 days there among our friends and extended family during the local feast of the village. Arminda and Nair who are cousins grew up there, married there and there were born our first 3 boys. A great and joyful time was had by all. We remain in a very special way part of the village community. The only negative of our visit was that we did not catch any fish!

Know, as always, that you are all very dear to us as loyal friends and in our prayers. Keep in touch and if you should wish to contribute to Project as presented, then let us know.

With all our love:

Gilberto/Arminda/Juan José/Chiqui, Paula & John/Marian -Javier/Nair/Lupo/Paco -Juan