



MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA
CEMFRAT –CENTRO MARISTA “FRATELLI TUTTI”

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Dear Friends,

In these days here at our Marist Mission in Bolivia we are trying to bring closure to our activities for the current Church Year. As is our custom, we start the new year of Life and Mission Marista with the start of the season of Advent.

For this present Circular Letter each of us will share with you. We start with Gilberto.

It is very invigorating to share with you about our life and also our mission in this last period of the present year. As a Marist family, we are aware that we are older, our strength is less strong, our hair is already changing colour to white, our bodies tend to stoop. Physically we are showing our age. But we have the grace that our spirit remains the same, our commitment remains intact. God and we are well united.

From our origins as Marist Missionaries, we continue in fidelity with our moments of prayer, in coexistence as a Marist Community celebrating life together. The children in our community, some already professionals, others about to finish and our little girl, Marian, who is 10 years old in primary school. Our younger son, Chiqui, who is to finish his studies in physiotherapy in the university in Sucre and do his practice next year has brought so much joy into our community as his wife Paola and son Little John are added members. We are 12 in all.

In all this time of Marist life that is 34 years, each one of us has given time, effort, dedication and heart to forge, build, nourish and energize a life inspired by Mary of Nazareth. An exceptionally beautiful adventure. However, at this time, we are looking for ways to generate income and continue enjoying community life. To date, this year at our rural retreat [Refugio Yanacachi] we have put in a vegetable garden and cultivated our orchard of peaches, plums and apples. All for our own consumption. Heavy frosts in mid-year caused a lot of damage.

At this time, our missionary action is lesser locally, somewhat due to changes in the diocese that occurred when our former bishop retired some 4 years ago. However, we remain deeply involved at different levels. Our weekly radio programme “Tejiendo Redes” first went to air on 19th November 2006. It is now in its 19th year! In our journey together we have come to follow a Jesus who is a friend, close, a companion and who makes history day by day with us. This spirituality has always been nourished by our 3 yearly 3-day Spiritual Retreats and our monthly Days in the Desert. Our recent 3rd and final retreat for 2024 had as its focus *“Some Lights in Order to Continue Our Life and Mission Together after 34 Years”*.

At this point in our letter we now wish to share with you two significant moments of our 3rd and last term of 2024 as a Marist Team. The first being that of the Workshop we gave at the beginning of October in a rural zone of the Archdiocese of Sucre. This Juan will share with you. The second that of our participation in the Latin American Encounter of CEBs and the Meeting of the Assessors from the participating 18 countries of the Americas. And Javier will share with you his reflection.

Over the years through our service to the CEBs [Base Church Communities] in different parts we have established a close friendship with Father Jaime who has promoted the process of the CEBs in the Archdiocese of Sucre. Some years ago Jaime established a multifunctional formation and training centre for leaders of the region. As of some 10 years ago we had been invited to give at the centre

ongoing courses in the context of CEBs. Subsequently as of six years ago with changes in the archdiocese, the responsibility for the centre was assumed by the archdiocese but to date the facilities remained unused and abandoned. Jaime in 2025 will celebrate 50 years of priesthood and due for retirement. With other priests of the region, he decided to get the centre up and going again and contacted us urging us to come and reinitiate the formation courses. Meanwhile he had to get the place in shape – a complete clean-up and through the local parishes sign up those present and future lay leaders to participate in the workshop that we had gladly accepted to conduct.

The question for us as the Marist Team was to propose the theme and content of the workshop. The three of us got to work and put together a workshop that we titled "*Artisans of the Kingdom – Agents of Change*" that consisted of 8 presentations using the method of See-Think/Judge -Act. The three of us [Gilberto, Javier and Juanito] rotated in the preparation and presentation. Some of the topics we touched upon "*Who are Christians in Today's Society? Exist Anonymous Christians?*", "*The Political Dimension of the Faith*" and "*Protagonists and Prophetism in Today's Church & Society*". We took as our point of reference the magnificent encyclical of Pope Francis "*Fratelli Tutti – We are all Brothers*" that is truly revolutionary. After Juan's presentations, Jaime commented that for someone in his 80th year they were given with such passion!

We set off from Tarija in our Ford Ranger "*El Cangurito*" at 5.00a.m and arrived at Tomina in the Department of Chuquisaca at 6.00p.m, stopping for lunch on the way and petrol fill-up at Betanza. (In Bolivia for the past 2 months we have a crisis with the importation of petrol and diesel and all the stations along the way were out of petrol. However fortunately we got petrol there so as to make it to Tomina). Jaime greeted us enthusiastically, had us refresh ourselves with a scotch and beer and we then had a cold shower and later supper with the local parish priest. Next morning, we received the 25 participants from some 4 parishes of the region. For us, the workshop was excellent and the participants asked that we return before long to give another.

One of the delightful and unplanned fruits of the workshop has been our friendship with the local diocesan clergy there. Jaime has been responsible for them to form a fraternity where they come together for a day to pray, relax and share a meal and find mutual support. They are relatively young priests. All of them have from 40 up to 150 rural villages to attend apart from their central church where they live alone. Jaime told us that several young priests in the archdiocese have left the ministry in recent years. With Jaime, six of them decided to plan a visit to Tarija after All Saints and asked if we could provide the hospitality. Well, it turned out to be a joyful and memorable occasion for all. They stayed 3 days with us. We accommodated them at our residence "*Casa Colir*" and Centro Marista "*Fratelli Tutti*" on our property in Barrio Lourdes. One night we had a Bolivian "BBQ" and another a Mexican Feast with tacos prepared by Juanito.

Javier now takes up our sharing with you reflecting on the days that we spent together in the Central American country of El Salvador.

"The Glory of God is that the poor live" (Saint Oscar Romero of the Americas- Bishop & Martyr)

The feast that we lived and celebrated from November 12 to 17 still resonates in my ears and vibrates in my heart. The Base Church Communities [CEBs] celebrated our XII Continental Encounter in the land of Saint Romero. El Salvador, that small country in Central America, through the Comunidades Eclesiales de Base, from its martyrial history and painful reality, opened its arms, welcomed us delegates, committed men and women, from 18 Latin American countries, to meet and continue weaving networks of life. It was a magnificent opportunity to value our articulation, to continue harboring hope, to feel accompanied, to know that we are not alone in this journey. In this event, at its different moments, we have witnessed the loving presence of God who is Community, of Jesus of the People and the restless and encouraging action of the Spirit, so that when we return to our territories, we may be the bearers of this Good News.

"When they went to the desert, what did they go to see?" (Mt 11,7-10) summoned by the theme "THE CEBS WALK TOGETHER FROM THE PERIPHERIES FOR THE LIBERATION OF THE PEOPLES" and animated by our motto "The CEBS walking and living together with hope".

The Base Church Communities, as the People of God in the peripheries, have witnessed and have been moved by the pain and violence of all kinds suffered by our peoples, victims of a system that destroys human life and in its desire for consumption is systematically destroying the life of our common home. But... not everything that happens to us is misfortune, good things also happen to us, they are those nutrients that feed our hope, which reminds us that our journey as CEBS is synodal, like the first Christian communities. Hope is born from the testimony and memory of martyrs, from experiences of liberation and the search for justice, from efforts to defend life; from the spirituality and capacity for living solidarity of communities and from joint work with other organizations and social movements.

"Plant the seed in the ground, it will not be in vain; don't worry about harvesting, plant for your brother" is the chorus of a song that encourages our journey. One of the many good news that has made us happy is the presence of young people of both sexes. Many of them were born in the CEBS, and through the living testimony of their parents, they are assuming their leading role. They are the new protagonists who are allowing the generational change and give us the conviction that the new seed has been planted. [Footnote: This song was composed by Javier and sung at various moments.]

After the Encounter, from the 18th to the 21st, the assessors from each of the 18 countries present met to evaluate and plan our journey for the next four years. In those days we have deepened our identity and evaluated the Strategic Plan that has been in implementation since 2021. At this meeting we have considered it appropriate to thank the first generation of patriarchs and matriarchs, among them my brother and partner in life and mission Juanito. From the beginning, they have been encouraging, promoting, resisting and risking their lives for the CEBS, just like so many passionate women and men on the continent. We affectionately call them *Wise Men* because they are the living memory of this beautiful way of being Church at the base. Juanito was one of the two members present who form what is called "The Council of Elders" having now served and promoted the CEBS throughout the Latin American Church for some 47 years. Thank you for so much, Juanito!

To continue the journey, the Encounter travels to different countries, we celebrate it every four years. In a good spirit, Mexico opened its arms to welcome the next Encounter to be held there in 2028, there, under the maternal lap of Mary our mother, in the invocation of the *Morenita de Tepeyac*, Mary of Guadalupe, we will continue to weave networks of life. We conclude with this quote: "Hope is only justified in those who walk." (Pedro Casaldáliga -Bishop and Prophetic Voice of the Brazilian Church.)

We carry each one of you in our hearts because you played and continue to play a very important role in building a life based on solidarity and sharing, and thus together we collaborate with Jesus in building from below the great project of the Father, which is the KINGDOM – the Reign of God among us.

In appreciation and with all our love:

Gilberto/Armindá/Juan José/Chiqui-Paola-Little John/ Marian -Javier/Nair/Lupo/Paco -Juan

[Below you will see photos of some of the moments we have shared in this letter.]



1. Marist Team with Padre Jaime overlooking township of Tomina where they gave Workshop to Lay Leaders of the Region
2. Marist Team[Gilberto/Juan/Javier] participating in Continental CEBs Encounter in El Salvador-[November 2024]
3. The 200 participants from 18 countries of the Americas at CEBs Encounter [Juan along side of the Bolivian flag]
4. Marist Team along side of the tomb of San Oscar Romero in the Cathedral of San Salvador
5. Juan beside the altar where Bishop Romero was slain on 25th March 1980 during the Civil War in El Salvador
6. Javier presents 5 of the Patriarchs of the Base Church Communities [Juan with 47 years of service & accompaniment]