



CEMFRAT –CENTRO MARISTA “FRATELLI TUTTI”

Calle 11 de Febrero S/n, Barrio Lourdes, Tarija, Bolivia

Email: cemfrat1990@outlook.com

Cel: 591-67370859/72950692/65813351



July 23rd, 2024...208th Anniversary of the Marist Project

Dear Friends,

Today is a very special day for all those who bear the name of “*Marist*” for it was on this day in 1816 in the Basilica of Fourviere, France 12 newly ordained priests signed a pledge that resulted in the foundation of the Marist Project. Last evening, we three members of the Marist Team [Gilberto, Javier & Juan], known here in Bolivia as “*Los Misioneros Maristas*”, arrived back home in Tarija at our “*Casa Colin*” after an 8-day return visit to our first mission here in Bolivia, known as “*Misión San Pablo*”. It is nearly some 30 years since we left San Pablo to go on to found our second mission in the Amazonia Boliviana and to which Juan had briefly made a return visit in February of this year. Fittingly, today as a Marist Community we have celebrated this anniversary and shared our experiences and memories of then and now with Eucharist and Fiesta. [Later in our present letter, we will share more about our visit.]

Now home in Tarija we are finishing our 2nd term of the current year with our customary 3-day retreat and 2 days of evaluation and planning. Our Lenten Retreat had as its theme “*We are Mission*” in light of our having entered into a new stage of our missionary journey together known as “*Nuestro Nuevo Rumbo – Our New Horizon*”. Our upcoming retreat next week will focus on then and now having just touched base with our beginnings as Misioneros Maristas here in Bolivia with our mission of San Pablo. Our inaugural 15-day retreat in the Andean Mountain village of Yanacachi concluded with the signing of our intent to be the community and team of “*Misioneros Maristas, Bolivia*” on November 22nd, 1990. So we have decided that our present retreat retake the content of that initial retreat.... looking back at our origins so as to lance us into our “*Nuevo Rumbo*”.

Our 2^d term of the current year that commenced with Easter seems to have flown more than previous terms of 4-months. During those months we have endeavoured to visit the homes of the animators of our CEBs [Base Church Communities]. Although we are no longer the diocesan accessors and formators of the CEBs, we still accompany the process and is cause for joy to know that they have remained faithful to their commitment in spite of the fact that the new bishop failed in replacing us in that capacity since our resignation at the end of 2022. With our “*Nuevo Rumbo*” project and our being more free in our missionary endeavours through the creation of “CEMFRAT”, we are able to better realize our continuing mission today as a Marist Team whose charism is summed up in the 4 Spanish verbs - *Acoger, Escuchar, Acompañar y Celebrar* [Welcome, Listen, Accompany & Celebrate]. Our visits to our animators and their families has been a very moving experience. Truly the Marists are part of their lives and this in turn is a source of great joy for us. The Guarani Indigenous Community of Mokomokal whose village was wiped out in the February flood of 2022 honoured us on our recent visit there to finalized the water project that we helped to fund and supervise along with the Jesuit Foundation [ACLO]. The Bolivian Church in the past has greatly neglected the Guarani People and in our years in the Tarija region we have won their hearts and close friendship. Another significant moment in this 2nd term was the spiritual retreat we conducted for the animators whom we accompany. Following our own reflection of our Marist Lenten Retreat whose theme was “*We are Mission*”, we retook the same theme for them. Some 17 animators from different communities participated. A truly grace-filled occasion!

Our weekly radio programme continues to be a very important part of our mission. We began this ministry of *evangelization* and *concientización* (raising the level of consciousness of a people- back in December 2006 at the invitation of Radio ACLO Tarija whose range is Southern Bolivia y Far Northern Argentina (part of the Jesuit Foundation). It is now in its 17th year and hence it is true to say that we have conducted and produced nearly 900 weekly half-hour programmes. As of 2022, one of the local popular FM stations -*Pachamama* -asked if they too could air our programme. More recently, Radio ACLO Tarija has us do 2-minute spots on specific themes that are related to current events... (For example: to comment on the failed military coup of June 26th.)

As mentioned above, we wish, at the pen of Javier, to share with you the significance of our recent return to our first mission, that of San Pablo.

Walking anew the path we have previously travelled, nourishes our memory, gives optimism to the unknown.

"Every now and then, it is always healthy to walk anew the path we have previously travelled", thus say the wise men and elders of the indigenous peoples. For it is in this way we keep our memory alive. For the followers of Jesus, keeping the memory alive is of vital importance, because it defines their identity, in this way nourishing the link with the source where this life project originates.

In that spirit, as Marist Missionaries (Juan, Gilberto and Javier) from July 11 to July 22 of this year we made a long-awaited trip to our 1st Mission "*San Pablo*". Encouraged by our grateful memory, we have returned to that place after thirty years (1994 - 2024). There we began our missionary adventure; there we have experienced with such clarity the different features of the face of God in the presence of so many men and women who came from different places in our country in search of finding a new home and building a future for their families.

In a happy coincidence, we arrived home on the eve of Fourviere. Walking those roads again, meeting those people, was an opportunity to renew our Marist spirit, our missionary mysticism. Charged with all that energy, on the 23rd, with simplicity and joy, we celebrated the Eucharist, commemorating the event of Fourviere in deep harmony with the spirit of the founders, in the hope of continuing to welcome, listen to, and accompany our brothers and sisters from the different communities.

Returning to the place where we live the mission in all its radicality, living an insertion without expecting concrete results, literally getting into the mud, to the point of feeling the lump in our throats and our guts moving in the face of such a challenging and questioning reality, conjugating with those men and their families the verb to hope and feel that the God of Life is with them; It was certainly an opportunity to look back at the path we have taken, to realize what we have achieved during those years of great dedication and missionary fervour. It fills us with a healthy joy, renews our strength and perhaps gives us a new perspective on the reality of the Church.

At this stage of our lives, the years have passed, our strength has diminished and perhaps our bodies no longer respond as they did in those years. In the spirit of "*Ignoti et quasi oculi -Hidden and as if unknown*", we consider ourselves privileged to have travelled this path alongside those men and women, grateful for Mary as the companion of our Life and Mission.

By way of conclusion to this sharing with you, our dear friends in different places who have travelled with us in this adventure that we call "*Misioneros Maristas, Bolivia*"

One of the *extras* to our recent visit to San Pablo was the opportunity to first visit the families of Gilberto and Javier who live in the Sud Yungas. From the Friday through to the Monday, Gilberto was able to spend time with his dad, Felix in the mountain village of Yabalo. At the same time there he encountered his sisters Dora and Maria and their families. For his part, Javier spent that time in the provincial town of Chulumani with his sister Benita and her family. Juan spent the first two nights with Gilberto's family and the second two with Javier's family. A magnificent reunion in all and we all spent the day Saturday together in Irupana at a local festival where Gilberto and Javier did their secondary studies together.

Below you will find some photos that tell something of the story of our days in San Pablo then and now. Thanks to Gilberto who has used his talents as a communication technician. We hope you enjoy them also. As is said: "*Behind every photo there is a story!*"

Until our next sharing. With all our love:

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



1a: Gilberto, Javier & Juan-Beginning of San Pablo Mission 1991



1b: Javier, Juan & Gilberto-on return visit to San Pablo Mission-Julio 2024



2a: Juan & Javier at end of road in Cotapata with their few belongings in wheelbarrow setting off to where they will build the mission -it is a 6kms walk along a narrow path parallel to the Boopi River



2b: Gilberto & Juan on July 2024 visits stop their 2011 Ford Ranger "El Cangurito" in Puerto Aroma village and meet up with 2 of the animators -lay ministers [Silverio& Juan] who they formed at the mission some 33 years ago



3a: The San Pablo Mission House & Formation Centre constructed entirely by the 3 Marists...nestled in the jungle with the Boopi River in the background



3b: On July 2024 visit, Javier, Juan & Gilberto find what remains of their mission house -[a burnt out pillar in what is now a coca plantation



4a: Back in the 90s we crossed the fast-flowing Boopi to visit the 8 villages on the other side using various means- raft, dugout canoe, flying fox, and swimming. In the same river we bathed and washed our clothes



4b: On July 2024 visit Javier & Juan take to the water recording past experiences



5a: Juan gets to the other side pulling on the flying fox.



5b: But now in July 2024 Javier, Juan & Gilberto cross at the same point on new hanging bridge



6a: Marist Team [Juan & Gilberto in photo] conduct a regular formation course at the mission for the animators [lay minister] of the 15 surrounding villages



6b: On July 2024 visit the Marist Team [Juan & Javier in photo] visit the now most senior of the animators [Don Felix] at his home in Nogalani



7a: During our 5 years at San Pablo Mission in the various villages we had communal celebration of the Sacraments. Present photo shows Juan with David from San Felipe village and Justina from Santa Teresita village whom he baptized there.



7b: On July 2024 visit Gilberto, Juan & Javier visit the home of Gonzalo & Leonarda -one of the original animators- whose marriage Juan celebrated in 1993 there in Nogalani.