



MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA

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Easter 2022

Dear Friends,

Once again, Christians throughout the world are celebrating the central mystery of their faith –the Paschal Mystery. This year in our preparation of this feast, Pope Francis in his message exhorted us *"not to tire ourselves in doing good"*. Quoting St. Paul, he urges us that while we have the opportunity we should do good to all. And in this spirit, Francis tells us to practice this call to do good to all, taking time to love the very least and indefensible of this world, those abandoned and despised, those discriminated and marginalized. If we do not tire in doing this, then in due time we will reap an abundant harvest. Using the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Francis calls us to become neighbour with those sisters and brothers who are wounded along the path of life. In addition, Francis composed a list of some 15 simple acts that we could undertake instead of Friday abstinence from meat. Here is a sample of those simple acts that Francis has proposed: *Greet others with a smile—always and in every place; listen to the other's story –without prejudice, with love; stop to give help –being attentive to those with necessity; lift up someone's spirit –help others to overcome obstacles; select what you do not use –and give it to those in need; remember to tell the other how much you love him/her –and celebrate his/her qualities and successes.* What a different world we would know today if we abided by the wisdom of Pope Francis! Indeed, *"another world is possible"*. As we celebrate this Easter Season, we know that Jesus has been victorious, triumphed over the evil in this world and the Kingdom of the Father [His Reign] is here among us today *"on our earth as it is in heaven"* –as we pray in the *"Our Father"*.

Here in Tarija, slowly we are adapting to a new "normality". As of March, classes in the schools and universities are given on site after some 2 years of virtual teaching; that meant that many students lost two years given they did not have access to the internet. Many citizens now get around without wearing the proscribed mask, although it is still obligatory here. The football stadiums are full and the entertainment venues are again open. However, as in other parts, while the churches are opened, attendance is still low. Will they gradually come back? One would like to be optimistic.

For our part as the Marist Missionary Team, we have re-commenced our visits to the Base Church Communities throughout the diocese. Before the pandemic, we were accompanying each of the 17 communities in their meetings once every two months. Already during February and March, we have connected with the majority of these communities and with a pleasing result. In each, we have received an embracing reception; the members so happy to have us there with them anew and we ourselves so happy to renew our presence among them. Meanwhile, the three of us [Gilberto, Javier and Juan] have conducted, to start our pastoral year together, a contemplative retreat for our CEBs Animators. A truly wonderful experience with 25 participants with the central theme being *"Do Whatever He Tells You"*. Our first venture post-pandemic outside our Tarija Diocese with the CEBs on the national level will be a Workshop on the identity of the Base Church Communities to the CEBs of the Archdiocese of Sucre. Sucre is some 8 hours' drive from Tarija.

One of our present pastoral priorities is the formation of our youth. As of February, we have resumed our monthly coming together as a team with a mature group of young people who have been associated over the years with the CEBs that we have helped to form in the diocese. So we meet here at our Marist Centre [*CEMPAC- Marist Centre for the Promotion & Articulation of Communities*] in Tarija on the last Saturday of each month. Presently they number 15. Our hope is that they bond together as a group of friends among themselves and in their communities become protagonists and leaders. To date, the process has been very encouraging and effective.

At the same time as there were floods in March in Australia [parts of Queensland and New South Wales], we had devastating floods here in our region of Bolivia. Six indigenous villages of the Guarani People were the most affected. One village literally disappeared –swept away with nothing left. Downstream is the village of Mokomokal where we accompany a CEBs. It partially disappeared –with loss of life, houses, and buildings where the community meet. All this happened at night without warning and the people had to run in the dark to higher ground, gathering up their loved ones and what they could still pick up in their arms. A tragedy beyond comparison. The flooding left the zone without water, electricity and accessibility by vehicle. It took three days before one could get into the village by driving; Civil Defence had to clear so much mud and debris with heavy machinery. Upon hearing of the disaster, we Marists mobilized our CEBs throughout the diocese in a campaign essentially of food and clothing. For three days we traversed the countryside [knocking up some 600kms on our Ford Ranger] collecting the donations collected in the various communities. The response from our CEBs was swift and overwhelming. Our brothers and sisters from the Evangelical Churches collaborate with them in a true spirit of ecumenism. So on Ash Wednesday [March 2nd] we set off from Tarija at 5 a.m. in two packed -to -the- brim Ford Ranger 4x4 pickups to accompany the communities of Mokomokal and Tomatirenda. Previously we had been able to communicate with the CEBs Animators to advise them of our visit. They requested that upon arrival we celebrate the Eucharist for those who lost their lives. When we arrived there at 9.30 a.m., the stream was still partially risen and so even with 4x4, it was not possible to cross. We stationed the two vehicles that had made it through the territory with difficulty alongside the stream. The whole community [the elders, the parents, the youth and the little ones came running, crossed the stream one way or other and met us with hugs and just so much affection. Seeing them and what was left of their village, brought tears to our eyes. The devastation was beyond belief if one was not there to see it. While it was evident that the community was still in shock, all got into the act of unloading the pickups and taking the merchandise across the stream and storing it in a shelter on higher ground. Juan stripped down, put on his shorts and helped across. Quite a sight and to amusement of all! The hidden cameras have captured the scene for posterity!

What an amazing people and community! Once on the other side, the leaders prepared a table in the open and had us sit down to a breakfast of herbal tea and bread. Meanwhile the young men folk set about clearing a spot under two still standing trees where we would celebrate the Eucharist. And this Eucharist proved to be one of the most moving, beautiful and participating in all our experience. As it was Ash Wednesday we blessed and imposed the ashes; the imposition conducted by the CEBs Animators of the community. We spent the rest of the morning sitting with the community and listening to their story. Then we went throughout the whole village viewing the remains and stopping to bless where once was someone's home and where was swept away in the dark a loved one, only to be found buried in the mud some 8 days later downstream. Meanwhile, the women folk had set to work outside with open fire to cook up a luncheon for the whole village. We returned later in the afternoon to Tarija, having made an accord with the community that we would make a return visit on Friday March 18th.

As arranged, we the Marist Team returned to Mokomokal. On this occasion, we also arrived in the two pickups loaded with more food, utensils and clothing that had since been collected from our CEBs. On arrival, we discovered that the authorities who had arrived in the days following the flooding and made promises regarding immediate relief and reconstruction had not returned and what relief had been forthcoming, none of it had reached their community. Meanwhile the community had tried best they could to make the village more habitable, although most of the rubble needed to be removed by heavy equipment that still had not been provided. However, the youth having worked hard were able to clear their dirt soccer field so as to have a minimum of diversion before the end of the day. Juan sat down with them and heard their story concerning how they had lost all their gear and would be unable to front on for the time being in the local competition. To lift their spirits and knowing how healthy it is for the young to dedicate time to sport, he told them he could look into how we Marists might be able to get them set up.

Upon return to Tarija, we checked out the local sporting goods stores and the end result was that we had manufactured a complete soccer outfit for each of the 12 players –jersey, shorts, socks and boots –all specially designed in the team colours, with logo and name of their club and village. Without a doubt, when they take the field in the coming tournament, they will be the finest looking team. For us, it was a moment of great joy when we were able to present the team with their complete outfit –soccer ball included.

The weekend before the start of Holy Week, we had scheduled a visit to the CEBs of Yukumbia –a Guaraní community belonging to the same district and an hour by road from Mokomokal. It was in this community that one of those who lost her life in Mokomokal had family. As a gesture of solidarity, the entire community of Mokomokal set off at dawn to be there with us and the family for a Eucharist celebrated in the local cemetery where Zulma had been buried. Once again, it was a Eucharist to be remembered. Afterwards the family invited all back to their home; we were over 100 present. The fattened calf had been prepared and all were served a delicious luncheon as we sat outside in a circle on the dirt patio. It was a scene that reminded us of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes there with Jesus, his disciples and the crowd of 500 on the plain.

In the midst of all these memorable happenings, we have lived out our life as a mixed Marist Community. Three of our four boys have left home here in Tarija to continue their university studies now that classes on site have been resumed; Paco in La Paz, Lupo in Sucre, Juan José in Córdoba, Argentina and Chiqui here in Tarija. The mums and dads were sad to see them leave home after their having been with us for the past two years due to the pandemic. Marian, our “princess”, has also resumed classes here at the Franciscan Sisters’ school; she is in 2nd Year of Primary, and in addition, takes classes in folk ballet.

As is our tradition, Gilberto, Javier and Juan made our Contemplative Lenten Retreat there at our Marist Retreat House in Pantipampa at the end of March. We took as its central focus the main themes found in the latest Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis entitled “*Fratelli Tutti*” about fraternity and social friendship. We gave our retreat the following title: “*Alrededor del Fuego de Fratelli Tutti-Contemplando Nuevos Rumbos – Around the Fire of Fratelli Tutti: Contemplating New Directions*”. We believe that the Spirit was at work in us. Earlier as a Marist Community and Team, we had spent some days composing a new document to give us direction for the coming years. We called it “*Realizing the Marist Project: We go where the rest do not go*”. As ATTACHMENT to this letter, you will find the English translation of our document.

Conscious of our advancing years, we do our best to keep healthy and active. However we remind ourselves that we are no longer the “*changos*” we were when we started off on this adventure some 31 years ago. The solidarity, friendship and encouragement from you our dear friends keeps us going with that same fire that was there when we set off. Know that we value all this and keep you present in our daily community prayer.

May you now experience the JOY of the Resurrection as we celebrate this Easter Season.

With all our love:

Gilberto, Arminda, Juan José, Chiqui, Marian – Javier, Nair, Lupo, Paco – Juan

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On the following page, we have posted some photos that are related to some of the recent happenings that we have referred to in this letter.

1. Marist Team [Gilberto, Javier & Juan] with Youth Group of CEBs



2. Recollection of Donations for Flood Victims: Marist Missionary Gilberto with La Merced CEBs



3. Unloading of Donations upon arrival at Guarani Community of Mokomokal



4. Eucharist in Mokomokal for the Victims of the Flood



5. The CEBs of Yukumbia & Mokomokal together celebrate Eucharist at Zulma's grave



6. Dusk as experienced from the veranda of our Marist Retreat House "Yanacachi" in the midst of the Andean Mountains





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REALIZING THE MARIST PROJECT

-**"WE GO WHERE OTHERS DON'T GO"**- [Jean Claude Colin]

REFERENTIAL FRAMEWORK: Our Mission and Marist charism

-Presence (Like Mary at Cana and at the foot of the Cross)

-Action (Healing, welcoming and embracing like Jesus in his ministry *'Doing good'*)

TOWARDS A NEW DIRECTION

This presence and action promote the Mysticism, Spirituality and Synodality that characterize the church model that we want to build in the following scenarios

SCENARIOS

1. - Existing CEBs [Base Church Communities]
2. - Youth- protagonists for life
3. - New opportunities
4. - Social organizations and popular movements
5. - Weaving Networks

CONCRETE ACTIONS

1st SCENARIO - CEBs on the move

1. - Scheduled visits
2. - A spiritual retreat and a workshop for animators
3. - Zonal/diocesan meetings of CEBs
4. - Scheduled meetings of animators
5. - Animation team meeting
6. - Days of insertion into specific communities

2nd SCENARIO – Youth- protagonists for life

1. - Monthly meeting
2. - Identify and invite new participants
3. - Because of the bonds of friendship, in some communities, we invite young people to enter the round
4. - Two general gatherings during the year

3rd SCENARIO - New opportunities

1. - Visits to homes in peri-urban neighborhoods, to get in touch with their reality and listen to their hopes
2. - Resume contacts with parish priests who expressed their openness to the CEBs and cultivate a spirit of mutual collaboration

4th SCENARIO - Social organizations and popular movements

1. - Identify these existing departmental, national and international instances
2. - After discernment, initiate contact and rapprochement and define our bond.
3. - Participate in the dynamics of its activities and collaborate as appropriate.

5th SCENARIO - Weaving Networks

1. - Sit down with those responsible for Fundación ACLO and Radio Pachamama to confirm continuity
2. - According to our discernment and current contexts, develop content that corresponds to a process of evangelization and awareness.
3. - Develop content with positive approaches that awaken and cultivate hope, good spirits; flavoured with the Joy of the Gospel.
- 4.-Nourish the programs with experiences collected throughout our Marist life and mission

Period: 2022-2023