



MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA

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Dear Friends,

The pandemic continues to be one of the major topics as one moves around, whether one goes to the hairdresser, meets up with friends, or is waiting at the bus stop. We have come to learn that it is not going to be eradicated in the short term and therefore have to live with it. At the same time, it has challenged all of us and as a result we have made certain adjustments to our way of life and perhaps even to our system of values. We have arrived at the conclusion that we are never going to return to the old "normalcy". However, we must live in hope and be creative. One lesson that we learnt is that we all need each other and we must be more caring and attentive to the needs of all, especially to those most affected by this pandemic.

When we as a Marist missionary team and community spent a week last November to do our annual evaluation and planning, we were somewhat optimistic that as 2021 unfolded we would be out and running, doing our pastoral activities as we have been accustomed to do them in recent years. Reality has shown us that that has not been possible. As with many others, we have learnt to adapt, to be constructive and to be innovative. As we know well, the Social Medias can easily be abused and we can be enslaved to them, but at the same time, they can provide us with the capability of reaching out to others and to be a powerful means of communication and education. We have learnt "to work and study from home". In our case, we too have gone "virtual" as we realize many of our pastoral activities. However, in recent months we have gradually moved out from our base in Tarija City to our communities.

Due to an alarming increase in the number of new cases in the last week of May here in Tarija, we once again went into "lockdown". Consequently, we had to suspend the celebrations we had planned for Juan's Golden Jubilee of Priestly Ordination scheduled for May 27th. Instead, we however had a quiet Marist community celebration at home with Eucharist and a delicious meal of a whole lamb slow-cooked over red-hot coals Tarijan-style. In spite of the restrictions in place, we had a wonderful family celebration helped along by our local red wines that our now considered world-class.

One of our dreams in recent years had been to visit together as community our former mission of Palma Flor in the Amazonian Region of Bolivia. It was here that Gilberto and Javier married and were born the first of our three boys [Juan Jose, Gilbertito and Jose



Guadalupe]. Our last visit was some six years ago and our intention had been to spend some time there during the mid-year university break in 2020; but this was not possible due to the restrictions in place at the time. Fortunately by July of this year we got the green light to travel and so we headed off in the second week of July from Tarija in our Ford Ranger 4x4 to Palma Flor.....a round-trip of some 3500kms and more than half was over non-paved roads that were in extremely poor conditions given the summer rains in previous months. Each way it took us three days, stopping only to rest at night along the way. What an adventure

and one of sheer joy! We arrived in the village around 6 pm on the third day of travel to a grand welcome by the local community, many of whom are in fact relatives of the wives of Gilberto and Javier and cousins and uncles and aunts to our four boys and Marian. We spent

some eight days there just enjoying being and sharing so much together. We left the Palma Flor Mission that we had established some 22 years ago and now upon greeting Juan said: "*Juanito, no has cambiado nada en todos estos años, igualito*"—"Juan, you have not changed at all in all these years". On a few occasions, the men took off both at night and during the day to fish in the local rivers. The main catch were piranhas that we fried and had as supper. Along the banks of the river, photos were taken alongside of crocodiles and anacondas! This is another world and was our world for the five years we lived there previously.

One aspect of our visit that filled us with delight was the fact that the community continues to come together each Sunday for the Celebration of the Word. When we handed over the mission to the Vicariate in 1999 after having set in place that model of being Church that we know as Base Church Communities with their own lay ministers, the mobile rural team of the Pando Vicariate assumed pastoral responsibility and would make up to two visits a year, mostly for the purpose of providing the Sacraments. However, our bishop retired and it seems there has been a gradual run-down as regards to the pastoral care of such outlying villages as is the case with the Palma Flor Mission. Our people have remained faithful as we discovered. At 6.30am each Sunday the bell is tolled and at 7am the Celebration of the Word commences with Amador as the Delegate of the Word and shared responsibilities throughout the celebration. On the Sunday that we were there, the community requested that there be a Eucharist with Juan as the presider. What a Eucharist! What a shared reflexion on the Gospel Reading! This is a Church that is People and a People that is Church, as we proudly acclaim. When we lived there among them, it was the custom that the families would rotate in preparing the chapel each Saturday afternoon. And while there now on visit we heard much activity there in the chapel and to our surprise, there they were cleaning and arranging the chapel for the Sunday celebration. The truth is that such fidelity is rarely found here. In recent weeks, we have spoken by WhatsApp to Bishop Luis Casey who was our bishop at the time and now in retirement in his homeland of St. Louis, USA, and being cared for in a place provided by the archdiocese where he is being treated for cancer. We recounted to Luis our visit to the Palma Flor Mission and it was evident his delight in hearing all that we experienced on our recent visit.



all. Of course, our people wanted to know when we would be returning to visit with them. Hopefully we do not have to wait another six years.

Another very moving experience for us in these weeks has been our visit to the Guarani Indigenous community of Yukumbia in our present Diocese of Tarija. It has to be said that the Catholic Church over all these years has neglected and not accompanied our indigenous communities and not reached out to them in respecting their customs and structures. For the past seven years, we as a Marist Team have reached out to them and little by little have won their confidence and affection to the point where today they welcome with such joy our visit and shower on us their friendship and affection. On Sunday August 15th the community celebrated the 28th anniversary

For our final evening there at Palma Flor, the community put on a farewell fiesta for us. Each family came with a plate and drinks for supper. Tarija is the wine-growing area of Bolivia and in recent times has won several gold and silver medals at different international wine festivals, on occasions outdoing the French, Argentinians, Chileans and even Australians. From Tarija we had brought three cases of our reds that we were able to share with them. Such wines do not reach this part of the world! A great night was had by



of its organization as an indigenous community. The day commenced with a Celebration of the Eucharist around the tomb of the founder and chief of their organization –Don Jeromo. For us, it was a 7-hour round-trip and some 500 kms. As we arrived on the scene, we were greeted with smiles and very warm hugs and kisses. Several of the older women were dressed in their traditional costumes, and although some still do not communicate well in Spanish, when we visit they are always present and very attentive. The children and youth are so much at home with us. Humbly we believe that it because of our Marist Spirit of simplicity and the way we minister that we have won their hearts.

One moment of the official programme of the day that deeply impressed us was the presentation of the history of their organization by Martin. Martin is the nurse at the community health clinic, an animator of the community and a relative of Don Jeromo. He commenced by reminding those assembled of the importance of guarding the memory, of recounting their history and at each anniversary the younger generation know of those who have gone before them, in service of the community and have struggled for their advancement. Such wisdom! One recalls here the Old Testament injunction to guard the memory.

Due to the pandemic with the restrictions in place, we have not been able to move around and visit our CEBs communities in different parts of the diocese over the past 18 months. Nevertheless, we have been able to maintain contact, especially with their animators and our radio programmes. With the easing of some of the restrictions, during May, June and July we have visited the homes of the majority of our animators without calling together the whole community to a meeting. We have enjoyed just being there for the day with the animator and his/her family, with simplicity chatting about has been happening and sharing a meal and their hospitality. Indeed, a beautiful and joyful experience.

The radio has been a blessing for us in our ministry. Since the Jesuit Network some 12 years ago invited us as the Marist Team to produce and conduct a 30-minute programme to be aired each Sunday, we have been faithful in the undertaking and have now had over 600 programmes go to air. Last month we were approached by one of the popular radios here in Tarija called Radio Pachamama whose audience is those who live in the surrounding barrios, those who work in the local markets, those who drive and ride in public transport, those who work on construction sites or in the surrounding fields outside of the city. They asked if they could air our programme of "Tejiendo Redes" also. We have accepted, knowing that their general audience is somewhat distinct and we will have to adapt the content and form to that audience. So the preparation of the radio programme keeps us busy here at the office during the week.

When our new bishop took over the reins of the diocese at the beginning of last year, in his first meeting with us and without really knowing us but listening to the group he had gathered around him, he told us that we did not seem to do much here in the diocese and implied that we were doing our own thing. Where were we visible in the activities of the diocese? Our former bishop in retirement has returned to his native Spain and always expressed his appreciation and pleasure for our ministry with the Base Church Communities....We enjoyed a deep friendship and mutual respect. The changing of the guard, as they say, has presented us with new challenges as we go about "doing Mary's work –hidden as if unknown in the world" as our Marist founder would say.

With our present pastoral plan, we have taken on two new initiatives. Having accompanied many communities over the past 22 years in the Tarija Diocese, we have come to know several members who have the capacity to be protagonists and leaders both in the church and in society. Some of the young folk from these communities are now at university or young professionals while others remain in their rural communities. During the year, we approached those whom we had considered to form a small group that would meet together on a regular basis to strengthen the friendship among them and to reflect upon different themes as part of their formation. The twelve of them now meet at our Marist Centre on the last Saturday of each

month and the response is very positive. In a similar way and with the same proposal, we are in the process of forming a small group of animators from the CEBs throughout the diocese.

Over the past year, we as a Marist Team have dedicated a good part of our attention to our service as members of the Latin American Articulation of Comunidades Eclesiales de Base-CEBs [Base Church Communities]. We have a ZOOM Meeting from 7pm through to 9.30pm every second Tuesday in which some 30 of us participate from the various countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. It has been a wonderful and enriching experience as together we endeavour to promote and renew this model of being Church throughout the continent. As part of that sector of the Catholic Church that seeks today a transformation in the life and mission of the Church, we are thankful to the support of Pope Francis who tirelessly denounces the ravages of the neoliberal system, promotes popular movements as major agents of change in government structures and the economy. The 2019 Synod on the Amazon and the papal Letter "Dear Amazon" promote the integral development of this immense region from the Indigenous people themselves and the defence and promotion of nature. The Churches of the 9 countries that participate in the Amazon Basin at the instigation of Pope Francis, have organized themselves in a common Ecclesial Conference, to coordinate their pastoral and social activities. The Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), based in Bogotá, has been renewed and is resolutely supporting the options of Pope Francis. For November this year, the Pope Francis has summoned the Catholic Church to a new meeting: An "Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean". The novelty is the participation of all the baptized and not only the clergy (bishops, priests and deacons) both in the preparation and in the realization of said Assembly. The first Ecclesial Assembly is repeated in the times of the first Christian Communities, as the biblical book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us. In this way, the dynamics of the times of the Second Vatican Council in the 60s of the last century are resumed, as Pope Francis proclaimed on the day of his elevation to the papacy: "*I want a poor Church at the service of the poor.*" ... Confirming the ecclesial spaces and movements that we always work in the line of liberation theology and the spirituality and pastoral praxis of liberation. So in recent months we have been very actively involved in the preparation of this Church Assembly that will have grand implication not only for the Latin American Church but also for the Universal Church. The first phase of preparation, called the "*Escucha*" has just concluded where we have "*listened to*" the hopes, aspirations, clamors and cries from all sectors and those responses will now be processed and included in the working-paper for the Assembly. A just published survey in what was for centuries considered as Catholic Spain has revealed that today 4 out of every 10 Spaniards proclaim to be atheists or with no religious affiliation.

Perhaps our new bishop here in Tarija is right when he has told us that we Marists do not seem to do much and not all that visible in the activities of the diocese. As a consecrated Marist community, we try to give witness through our presence and insertion among the people of an alternative way of being Church today and can be somewhat unsettling for others.

We are forever grateful to our dear friends in different parts who stand in solidarity with us and who support us with their encouragement, prayers and sharing. In spite of the economic insecurity, that has been a factor in our 31 years of living and serving together, the Lord has blessed us with such beautiful friends who have placed their trust in us. Today with the 10 of us who form our Marist Community our daily needs have increased considerably and our resources continue to be diminished. However, in our discernment together, we are firm in our decision to follow through in our commitment to our people and the Church, and as one of our dear priest friend keeps reminding us: "*If God wants it, it will happen*".

Know that all of you are present to us in our daily Morning Prayer of the Church. Gracias for letting us share with you once again something of our faith-journey.

With all our Love:

Gilberto/Arminda/Juan José/ Chiqui/Marian -Javier/Nair/Lupo/Paco-Juan

