

*PALMA FLOR
AND
BEYOND*



*-THE GOSPEL PROCLAIMED
AND LIVED TODAY
FROM BELOW-*

JOHN HOPKINSON

Dedicated

to the memory

of

the following prophetic bishops and pastors

*who imbued the spirit of the 2nd Vatican Council
and inspired and animated me*

in my missionary journey

- Arturo Lona: Bishop of Tehuantepec, México

- Adhemar Esquivel: Bishop of Tarija, Bolivia

- Luis Casey: Bishop of the Pando Vicariate, Bolivia

1 – TAKING FLIGHT

January 1st 2025 – a new year has been inaugurated and I am aware that this year will see me turn 80. For many, it is seen as a significant moment in one's life-journey. As planned, to mark this point that I have reached, January 2nd I set off from my home in Tarija, Bolivia with my good and close friend of many years, Alex on what could be described as an adventure tour – to discover new places and to retrace important moments in my life as a Marist Missionary. Alex has taught me to celebrate the life to which I have been blessed -to live and enjoy life to the full.

Together we spend the night in the capital, La Paz so as to take at dawn the flight to Quito, Ecuador. And so the adventure begins on arrival in Quito at midday of January 3rd.

Some 48 years ago, I had left my native Australia to be a Marist Missionary at the service of the Latin American Church, having left behind family, friends and my Australian Marist community – and my passion for rugby and surfing.

On May 5th 1977, I arrived in Mexico City to begin that missionary journey and immediately fell in love with all things Mexican. Accompanied by my Marist Mexican confreres, I served the following 11 years in two missions, that of San Mateo on the outskirts of Mexico City and later in the south, that of El Porvenir in the Diocese of Tehuantepec. It was during those years that my ministry consisted

principally in the promotion, formation and accompaniment of that model of being Church known as *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base -CEBs [Base Church Communities]*.

It had been my deep desire to live out my days there in Mexico. However, with great expectations after 11 years there and eligible for permanent residency, the Mexican authorities denied me such. They never offered a plausible explanation at that time. In hindsight, we suppose that the real reason was that I was a pastoral agent there in the Diocese of Tehuantepec that had a clear option for the poor and defence of the *campesinos* [peasant farmers], the 7 different indigenous people of the diocese and the university student movement that was being persecuted. Our bishop, Arturo Lona -a prophetic voice- himself survived 11 attempts on his life. We had our martyrs -lay and religious – and we all knew that we were under vigilance. In hindsight today, I accept that there were certain situations in my life at the time that required certain courage and audacity.

Having failed in my attempt for permanent residency, I eventually received reluctant permission from my Marist superiors to accept an invitation to serve the Bolivian Church, but I was to go as a lone Marist and on the understanding that the Society would be unable to see to my personal and ministerial needs while there.

2 – An Ecuadorean Detour

Others have written elsewhere of our Bolivian Journey of the past 36 years. So here we take up the story as from when Alex and I landed in Quito at midday of January 3rd of the current year.

From Quito airport we take the 45-minute bus ride to the bus terminal of Calderón where we board for Esmeraldas on the Ecuadorean Pacific Coast. It is a 7-hour ride. Ahead, we had booked for a week a beachfront apartment at Playa Azul. It is night-time when we finally occupy our apartment.

Next morning, we awake and look at the beautiful expanse of beach and the blue Pacific; reminding me of those of my native Australia. Together we share a marvellous week of beach and surf to celebrate the beginning of the year of my 80th. [Bolivia is land-locked and so there is no opportunity to relish the ocean.]

We return to Quito where we spend the next 3 nights. For my service to the Continental Articulation of the CEBs since 2004 where I have been the articulator for the Andean countries of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, I had visited Ecuador on 5 previous occasions for reunions, encounter, visits to the various communities throughout the country, conduct leadership formation for the national teams of the region and, in general, animating the various communities in

the process of CEBs. It was Alex's first time in Ecuador and he became engrossed in all that the Historic Centre of Quito has to offer, especially its magnificent churches whose interiors are often clothed in gold and their stained-glass windows. Such constructions are from colonial times.

Having arrived there at night on the Friday, we are accommodated in a nearby hostel. Next morning, we set off on foot to find breakfast and a bank there in the historic centre. Exiting the bank, and out onto the Mall, we hear a voice from behind calling out: "Juanito". We turn around and fall into the embrace of Marlene. Quito has a present population of some 1,600,000. It was hard to believe what I was really experiencing. The last time I had been with Marlene and had had contact with her would have to be at least 8 years. We had first met when I first visited Ecuador in my capacity as articulator for the Andean Region. At that time, Marlene was coordinator of the CEBs in Ecuador and helped me on my visits to the different CEBs throughout Ecuador. Marlene and her husband Carlos were members of the local CEBs of La Tola and I consequently became a dear friend of its members, especially with Doña Susanita and her family. [We were able now to catch up with Susanita who had recently had a bad fall and hospitalized. She was truly moved to be in contact anew with her "*Padre Juanito*".

On previous visits to Ecuador, Marlene had been my guide. Together we had organized the

diploma course there for the national CEBs teams of the 4 Andean countries. Together we had visited the CEBs of Sucumbio in the Ecuadorean Amazonian Region where I went to express the solidarity of the CEBs of the continent when the bishop and the CEBs there were being severely persecuted. It so happened that when I participated in the 12th Latin American CEBs Encounter in November 2024, one of the delegates of Ecuador was from Sucumbio and we were able to share much of what I had experienced with them during my visit and the lasting memories.]

I had had the good fortune of enjoying the hospitality of Marlene and Carlos earlier and there they came to know just how much I enjoy prawns. Now on reencountering with Marlene there in the Mall, she invites Alex and myself to their home on the Sunday evening for a feast of prawns. She is a professional chef and so we were honoured, knowing that we do not get prawns in Bolivia, being no access to the sea.

The next day, the Monday, Marlene and Carlos took us to the airport for our flight to La Paz. The Lord certainly works in mysterious ways!

Alex and I touchdown in La Paz at 3,45 a.m. on Tuesday January 14th. It is here that we separate on this memorable journey. As Alex is a lecturer in ethics and political science at the state university in Tarija, in the following weeks he will be required to assist in various reunions of the faculty and direction before the start of the

academic year. [Apart from his tenure at the university, he serves as a liturgical lay minister and always on call for funerals, blessings and various celebrations.]

3 – Revisiting Palma Flor

It had been my deep desire to revisit at this time our former Marist Mission of Palma Flor in the Pando Vicariate in the northern Amazonian Region of Bolivia that we left in 1999 to undertake our present mission of the Tarija Diocese in the far south and border with Argentina.

Alex and my companions in mission of some 35 years, Gilberto and Javier, are concerned that I travel there alone. However, I felt confident that I could achieve it, knowing too that it might be my last opportunity for such an adventure.

So Alex and I part our ways there in La Paz airport. I take a taxi to the terminal for all types of travel to the north of La Paz in Villa Fatima. It is now 5 a.m. and within 10 minutes acquire passage in a 6-passanger taxi to Caranavi some 4-hours' drive. The entire journey from La Paz to Palma Flor is some 750 kilometres. Arriving in Caranavi at 9 a.m., with luck I quickly get another taxi to Rurribanaque. I arrive there at 1 p.m. The first stretch of the highway is a complete disaster until Yucumo and the going is difficult and precarious.

In Rurribanaque there is awaiting a taxi to travel to Riberalta that will take 6 passengers, with stops in Santa Rosa, Palma Flor, and Australia along the way. With my arrival it requires 2 more passengers to complete the ride. We eventually leave at 3 p.m. and I safely arrive at 7.15 p.m. in Palma Flor. The community ahead of time had

prepared for my visit and swiftly I am picked up there on the highway at the entrance to Palma Flor village. With my backpack, I hop on the awaiting motorbike and brought to the home of Amador, our dear friend and principal animator of the community. I had safely arrived in record time. Deo gracias! [When we lived there at the mission, the journey from Rurribanaque could take from 2 days to 2 weeks. Last year the Chinese completed the new paved highway commissioned by the Bolivian government of the day.]

Well, what can I recount here that puts Palma Flor at centre? Gilberto, Javier and myself left our first mission of San Pablo in the jungle at the side of the Boopi River in early 1995, having accepted the invitation of the bishop of the Pando Vicariate to serve there in this hostile and abandoned region of Bolivia. Bishop Luis Casey [a native of St. Louis, USA] first had us visit a number of possible areas of the vicariate that were unattended pastorally and required the presence of missionaries to accompany and form the communities. As a result, together we discerned to establish what would become the Mission of Palma Flor -some 270 kilometres south of Riberalta, the seat of the vicariate. The new mission would be comprised of some 15 villages -the furthest to the south alongside of the Yata River and 100 kilometres from our base and the furthest to the north another 100 kilometres to the north, that of San Jorge. And so with no material or financial

resources the 3 Marists set about in the establishment of the Palma Flor Mission.

Our Marist founder – Jean Claude Colin [+1875] -on one occasion said: "*Marists choose to go where others do not go*". During our years at Palma Flor we had invited Padre José Marins and his team to come to Palma Flor Mission to give a live-in course concerning the Base Church Communities [CEBs] to the now 30 animators from the surrounding villages that were now committed with this model of being Church. José along with Hermana Teo and Padre Felipe over the years had traversed the length and breath of Latin American promoting and conducting course in the process of CEBs. When they finally arrived in Riberalta from La Paz, we received them at the airport and brought them to the bishop's house where we all slept the night. Next morning, we set off early in our 4x4 pick-up for Palma Flor. After several hours of travelling over the horrendous dirt and pot-hole road, our guests were wondering just when eventually they would get to this Palma Flor Mission. Upon final arrival there, they remarked that they understood what Jesus meant when he said that his disciples were to go and preach the Good News to the ultimate corners of the earth and make disciples.

Following the directions of our founder "*to choose to go where others do not go*", Gilberto, Javier and myself set about with energy and "*mucho ánimo*" to establish this new mission in the

Bolivian Amazonia. Prior to our arrival, the villagers had prepared a tiny "*chosita*" with dirt floor comprised of bamboo walls and palm roof. Three camp beds took up the available space. Meanwhile we daily in the afternoons bathed together with the villagers in the local stream and they saw to providing us with meals. No electricity, no running water, no shops. But the whole community had opened their hearts to us. Also we would have to adapt ourselves to the constant intense temperatures, humidity and rains, as well as to the mosquitos.

With the financial help of our Australian friends, we were able to purchase basic construction materials to build our mission residence, community and formation centre and village chapel.

As we began to settle in here in Palma Flor, it was important that we had knowledge of its history and reality. Having sat down with Amador, the principal animator of the community, we learnt the following:

- the community was founded and titled in 1955
- extension of some 4,300 hectares
- 42 families
- 272 inhabitants
- families had migrated there from different parts of the region -some from around Los

Reyes, 5 families of the indigenous Cavineños people and 6 families of the Tacana people

-the families dedicate their livelihood principally in agriculture, fishing and cattle raising.

-according to the census of the day, the community was classified as being in extreme poverty

-in time, a school was established there and today has some 86 students

-the land is shared in common, meaning that it belongs to all and cannot be sold or turned into private property

As a Marist Team, on arrival in Palm Flor our pastoral strategy was to promote the formation of that model of being Church known as *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base -Base Church Communities [CEBs]*. This had been the model that we had introduced in our earlier mission of San Pablo and I had promoted in my years previously in Mexico. The community responded with great enthusiasm. The Gospel text of Matthew 9: 36 – “*At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with compassion for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd*” became very real for us. Later the Gospel tells us that Jesus had them sit down and began to teach them and organized them in groups to eat.

So little by little, the process of CEBs was taking root in the community of Palma Flor. The seed had been sown.

When we arrived there, the community had its own rhythm of life. Each afternoon before dusk, the point of concentration was the soccer field. The young and not-so-young males took to the field for a friendly game. The young girls played basketball. The youngsters played games that they invented. Meanwhile, the elders sat under the frondose mango tree, talking about the weather, their work in the *campo* and family concerns. As the sun starts to set, all head off to bathe in the local stream. The males strip down to their undies, the women bare-breasted and the youngsters skinny-dip. There is a lot of splashing and scrubbing. When our bishop Luis came to see how we were doing after our first months there in Palma Flor, he decided to stay overnight with us and the community. Luis is a big man. He became part of the community and he too stripped down like the rest of the males and plunged into the stream, with a cry directed at the children now happily playing there: "*Beware! Here comes an elephant*". All to their delight. What a scene!

Later, the community scrap up a camp bed bigger enough for Luis and we found a space in our tiny hut for him to sleep. Following this, families of the community provided all of us with supper before resting for the night.

In these early months there in Palma Flor, the community decided to come together each Friday night to what developed into a CEBs meeting. They divided into 3 family clusters and

rotated each week as regards to whose house the next meeting would take place. Previous on a trip to Riberalta the Marist Team had purchased 3 hurricane lamps that we took to each meeting place. At first, we helped in coordinating the meeting where together we shared the Word and reflected upon our lives illuminated by that Word we had received and thereby together discern what we believed we were called to do in response to that Word so as to transform the reality about which we had reflected. On some designated occasions at the conclusion of the reflection, we would share some simple refreshments. A small box was placed on the table at the centre on which was also the Cross, bible, candle and flowers. Before leaving, a family would voluntarily deposit a few coins that provided a common fund for special needs within the community.

As the process of CEBs continued to develop in the life of the community, we introduced to it what we called "*Trabajos en Común Organizados - TCO*" [*Organized Works in Common*]. For this purpose, we as the Marist Team first conducted a week-long workshop where the community learnt the dynamics of a TCO, composed their laws for its functioning and taking a decision as to what would be their initial project. As a consequence, a portion of the common land of the community was prepared and a work-schedule drawn up. The day came when all was ready to initiate the decided rice project. There on site we conduct a liturgy to bless the land, bless all those who would work it, bless

the seed to be sown and to call upon the Lord's bless for an abundant and rich harvest. The time came for the first harvest and according to the agreed laws, a certain percentage would be sold as profits to go into the community's common fund and the grand percentage of the crop divided among each family according to the number of members and its needs. In conclusion, we celebrated a community Eucharist and Fiesta in thanksgiving.

After a year or so, with funds from the common funds we were able to construct and operate a community store of basic necessities. Previously, the families were subject to exploitation by the merchants who entered the village, buying their produce for very low prices and selling them in exchange products such as sugar, flour, cooking oil, kerosene for lighting and toiletries at exorbitant prices. A committee was elected to operate the store. As time went on, a small basic medical chest was also operating.

Although it was not our intention upon arrival in Palma Flor to attend to the medical needs of the community, the people naturally came to the mission, as was the case in our San Pablo Mission, looking for medical assistance. And so we Marists did our best to respond. I had, in the cadet medical corps as a student at my Marist College in Australia, some training in First Aid. In this Amazon Region of Bolivia at the time there did not exist any medical assistance. It was forgotten by the governments

of the day. Before long, the sick from all the 14 villages of the mission came to us in the hope of relief or of being cured. The region was endemic with malaria, tropical diseases were common, especially ulcers, babies and young children susceptible to intestine infections and diarrhea. Many adults suffered with rheumatic conditions.

On one occasion, one of our animators came to us in desperation as her menstrual bleeding had not stopped after several days. For most women, having a slightly heavier period for a few days is entirely normal. But if one experiences a sudden, heavy period or one that lasts longer than expected, she may need to seek medical care. Heavy menstrual bleeding (HMB) is also known as menorrhagia. This medical term refers to abnormally heavy or prolonged bleeding. Heavy menstrual bleeding can be an early sign of uterine or cervical cancer. Heavy bleeding can also be pregnancy-related, in the event of ectopic pregnancy or miscarriage. Pelvic inflammatory disease also can cause heavy menstrual bleeding. One's response to this situation was: *"Lord, what can we do here?"* At the mission we have 2 Bibles: the Sacred Scriptures and a Medical Manual called *"Donde Hay No Doctor-Where There Is No Doctor"*. This manual was composed by a German doctor who worked for a number of years in Mexico in the campo. Guided by his instructions, we were able to control the bleeding and Nora went on to have 3 more children. On another occasion we set off to the village of El Cerrito to accompany the

community in its monthly CEBs meeting. However, upon arrival we found that the whole village was down with malaria. So instead of the meeting, we turn our attention to assist the sick.

On my home visits to Australia and passing through the United States, my friends in the medical profession supplied me with very good medicines to take back. [This one could not do today with the restrictions in place.]

As part of our accompaniment and formation of the CEBs, we introduced the people into what is known as the process of "*concientización -raising the level of consciousness of a people*". When the municipal elections drew near, the local mayor of Santa Rosa, accompanied by his 2 *pistoleros*, arrived at Palma Flor to guarantee the vote of the entire population- as in previous elections. Don Hugo represented the political rightist party called *Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario -MNR*. But on this occasion, the community asked him what had he done for Palma Flor and what did he intend now to do for them if elected again. They called his attention to the state of the road into their village and the total lack of attention to their needs. Don Hugo left the village very annoyed and was rumoured to say that before the people were obedient, but now with the missionaries they were rebellious.

It so transpired that for the first time Don Hugo lost the election to the leftist *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria -MIR* whose candidate

was Don Elvio who won with the support of our communities of the mission. Don Elvio became a good friend of Palma Flor and tried to respond to several of its most urgent needs.

So on August 6th 1999 we say our farewell to the various communities of the Palma Flor Mission, confident that we had sown the seed of a Gospel way of life in the region. We as Marist Missionaries are *pioneers* and not *settlers* -always in *exodus*. Javier has in recent years composed a song that expresses this: "*Pon la semilla en la tierra no será en vano...Cosechar no te preocupes, plantas para el hermano -Put the seed in the ground will not be in vain...Don't be preoccupied as to the harvest, you plant for your brother's benefit*".

Gilberto, Javier and myself came to Palma Flor as a Marist community and team of 3. As we leave, we are now a mixed community of 8. While there Gilberto and Javier were blessed and given as spouses Arminda and Nair respectively. There were born their first sons: to Gilberto and wife Arminda were born Juan José and Gilbertito [Chiqui] and to Javier and wife Nair was born José Guadalupe [Lupito]. I [affectionately known as *Juanito*] became to be called *Abuelo -granddad* by them. It so happens that Arminda and Nair are cousins.

And so ends another chapter in our ongoing missionary journey together as we head off to establish the Mission of La Mamora of the Tarija Diocese in the far south of Bolivia and border with

Argentina. No longer the jungles and pampas of the Amazonian Region but surrounded on all sides by the high Andean Mountains. La Mamora is another story in itself.

4. - *My Days in Palma Flor among My Dear Friends [January 14th -20th 2025]*

Palma Flor Community of some 4,000 hectares is surrounded by several cattle ranches whose extensions sometimes are up to 10 times more that the whole of Palma Flor. These landowners need hired workers who, in fact we should consider as "*slave labourers*", without any protection and benefits and a miserable daily wage -often less that \$12. They are expected to work from dawn to dusk. [Joseph and Jesus in their day would have identified with this reality, as biblical studies today would indicate.]

At times, a dispute arises between the landlord and some of his *peones* and often that dispute is terminated by the killing off of the one or ones involved by his *pistoleros*. Such seems to have been the case with the husband of Tatiana who was discovered dead under suspicious circumstances. Apparently, the police recorded his death as from natural causes and were probably paid off.

Following her husband's death, Tatiana left the ranch with her 5 children; she was several months pregnant with the 6th. Where now to go? Through an uncle who lived on the outskirts of Palma Flor, she was rescued by the Community who arranged for the family to be accommodated meanwhile in what had been our residence at the mission. They settled in here penniless and the

community assumed the responsibility of providing for them.

It so happened that we Marists in 2022 came to know Tatiana and her family here in Palma Flor before the birth of Elsa. We had planned to make a visit to Palma Flor from Tarija to accompany the community in their patronal feast of Our Lady of Mercy on September 24th. We drove the 1,750 kilometres from Tarija in our 4x4 Ford Ranger Pick-Up. In these days of my present return visit, I reunite with Tatiana and her family.

After great hugs all around, I am invited to sit down there in the outdoor kitchen and given a herbal tea. Then I have handed a plate of rice and a type of stew [*un guiso*]; although I had just come from having breakfast there in the home of Crisanto and Felica. In the process I get an update on the family: -Tatiana 36, David 17, Alejandra 9, Roberto 8, Luciana 7, Josefa 5 and Elsa 2.

Eventually I enter the small chapel to pray my Morning Prayer of the Church [Lauds] and meditation, but am followed by the 5 younger children who stay there with me until I leave for lunch around 12 p.m. The 3 smaller ones play their games there on the cement floor in front of the altar, jumping around with enormous glee. Roberto stands with his arms on the table where I am seated and gazes into my eyes transfixed. [They have never seen someone with blue eyes before as most Latinos have dark eyes.] Every now and then the 2-year-old Elsa comes across and runs

her hands up and down my hairy arms. [Again, the arms and legs of most Latinos are hairless.] Every now and then I am getting hugs from each of the children as, after my meditation, I take to writing this present story! Again, this reminds me of another biblical scene where the disciples of Jesus try to shoo away the little children who cling to Jesus and Jesus tells them to leave them alone "*for theirs is the kingdom*". For me, it is a truly emotional experience of such tender love and affection. It so happens that this pattern continues for the following 3 mornings while I am here in Palma Flor.

At 12.30 p.m. on this same Wednesday, Gilda [the youngest daughter of Crisanto and Felica] arrives on motorbike to return me to her home for lunch. Gilda some 2 years ago was asked by the community to serve as an animator alongside of Amador. So now she assists in conducting the Sunday Celebration of the Word and prepares the children for First Communion. It so happens that today is her birthday and there are cheers all around. Felisa serves us a delicious plate of chicken and rice. Every mum here has her special touch in the kitchen and all cooking is done on open wood-fire.

There seated at table with us is Jesus, the youngest of the 7 children. Seated in his wheelchair that Rotary had donated. Jesus was born paralysed during our first years in Palma Flor. He is now 29. From the table, we move to outside

patio of palm roof where we continue chatting. Jesus wheels close to me. His face continuously radiates immense joy. He takes my arm and just holds me tight. Such tender endearment! One hears those words of Jesus: *"Abba, Father, I give thanks to you for hiding these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to the little ones. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do"*.

Come Thursday here in Palma Flor and today I will have my meals with Vida and the Diaz family. Vida's mother-Dina- was one of 4 sisters of Gilberto's wife – Arminda. Dina was born mute and came as a single-mother to have 4 children -Vida, Polo, Delmira and Nelsey. When Vida finished primary school there in Palma Flor, Arminda and Gilberto arranged for her to come to live with us in Tarija and so do her secondary education and go on from there. Finally, Vida entered the state university in Tarija to pursue a nursing career. Vida graduated 3 years ago. A great achievement indeed! Her dear mother was diagnosed with cancer 3 years ago and although having received treatment in Riberalta, it was concluded that no more could be done for her and so returned to Palma Flor to pass the rest of her days. As her condition deteriorated around October, Vida went home to nurse her mother in her dying and agonising days. Dina died suddenly and unexpectedly to the extent that Arminda only arrived in time from Tarija – [a 1,750-kilometre trip] – to be present at her burial here in Palma

Flor. Here, because of the reality, one needs to be buried locally within 36 hours. Gilberto, Juan José and Chiqui with wife and Little John arrived here after Christmas having travelled from Tarija in our Ford Ranger 4x4, to accompany Arminda and family in the traditional ceremonies of *8-Días* [*8-Days*]. Together they celebrated as family here the New Year.

Vida has stayed on here in Palma Flor in the family home, accompanying her sister Nelsey and brother Palo and their families in the meantime. She intends to return to Tarija soon in search of work as a qualified nurse.

Well, I am now to be treated to meals with the Diaz family. They killed a young pig *-un lechon*". It was Polo's 29th birthday. Nelsey and her husband -Eber- have 6 children -all little ones. The great matriarch of the Diaz family- Doña Florentina [105 years and grandmother of Arminda and Nair, the wives of Gilberto and Javier] was present for the occasion. So, 15 of us sat down to be served a delicious meal of roasted pork cooked in a clay oven.

After breakfast on Friday morning, I return to the chapel for my morning prayer and meditation and to continue writing this Project. It is a repetition of the previous mornings with the little ones of Doña Tatiana entertaining me there in the meantime.

The previous days and night had been reasonably overcast following days of rain prior to my arrival, but now the days were heating up and the humidity rising, with the temperature around 40°. After supper, I said to Amador that we could do with a cold beer. His son Diego was commissioned then to take off on his motorbike to get supplies up there at the store on the highway. The tall order being: "Ocho Pacheñas -8 Pacheñas [*the popular Bolivian Beer*]. Fortunately, the store has a petrol generator and so the beer is reasonably cold as needed in this climate. Our thirst is not sufficiently quenched after downing the 8 Pacheñas and so Juan Pablo -the youngest of the Amador's boys – hops on the motorbike for reinforcements! A good night and a lot of story-telling and laughter!

Comes Saturday and my 2nd last day here in Palma Flor before finally returning home to Tarija. Today for meals I am being hosted by Alindo and Yanet. They have 5 children -2 living away with their families in Santa Cruz, 1 here working on a nearby ranch and recently married and with a baby boy and 2 youngsters here at home with mum and dad. Alindo calls me "Padrino -Godfather" for having been his sponsor of Confirmation here when he was a teenager. Presently, Alindo is the authority for the Community of Palma Flor and on my previous visit he told the community that I was to return to Paloma Flor to live out my days and that the community would meanwhile build me a home here. Nothing more would I like, but at

present it would not be easy to uproot myself from Tarija, leaving behind my Marist Community of Gilberto, Javier and families who for the present are not in conditions to leave Tarija. So, the possibility remains open and for further discernment.

In the morning after breakfast with Alindo's family, I return to the chapel for my now morning ritual. David -the oldest son of Tatiana- has appeared on the scene, having brought home a huge *armadillo* he had hunted he had hunted overnight in the nearby *monte*. He had patiently waited all night there with his dogs. Tatiana shells and skins the animal and prepares to cook it in the open fire. Before I finish my time in the chapel, daughter Alejandra places on the table in front of me a plate of armadillo and rice to savour. Later I am served lunch consisting of chicken soup and chicken stew in the home of Alindo and Yanet. One less chicken now is running outside of their property. What a treat! With the temperature still climbing, tonight we set out again in search of reinforcements!

At 7 a.m. on the Sunday morning, Amador sets off for the village chapel, gives several dongs to the iron bar hanging from the mango tree that serves as the bell and together with Gilda, they prepare the celebration. Since our leaving the Pando Vicariate in 1999, its mobile rural pastoral team has been visiting the mission on about every 6 months, sometimes with or without an ordained priest to celebrate the Eucharist. So now the

community has invited me to preside; normally with Amador and Gilda they would have their Celebration of the Word. We await the arrival of the faithful and meanwhile the different ministries for the celebration are distributed. The chapel is rather small and does not take much for it to be overflowing. In our accompaniment and formation of the CEBs in our different missions, we have endeavoured to make our celebrations alive and with full participation. Here it fills me with great joy as we celebrate the Eucharist today in that spirit.

As we conclude, each family puts on the table the food that they have brought to be shared together in the *Convivencia* that follows. There is an abundance and in all simplicity we partake. Afterwards on the lawn we group together for photos. A real Gospel setting!

The clock is ticking away. Earlier, a passage has been reserved for me on the bus that leaves Riberalta at 11 a.m. for La Paz and I am to join it out on the highway at the entrance to Palma Flor. It can pass by Palma Flor anytime from 3 pm onwards. Amador and Mirtha insist that I lunch with them before setting off, as they know I will probably not eat substantially until arrival in Tarija on the Tuesday. And so, my return visit to Palma Flor and my days together with Alex in Ecuador to celebrate the beginning of the year in which I will turn 80 comes to an end. We say our good-byes with much emotion and head off on motorbike to

the highway to await the bus -that incidentally arrived at 5pm.

*5 – Putting this Adventure in Perspective upon my
Arrival Back in Tarija*

There are nights when I do not sleep without awaking one or several times. On such occasions I believe that my mind is still at work - not switched off and I awake suddenly with intuitions or full of inspirations. I have learnt that in order not to forget such when finally getting out of bed and readying myself for the new day, it is convenient to have on my bedside table pen and paper. Such has been the case with this present writing Project. My Community and friends at different times and places have said to me: "*John, you have to put into writing something of your life as a Marist missionary; your rich and unique legacy has to be passed on to future generations.*" To date, I have resisted and replied that I leave it to others to write such about my life and mission. However, now my eyes and heart have been opened during this present *adventure* and when I awoke one night there in Palma Flor, the title to this writing came to mind and I took up my pen then and there.

During my 8 formation years in our Marist seminary, we had ample and excellent studies in the Sacred Scriptures. However, when I arrived in Mexico in 1977 and became involved with that model of being Church which we called the CEBs and its spirituality and practice founded on the theology of liberation, my eyes were opened to a new method of reading the Bible, especially

Salvation History and the Gospels. We encounter a God who loves and cares for His People – a God incarnated in the person of Jesús of Nazareth whose first proclamation is "*I have come that all may have life and have it in abundance*" – a God who liberates and becomes himself *the poor man*.

Upon arrival there in Mexico I was assigned to our Marist parish of San Mateo, Tlaltenango on the outskirts of Mexico City where, at that time, the majority were poor workers. I was accompanied by my fellow Mexican Marist, Padre Alejandro. Shortly after I had settled into the parish and getting a hold on the Spanish language, Alejandro took off for some days of rest and so I was left alone to take care of things. One afternoon while taking my siesta [which is common practice in Mexico], I awake to a pounding on the rectory door. I get up to answer and there before me are 3 of the local youth [René, his brother Bernardo and Alejandro] shouldering a tiny ragged man who appeared dead or unconscious. They begin to speak thus: "*Padre, we found this man lying in a ditch by the roadside and we couldn't leave him there, but did not know where to take him, so we brought him here. What can we do?*"

My immediate reaction under my breath was: "*Oh my God!*". But I hear a voice inside me telling me that if I have come all this way to Mexico to be of service then I have to get involved and not turn him away. The ball is in my court, as we say. Getting my breath, I told them to bring him inside

and they place him on a mattress on the floor. I asked them for suggestions as what we do next. We got on the phone and called up the local council and got through to their social services department. I tried to tell the official who answered what we had on hand and he responded: *Oh Padre, this happens frequently -they are alcoholics without nowhere to stay. If they die there, then we go and pick them up and if there is no family to collect them, then the council's truck will collect them and bury them in a common grave. There was no need for you to get involved!"*

But I was now involved and had to act accordingly. Not knowing if he was really dead or just out to it, with the lads we rounded up some clean clothes, sponged him down and laid him back on the mattress. Hoping that he was still alive, I went to the kitchen and cooked up a light broth. This we started to served him by spoon. Suddenly his eyes opened and I asked him what is his name and with a smile he responded: "*Porfirio!*". Like a bolt it struck me that Jesus is here today with the name of Porfirio. The Gospel text rings true: "*Whatever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me.* Jesus has a new name: It is "*Porfirio*".

As Marists, apart from celebrating the Eucharist in the main church and chapels throughout the parish, we celebrate it also with the Sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta who have a refuge in the neighbouring parish of Santa Fe. The

lads help me in getting through to them on the phone. The Sister in-charge informs me that they are full up, nevertheless bring Porfirio to them the next morning and they will find a place for him. Such transpired.

All this changed my life and mission as a Marist priest. There was no turning back and I knew where my priorities now lay. I am ever Ggrateful to the 3 lads -René, Bernardo and Alejandro. Because of them, the Gospel today was proclaimed and lived and truly became "*The Good News*". [In fact, I still catch up with the lads who are now married men with family when I make a return visit to Mexico from Bolivia. We today remain close friends and I believe that I too have been evangelized by those from *below*.]