



“MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA”
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Dear Friends,

At this time last year in our letter I mentioned that I was entering my 75th year and if I had been made a bishop then I should start preparing my letter of resignation to the Pope as required. However no such rule applies to us priests; it is presumed that we just keep going in what we are doing. So here I am having today reached that significant point in my life and still very active in my priestly and missionary service to our people and loving it, without thought of retiring. For all this, I give thanks to our Creator and to Mary our Mother and Protector.

I turn 75 at a time when the whole world is in the midst of a pandemic and racial turmoil. In addition, many of us have now been in total quarantine for some 4 months, without leaving home and living from day-to-day in so much uncertainty as to tomorrow. During this time all of us have been affected in one way or another to the point of having lost someone very dear to us. In my case earlier in the month the news of the death due to the corona-virus of one of my very close priest friend finally reached me here at our mission in Bolivia. Bob died very suddenly at the retirement village for the priests of the Archdiocese of St. Louis in the U.S. as a result of being infected by the virus. His death occurred while sleeping on the night of April 24th. It was reported that 21 of the 30 retired priests there had proved positive. His death came as a great shock to all concerned.

Upon receiving this sad news at this very late stage, I have reflected upon its meaning for us, especially as to friendship. In this respect, the words of Jesus to his beloved disciples before his impending death come to mind: *"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."* [John 15.15]. Bob was such a friend to me and to our Marist community. Without going into much detail, we could say that thanks to him we got our little Marist Missionary Project off the ground here in Bolivia and continue to this day some 30 years later. Bob was my contact in Bolivia. During my Sabbatical Year in 1988 after having served as a missionary over some 11 years in our Marist Mexican Province, I was fortunate to have participated in St. Louis in what at that time was known as the "Emmaus Holistic Spirituality Program" – a 4-month program for mature priests and religious, limited to 5 males and 5 females. It was there that I learnt that the priests of the Archdiocese had missions in Bolivia and I was given Bob as a contact who at that time was pastor of the parish of Cristo Rey in La Paz, Bolivia. Upon my initial visit to Bolivia after the program I stayed with Bob and his community, and from there our friendship started. Upon completion of my Sabbatical Year, I was granted reluctant permission from my superiors to go as a lone Marist missionary to Bolivia, given that my permanent residency in Mexico had not been granted by the government of the day. During my first year in Bolivia, Gilberto and Javier joined me to form our little Marist missionary community and subsequently we set up the Mission of San Pablo in the jungle beside the Boopi River, one of the first rivers of Bolivia that form the great Amazon Basin. For necessities we would have to go up to La Paz every 3 or 4 months and Bob's rectory became our second home where we have always received overwhelming hospitality and warm friendship. In more recent years, for health reasons Bob returned to St. Louis and eventually retired to live at the archdiocesan retirement village upon turning 75 two years ago. I was there with him for a month last year for as I had been invited to share in some of the parishes something of our Bolivian missionary experience. It was a wonderful and joyful month together, and also with Bishop Luis Casey there who had been our bishop in the Pando Vicariate of Bolivia. While at our Palma Flor Mission, Bob moved to the vicariate and became pastor of the cathedral parish. So Gilberto's and Javier's families and myself would stay with Bob and Luis when we could get into Riberalta –the heart of the Amazonian Region of Bolivia.

So you can understand that I with my Marist Community are in mourning at this moment at the death of such a dear and enduring friend. Bob was full of life and his joyfulness was contagious. We will dearly miss him. I was to be there with him once again this July at the village in St. Louis as I had been invited back to visit 4 other parishes of the archdiocese to share there something of our Bolivian mission. It so appears that I spoke by phone to Bob a day or so before his death as he was making once again all the arrangements for my visit and stay in July. As things have turned out as result of the pandemic, my trip to the U.S. and to St. Louis has been cancelled for 2020. As priests we enjoy a certain fellowship, but as humans we have our very special friends who are our "*soul mates*" – on whom we can count no matter. For us, Bob was one such friend and a priest one with the people and loved by all. We thank our Creator for the gift of Bob!

When we talk by WhatsApp to our friends here and abroad during this prolonged period of quarantine, they naturally ask us how we are doing. It is easy to reply that we are fine or *hanging-in there*. We know that we are much better off than many of our people in the barrios and villages. As in other places, many of our people live from day-to-day, with no guaranteed income –always looking for work as day-labourers. With four months of strict quarantine in Bolivia, families are desperate and hungry and the "*de facto*" government's response has been completely inadequate. It is difficult to get the true picture as to the state of the pandemic in the country as all news is censored; in some states in recent weeks there has been an explosion of the virus.

As we are confined to home and office since mid-March, we have been able to keep ourselves occupied with putting in order so much that pertains to the good order of our office and with the production of our upcoming radio programs. In a normal 4-month term, we would have done our rounds of visits to each of the 23 Base Church Communities [CEBs] spread throughout the diocese; the visits are scheduled on a 2-monthly basis. In addition, in each term we have a live-in formation course for all our animators of the CEBs. As part of our pastoral vision, we insist on the importance of preserving what we call the "*memoria historica*" – *the historic memory*. We with the communities see ourselves journeying together and this journey is a "process" and not a series of "events" as many of the pastoral activities of the present-day church are. So during our prolonged quarantine we have in the office been able to bring-up-to-date and revise much of the materials we have developed over the past 30 years as a Marist Missionary Team and prepare new materials using modern technology. One such area in this task has been a systematization of all the photos of us as a Marist Community and Team and of all the Base Communities that we have accompanied and developed in 3 regions of Bolivia over the past 30 years.

As a follow-up to the Latin American CEBs Encounter in Ecuador in early March, during this period of quarantine throughout the continent we have been able to maintain contact and continue with some unfinished business of that Encounter. Our group of articulators of the 24 countries involved have a 2-hour video-reunion called a "ZOOM reunion" every Tuesday night where in these weeks we have been putting together what we call an "*Analisis Conyuntural de la Realidad*" – *an analysis of the reality* –of the countries involved, taking into account the social, economic, political, cultural and ecclesial aspects of each, so as to get a global vision of the present reality and to thereby respond as CEBs to that in light of the Gospel values and the building up of the Reign of God in our midst. It has proved a very valuable and delightful experience as we share together as friends and committed to the cause of our peoples.

As regards to our little Marist Community we are doing fine and looking after each other. Eventually Gilbertito and Lupo got back from Sucre where they go to university to be with us in Tarija; unfortunately, Juan José remains in Córdoba, Argentina.

Know that we hold all you our dear friends in our daily prayer together as a Marist Community. We love to hear from you. Take care!

With all our love: JOHN/HOPPY

on behalf of GILBERTO/ARMINDA/JUAN JOSÉ/CHIQUI/MARIAN-JAVIER/NAIR/LUPO/PACO-JUAN.

A GESTURE OF SOLIDARITY BY THE MARIST TEAM/COMMUNITY DURING THE QUARANTINE IN TARIJA
[We wish to share with you an experience that the 3 of us Misioneros Maristas had last week.]

1. JAVIER'S REFLECTION:

The COVID 19 pandemic has undoubtedly made us discover many shortcomings in the different aspects of our society. Abiding by the provisions for this health emergency, we have remained with the slogan of "Stay at Home". During these days of being at home, we have found ourselves in the need to go out and get to where our brothers and sisters are in the poorest neighbourhoods of our city.

From our limited resources, as a Marist Team / Community, we have organized a day of solidarity with the families of four neighborhoods whom we accompany pastorally. Despite the risks, we have managed to reach some forty families who were having a hard time.

Having the opportunity to be there was a profound experience for us with the Suffering Jesus, with the God who became the Poor One. Being there was for us the nutrition that we were lacking, after being locked up without being able to leave for some 15 weeks.

Returning to our homes, with the joy of having lived our Mission, we have agreed that it was God who spoke to us through the people and the different moments of that day. We wish we could reach more; the need is so great. Although our contribution was little, for those families, many of them single mothers, it was without a doubt GOOD NEWS.

Our emotions that arose in us that day still live with us. With that joy I share this direct experience with the God of Life. My prayer now is that of asking the Creator to allow us to get out of this situation and to protect us all.

2. GILBERTO'S REFLECTION:

I share part of the experience lived recently as Marist missionaries. We arrived at the San Jorge II neighborhood of the city of Tarija, where we have a Base Church Community [CEBs] that bears the same name. We made it possible to reach 10 families who are really in need of food. We organized so that the CEBs animators themselves could deliver the small basket of food to the families so that they, too, could experiment, feel a little and learn about how impoverished families live at this time. So Marbel and Nicolas (animators) said that it really hurts and causes much anger about how it is possible to allow these things to happen in this 21st century. And the wonderful thing in all this as went about the distribution was that they managed to get a smile; they managed to find the desire to live and fight.

Of the 40 baskets we were left with one that had not been assigned, but on the way back we thought and said that the first very poor dwelling we see we stop and deliver the basket. So we did. By surprise we visited a very simple family that lives in a borrowed shack and without having to eat that day. Doña Josefa told us verbatim: "Thank you *papitos (my dear little fathers)*, thank you *Diosito [my little God]* for this gift." And it really hurts your guts to hear these words. Doña Josefa lives with her daughter, her husband in prison and they earn a living selling something on the street. And at this time they do not generate income since it is prohibited to circulate every day.

As Marist missionaries we are convinced that Jesus the Galilean suffers with these brothers and sisters. And we are also convinced that Jesus of the People suffers from the fact that the authorities do not watch over the life of this sector that is so vulnerable.

SHARING SOME PHOTOS WITH YOU OUR DEAR FRIENDS WHO ACCOMPANY US IN OUR MISSIONARY JOURNEY



1. Marist Team preparing food baskets



2. Juan & Javier setting off from Casa Marista



3. Gilberto with Basilio(CEBs Animator) giving food basket to Daniel in Barrio Unidad y



4. Misioneros Maristas distributing food baskets in Barrio Chapacos II



5. Marist Community Eucharist for John's 75th during Quarantine



6. John's 75th Birthday at home with his Marist Community