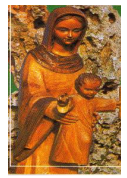




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Lent 2021

Dear Friends,

Once again this year we are entering the Season of Lent in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Understandably most of us feel somewhat dispirited as the year unfolds, waiting anxiously for the final eradication of this virus from our planet and a return to a state of normality, knowing that we cannot return to the old status quo. Life in different ways has changed for all of us. Some have been personally victims, others have lost loved ones, while others have lost employment or even destroyed financially. At the same time, the “new normality” can provide us with certain challenges and opportunities. This Lent therefore can be for us a time of healing and special graces as we honestly reflect upon our own lives and the life of our communities, whether they be religious or civil. We can stop to see from where we have come, where we stand today and how we hope to live in the future as persons and together in community.

Back in 1988-89, having been given the opportunity of a sabbatical year upon the termination of my missionary endeavours in Mexico and before undertaking a new mission in Bolivia, I had the good fortune of doing biblical studies in the Holy Land. Among my many experiences there, we did an excursion of some three days into the desert wilderness. Our teachers pointed out to us the fragility of life there. Among other things, they kept telling us of our need to drink plenty of water. Traditionally the Gospel Reading of the 1st Sunday of Lent is that of the Temptations of Jesus in the Desert. We know that Jesus confronted himself with these temptations, sought strength, overcoming them and left the desert as a free man to carry out the mission He had received from His Father. Each of us has our own story of “desert experiences”, in which we have become aware of our own vulnerability and fragility. However we are offered the option to leave the desert and to move forward with confidence, having discerned and decided well, being accompanied by the Spirit as Jesus was.

Why share with you who are my friends this particular reflection at this particular time in my life’s journey? A good question indeed! I am conscious that within 3 months [May 27th] I will be celebrating my Golden Jubilee of Priestly Ordination followed by my 76 birthday and having on 2nd February celebrated 55 years of Marist Religious Profession. Thus one can say that he is living in the Golden Years of one’s life and one’s days of vigorous activity are being reduced. It is a time to reflect upon the journey travelled so far and to discern how one might best live the days ahead.

On my last visit to Australia while staying there at our Marist Communities in Sydney, one day at the lunch table talking to one of my confreres in particular who had been a few years behind me in the seminary he asked me how I was going, what I had been up to and what I thought about different issues. In the end, I said: “Well, I think as the years go on I am becoming an anarchist!” to which he replied with a hearty and humorous bellow: “Hoppy, you were always an anarchist!”. Some might call that “wisdom”!

There are certain influences that have shaped my life and priestly ministry over these many years. Although my father died when I was only nine years old, I fondly recall how I would sit on his lap in the lounge chair as he arrived home each evening from his day’s work at the office. As he stroked me with affection and we chatted away about our day I came to learn the values that he inculcated in me. My dad was active in politics, being at the time president of the local branch of the Labor Party and a union delegate. I enjoyed when he would sometimes take me along with his colleagues on the campaign trail. Hence from an early age I was socially conscious and intent on making the world a better place for all. Also I have been greatly influenced in my vocation by the Marist Brothers and the education I received at their feet at Marist College, Ashgrove over 9 years.

As I compose this letter at my computer, I am sitting at my desk in our community retreat-rest home that we constructed 4 years ago in a rural village called Pantipampa some 40 minutes from our home and office in Tarija City. We have become very much part of the local campesino [*peasant farmers*] community. We are surrounded by wonderful neighbours who have become our very dear friends. It has become a place where Gilberto, Javier and myself love to come to in order to relax, reflect, pray and prepare materials for our pastoral activities, as well as enjoy the company and sharing with the local community. We are surrounded by mountains on all sides, with incredible sunsets and star-filled and peaceful nights and awakening to the call of the roosters that run loose.

When I was ordained on May 27th 1971 at our Marist Parish Church of Mater Dei in Brisbane I could not suspect how my priestly life and ministry over these 50 years would unfold. Now I can look back on those years in heartfelt gratitude to the good Lord, to Mary our Mother whose name I bear as a Marist, to so many wonderful friends I have made in different places and to all of you who in one way or another have shared our journey and believed in us and supported us and made possible our continuing mission. Something of our story has been told through the booklet that my Australian friends produced in 2017 to commemorate my 40 years of missionary service in the Latin American Church and more recently through another booklet that we published to give to our friends in gratitude to commemorate our 30 years as Misioneros Maristas Bolivia that consisted of presentations of each of the members: Gilberto, Javier, their wives and sons and finally myself, telling what it has been our experience as living and serving our people here in Bolivia as a Marist Community and Team.

Upon my ordination I was appointed to our Marist community and staff of St. John's College ["Woodlawn"] in Lismore. It was then a boarding college of some 400 young men of 13-19 years of age. It was not an appointment that I would have freely chosen for myself. In fact, it was last on my own preference list for the more than 20 places for assignment within the Australian Province of the Marist Fathers!! But the Lord has His ways that we learn often are not our ways. Over the 4 years there as a teacher and housemaster I enjoyed the friendship of my students and many of their families; some of those friendships have endured these 50 years and been a means of support in my missions. From my entry in the seminary, I had the desire to be a missionary, and our Marist Missionary Territory at the time was Oceania, I presumed that one day if accepted I would end up there. After 4 years at Woodlawn I requested that I be finally accepted for foreign missions and to better prepare myself for this I had 2 years of parish experience; first at our inner-city parish of St. Patrick's in Sydney then at our West Sunshine migrant parish of St. Paul in Melbourne.

Although as mentioned, our principal mission zone until this time was Oceania, however some of our Australian Marists who had been undertaking renewal studies in the U.S.A. passed through Mexico on their way home. The Mexican Provincial told them that they would welcome there Marists from Australia as missionaries, Mexico being a very small Province and without sufficient priests to respond to the pastoral needs of the Mexican people. This invitation filtered down to me and I put to my Australian Marist Admiration and to our General Admiration in Rome my great interest. Subsequently I received the green light and found myself in Mexico on May 5th 1971 and so commenced my missionary journey. I fell in love with Mexico and its people. My first 6 years there were spent as a member of the San Mateo Marist Community where we ministered to poor workers on the outskirts of Mexico City. At the time San Mateo was a type of old colonial village with its church and traditions. I took particular care of 3 small barrios: El Rio, La Canada y La Venta. Here little by little I was able to form what latter we would refer to as Base Church Communities [Comunidades Eclesiales de Base –CEBs]. In fact to this day, I enjoy close friendship with those who were then teenagers who became my catequists and leaders in the community. I have become part of their families over the past 43 years.

From San Mateo I went to the Dioceses of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca initiating a new Marist mission among the campesinos y indigenous people. From our base at El Porvenir, for the next 5 years we reached out to some 17 village communities. For our option for and defense of the poor the bishop and the pastoral agents of the diocese we were always under threat from the

powerful and rich of the region. [Arturo, my bishop, mentor and close friend who called me "Juanito el Cangurito –Johnny the little Kangaroo" had 11 attempts on his life. A truly prophetic church we were! After some 11 years in Mexico I was in line to get permanent residency, but my application was denied. As I have shared elsewhere, I was reluctantly given permission by my Marist superiors to then accept the invitation to work as a missionary in Bolivia where I have served for the past 31 years and have shared with our friends through our regular letters and booklet much of our journey to date. As indicated earlier the Lord has HIS ways, and although I had very much hoped to live my days from here on in Mexico, it was not to be. Doors close but new ones open unexpectedly.

And now sitting here in Pantipampa sharing with you, what can I say now looking back over the years and looking now to the future? I realize I have been truly graced in my priestly life and ministry. As my close priest friend since ordination keeps reminding me: "Hoppy, if the Lord wants it, it will happen!" I have been blessed with so many true and loyal friends. My dear Mum in my last visit to Australia before she died said to me: "John, I do not worry for you in all you do; I know you have such good friends". And as one of these friends who is my close friend from my first days in Mexico reminds me: "¡Juanito, siempre cuentas conmigo! – Juanito, always count on me no matter what may happen in your life!".

While not being a diehard anarchist, I know that I run with my gut feelings and take initiatives and seen as not all that tradicional in many things, especially religious. I recall what our dean of scholastics would say at times when I would propose changes or permissions, with a pained face he would reply: "Oh..But it has never been done before", to which I boldly would respond: "True, but why not now?", and in his goodness would then say: "Then I will have to put it to the faculty". And in their wisdom most times granted or approved my proposal.

Now with so much and varied experience, in my last years and knowing it is time to slow down, as one of my close young friends here constantly counsels me: "Juanito, ya tienes que VIVIR –now you have to start living!" What then remains for me to continue doing? Our missionary endeavours have not been centered so much with Masses and Sacraments nor so much preaching. It has been one of presence and friendship. In the days remaining, I do not see myself running around the country here and there giving formation courses nor taking part in so many meetings. As a Marist Team in recent times, we have adopted this phrase as regards to the way we minister: "*Acogiendo, escuchando y acompañando al pueblo – Welcoming, listening to and accompanying the people*". In living and ministering in this way, I can enter into a new phase in my life. As Pope Francis entitled his first apostolic exhortation: "The Joy of the Gospel". Let my life radiate the joy of the Good News and be Good News for our people. With this I am at peace!

Thank you, good friends, for having read this my present sharing with you as together we celebrate these significant anniversaries. As you are well aware, for all our life and mission over all these years has been made possible for your solidarity and sharing with us, as we are not financed by the respective religious bodies nor do we receive stipends or salaries or take up collections. We do not ask for money, but through your generosity we have been able to maintain ourselves and our mission. *¡Muchas gracias y qué el Dios de la Vida les bendiga hoy y siempre! – We sincerely thank you and may the God of Life bless you today and always!* As we always remind you: Know that you are held there in our daily community prayer.

Our local community here of Pantipampa have said to me: "Juanito, aquí con nosotros tienes que celebrar tus Bodas de Oro el día 27 de mayo – here with us you have to celebrate your Golden Jubilee on May 27th [which is also here Mother's Day]. (I am unable to come to Australia to celebrate there with you also as the borders remain closed.)

With all my love and that of my Marist Community:
-John Hopkinson, S.M. [Juanito/Hoppy]