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Easter –Pascua 2023

Dear Friends,

Today on this Easter Wednesday as I write to you on behalf of our community of Misioneros Maristas I am enjoying the beginnings of a time away to renew and relax after having at the end of 2022 officially resigned from pastoral activities and responsibilities in the Diocese of Tarija where we have served continuously for the past 23 years. As explained in our Christmas Letter, as of 2023 we have embarked upon a new course that we have in Spanish referred to as "*Nuestro Nuevo Rumbo*". Our 1<sup>st</sup> Term of the present year has seen us setting the stage for what we have proposed for our Marist Life and Mission for the coming years. Now the community has given me the time and space in this 2nd Term to "take a breather" while Gilberto and Javier begin to implement that new direction. Later in this sharing I will briefly mention how I intend to use this time, but first I want to share with you something of my reflections and experience alone during Holy Week and Easter which I spent away from Tarija and as another member of the faithful, one could say. It has been a gracefilled time for me.

*For us Christians, the Easter Season is always an occasion to believe anew that it is possible to embark on the path of the Good News –the Gospel and the following of Jesus. The Resurrection of Jesus confirms in us divine love. This love takes over our lives and gives us the strength to permeate the structures of life and society with love.*

*In today's world, in the name of Jesus, many Catholics and evangelicals support right-wing policies, contrary to the interests of the poorest. Thus, they bear witness to a cruel and sectarian God, a friend of those who adore him and vengeful towards those who do not adhere to the Church. The good news of the Resurrection must be prophetically opposed to that type of religion. To follow the risen Jesus is to opt for Justice, Peace and Mercy, announced in the Gospel. Easter makes us live a Church at the service of all humanity and not just believers. Together with all those who hunger and thirst for justice and peace, let us kindle the new fire of peace and solidarity on earth. From the joy of believing that Jesus has risen, our mission is to go out into the world sowing resurrection.*

*In this sense, the Resurrection is not the memory of a past, but the celebration of a present, always present to arouse joy in us, the soft smile that the death on the cross of Jesus of Nazareth, on Good Friday, is just a journey through a life free of death and fully fulfilled in the resurrection. The gloomy horizon cleared up and the Sun of hope broke through.*

*The light of Easter illuminates us. Everything good, honest, beautiful and fair in our lives, in history and on earth, our family and our friendships, nothing will perish, everything will be transfigured. As long as we live, we have the commitment to help free society and the earth from all injustice and all death, but this task is hopeful, the light of Easter accompanies us. The great mission of the Church, the joyful good news of it and its only wealth is to be able to announce Jesus dead and risen.*

My experience of the Church as I have moved around in the Latin Church in recent years is that she is tired, tries to return to a past that today has passed and we live in a new age, that the "*Joy of the Gospel*" referred to by Pope Francis is absent in most places, that as Church we have become "*museum Christians*". I have spent Holy Week away by the beach –in distant shores. As part of the People of God, I participated in the Good Friday Celebration there in the local parish church. Meanwhile the beach was packed –"*chock-a-block*" as an Aussie would describe; five continuous rows of holidaymakers stretching from one end to the other, a distance of 1 kilometre. It was for me a joy to see so many ordinary families out there having a wonderful time and away from their daily routine. The Church faithful were mostly of my generation. However sitting next to me in the pews was a very fine young man- around 18 – who was assisting attentively his grandmother. The sermon was of some 50 minutes, very dramatic. In addition, throughout the celebration there were endless explanations of each part, including a detail listing of all the ways that one could have sinned according to each of the 10 Commandments that should prevent one from going up to receive Holy Communion following the Adoration of the Cross. Needless to say that the young man went to adore the Cross, but failed to present himself for Communion. As I looked at this young man, I discerned that he was completely bored and just waiting for it all to finish. We have to honestly assert that is the reality in many places today.

Previously I had gone into the town to the cathedral for the Chrism Mass where the bishop and priests of the diocese consecrate the Holy Oils to be used in the different sacraments. During the liturgy, there is the moment where all the priests renew their priestly vows as Holy Thursday is the occasion there at the Last Supper that we believe Jesus instituted the ordained priesthood. I sat there, dressed in my shorts and sandals, as one of the faithful, behind the rows of the priests all vested in their albs and chasubles. Silently with them at the appropriate moment, I too renewed the vows that I pronounced some 52 years ago. However, with a new understanding of them. In all simplicity, I wish here to share with you what over the many years I have come to believe is my priestly commitment expressed in those vows.

Their formulation I would like to be considered as "*the Beatitudes of a Priest*":

*"-Happy those who do not believe in the possession of a sacred power, but their existence acquires meaning in a permanent service.*

*-Happy those who are chosen by their community, to offer them with love all that they are and have.*

*-Happy those who celebrate the liturgy of life, the cult of commitment, the prayer of their hope, the common, sincere and permanent search.*

*-Happy those who know how to listen to the problems of others, who know how to always forgive, who manage to wipe away the tears of those who suffer, who enjoy the joys of their sisters and brothers.*

*-Happy are those who feel called to serve, to give their time and their charisms at all times for others, without thinking about themselves.*

*-Happy those who feel inside, as their first obligation, to bring happiness to others, to share their own happiness.*

*-Happy those who offer, not an empty sacrifice, but that of their own life, like Jesus, because they know that only this will always be the pleasing worship to God.*

*-Happy are those who do not believe themselves to be consecrated, but companions, friends, pilgrims, walkers, brothers of others, and accompany with their hearts, sincerely, without boasting or seeking praise."*

I am only at the first stage of my pilgrimage away from my mission and community in Tarija. To date, it is a grace-filled time. I move on from here for the next stage that will find me as of the first days of May in my native Australia where I will stay until the late in June. I intend to make my base at Yamba where friends have made available to me their unit. It is not my intention to move around, apart from visiting my family, my Marist community and close friends in the region.

In our 1<sup>st</sup> Term of this *our Nuevo Rumbo* and having officially presented our letter of resignation to the bishop, the community of our former mission of La Mamora where we have continued to accompany them in their being a CEBs (Base Church Community), invited us to visit them to participate in a fiesta where they wished to honour us as a Marist Team. Well, it was a most moving experience for us. The whole village turned out. A magnificent banquet for all present, cultural presentations, an inscribed plaque and various speeches to thank Juan and the Marists. This was followed by several hours of dancing accompanied by local music, beer and wine.

February 10<sup>th</sup> was the first anniversary of the flooding and total destruction of the indigenous Guarani village of Mokomokal. The community wished to have a special commemoration with the Marists. As explained in our two previous Circular Letters, the water system for the village had been completely destroyed. Although promises had been made by government and ecclesial authorities, no action was eventually forthcoming. We had urged the Jesuit Foundation (ACLO) to collaborate with us in a project to provide the village with water as a first priority in the recovery of life for the village. ACLO would provide the technical assistance and we would look to means of financing it from our own limited resources. Under the leadership of our CEBs animators and their own ancestral chiefs, a plan of action was put into operation. We had previously been present at a ceremony to inaugurate and bless the project on December 1<sup>st</sup>. From this date until the end of January each member of the community worked tirelessly to bring water from a mountain spring some 5 kilometres away to the village. They excavated with pick and shovel and then placed the tubing, having carried overland given there were no roads into the region. On the night of February 9<sup>th</sup>, water reached the village and the taps opened. Crystal clear water with surprising force flowed. The people were ecstatic. When we arrived there for the celebration on February the 10<sup>th</sup>, the people came running to embrace us and the chief said to me: *"Last night I showered for the first time in a year. It was just heaven!"* The community made us sit down and provided us three Marists with breakfast, meanwhile a group of men saw to the killing of a pig and its preparation for the banquet that was to follow. With all the community, we went to what had been the home of one of the villagers who had been swept away in her home while sleeping. There we celebrate a Prayer Meeting with a blessing in memory of all the victims. Once the pig over the open fire was declared cooked, all sat down to the banquet. On the tables were several dishes of the pig, accompanied by steamed corn, called "mote". We helped ourselves filling our plates –as is the custom, you eat with your fingers. They called upon me to bless the meal. This truly was *"Eucharist!"* Song and dance followed. Heaps of thanks and praises were directed at us Marists whom they acknowledge as the only ones who care for them. There is still a lot more to be achieved in restoring the village, but this has been the first sign of new life in the village and truly an experience of the Resurrection –an Easter event.

When the new young bishop on the three occasions that he had called us to his office to tell us that we did not seem to have a presence there in the diocese, we responded that that actually was not the case; however we do try to live our Marist charism of *"Ignoti y Cuasi Oculti –Hidden as if unknown in the world"*. As our founders would say: *"We go where others don't go"*. Our way of ministering together as a Marist Team is to *welcome, listen to and accompany*. Having embarked upon our *"Nuevo Rumbo"*, we now feel more free and able to offer an alternative to the dominant system. Age is catching up with the three of us –as some like to refer to us as the *"Three Musketeers!"* Nevertheless, we declare that we will continue to give 100% of ourselves to the building up of the Kingdom here among us while we are still capable.

What is my next move in taking advantage of having this 2<sup>nd</sup> Term away from our base in Tarija? Well, Gilberto and Javier had encouraged me to spend some of the time in my native Australia. So I have my carry-on ready and my flights booked. I am due to arrive in Sydney on May 5<sup>th</sup> that is precisely 46 years to the day that I arrived in Mexico to commence my Latin American Journey. My good friends have made available for me their unit on the NSW North Coast that I will use as my base. It is not my intention to move around a lot, giving myself time to relax, renew and visit with family, my Marists and some close friends nearby. I start my return back home on June 26<sup>th</sup>, which is the day after I hope to celebrate my 78<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Our 4 boys are busy with studies in their respective universities and little Marian is now no longer so little, becoming a beautiful young girl. Arminda and Nair try to keep in shape us three men. Take care. Until next sharing...  
With all our love: JOHN (on behalf of *Gilberto/Arminda/Juan José/Chiqui-Paola-Little John/Marian –Javier/Nair/Lupo/Paco*)