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***“MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA”***

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**Lent-Easter 2020**

**Dear Friends,**

**As we enter Holy Week and the great Christian Feast of Easter in this year of the Lord 2020, we are profoundly aware that for most of us in different parts of the world we are celebrating the Paschal Mystery in a unique form as we live in a state of global pandemic. We can ask: “What part of the way to God is the pandemic of Covid -19 showing us”? Father Arturo Sosa – the actual Superior General of the Jesuits – has answered the question in the following manner: “*It is showing us that we are one humanity. Each one of the human beings, all the peoples, each one of the cultures that enrich human diversity, are part of the unique, varied, rich and interdependent humanity: a single humanity”.* And the Paschal Mystery reveals that we are all now *ONE IN CHRIST*.**

**The past months have tested us in so many ways. Some of us affected directly with the coronavirus, all subjected for a period of time to quarantine, most have suffered financially, many have experienced isolation and solitude and others have questioned the way we live and our own values and priorities and those of modern society. Many conclude that the world will never be the same again. It is our hope that that be the case –that we learn to be more loving, caring, united, in solidarity, compassionate, less selfish and more community orientated, that we care for all that God has created and that we respect the sanctity of life in all forms.**

**In the midst of the crisis, there has been “*Good News”* from the grass-roots as we as a Marist Team [Gilberto, Javier and Juan] continue with our accompaniment of the Base Church Communities [CEBs] in the Latin American Church. The more recent highlight of our journeying together was the celebration of the 11th Continental-Latin American Encounter of the CEBs in Guayaquil, Ecuador from March 9-13th that had as its theme *“Listening to God in the Cry of Nature and that of the Poor. Let Us Defend Life and Promote the Reign of God”.* Some 220 delegates from 20 countries of the American Continent descended upon this Ecuadorian coastal city in a spirit of being Church – a Church of the People and a People that is Church. Among the delegates were some 50 youth, committed and mature members of the CEBs in their home countries who gave a very special flavour and contribution to this Encounter.**

**Following the days of the Encounter, Javier and Juan participated in the annual meeting of the Continental Articulation of the CEBs there outside of Guayaquil at a Jesuit Retreat Centre that was scheduled from March 13– 17th. Juan is one of its founding members and Javier for the past 8 years has succeeded him in being the articulator for the Andean Region of Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. Here the 42 participants were given to reflecting upon our journey as CEBs in the Latin American Church over the past 40 years and to put together a strategic plan for the CEBs in the light of the present social- political- ecclesial realities. You could say that most of us arrived there somewhat tired after the very active days of the Encounter, but ready to give our all for the cause. Over the years we have come to be very close and supportive friends and the climate is always congenial. We forget about our tiredness, work through the day and often until 9 p.m. – and then the younger folk and stalwarts [including our Juan] take to unwinding with refreshments, music, dancing and a lot of laughter. But the tide of events suddenly changes. Early on the Sunday morning after celebrating Eucharist we meet to evaluate the current situation concerning the unfolding of the “Corona Virus” crisis and whether we need to immediately terminate our meeting and try to get back to our home countries. Meanwhile the Ecuadorian government has declared a state of indefinite obligatory quarantine as of Monday –no transport, no flights among the measures to be taken. Hurriedly we pack, run to the airport that is off-limits now to those without a confirmed ticket out and given permission to enter in an attempt to change our ticket for the flight back to Bolivia for that same day. [Javier and Juan were booked for the night of Tuesday 17th, while Gilberto had returned safely following the end of the Encounter.] There are only 3 airlines that service Bolivia from Ecuador with connections through Peru, Colombia or Panama. Our roundtrip is with Avianca through Lima, Peru. No luck there –they assure us that we are still confirmed on their scheduled flight of the 17th. There is space for the same routing on the Monday if we should be prepared to pay an extra $500 each. We check with the other 2 airlines. Latam have no space for that evening and Copa can take us to Santa Cruz Bolivia via Panama on their flight that evening for $1000 each. So Javier and Juan return to the city to sit it out until their supposed confirmed flight on Tuesday evening, along with others of our group who also were unsuccessful in obtaining a seat for that Sunday. We are awaken at 6 am on Monday with the news that all flights will be cancelled from midnight and the country in total lock-down now in effect. After a hurried breakfast, we with our luggage take one of the few taxi still circulating back to the airport where we wait for the agents of Avianca to open their desk at 8 a.m. When finally attended, our only viable option is to take their “confirmed” flight to La Paz at 5.30 p.m. connecting now in Bogota, Colombia as their connecting flight out of Lima to La Paz is unavailable. Although contrary to the government decree, the airline charged us each an additional $600 US for the change. [ Our roundtrip ticket cost us $540.] This is an example of how the big corporations exploit the misfortunes of their customers. Providentially our flight took off on time, having waited all day there inside the airport, Bogota connection was realized and we arrived in La Paz at 1.30 a.m. Tuesday where we took a connecting flight to Tarija at 7.30 a.m., eventually arriving at 10 a.m. Later we discovered that those of our group travelling with Avianca with their connection to Argentina in Lima, Peru were all quarantined upon arrival there as the airport and all traffic in the country now stopped for 15 days. This would have been our lot also. After 10 days in detention in Lima our Argentinian friends were rescued by an Air Force Hercules that their government provided to repatriate them. Others of our group who flew out at the same time with Copa Airlines with connections through Panama, upon arrival there found that the airport was to be closed and so had to remain there for days until alternate arrangements materialized. Javier and Juan now give eternal thanks to the good Lord and his Mother for getting out and home; otherwise they would still be languishing in either Guayaquil or Lima without any immediate prospect of getting out. Two other members of our group are unable to fly out and remain there in Ecuador, being cared for by the local CEBs. We now know the trauma of trying to get out under such circumstances; it is one thing to see it in movies concerning refugees, it is another thing to experience it in the flesh. As we write, we see on social media that in the streets of Guayaquil there are dead bodies and coffins awaiting to be picked up and then interred in mass graves.**

**So since the return of the Marist Team to Bolivia we, along with the whole country, are in obligatory quarantine. All have to stay at home. One member of each household on foot can leave between 7 a.m. - 12 p.m. one designated day of the week, according to the last number on your national identity card, to buy provisions at the local markets. Senior Citizen, including Juan, are forbidden to go outside.**

**With all these restrictions in place, we are learning to survive and keep active, while at the same time recuperating after returning home. Incorporated into our” Marist Village” complex in Barrio Lourdes on the outskirts of Tarija City is our office where as a Marist Team we attend to our pastoral activities with the Base Church Communities at the different levels. So we are able to catch up on a number of tasks that have been sitting on the back-burner and maintain by social media our contacts. On Thursdays we are accustomed to go to the radio station to record our weekly Sunday programme; as we cannot move outside, we have found a way to do it from our office through WhatsApp – a bit complicated, but effective. So this is proving to be a good media to be in contact with our people, to animate and orient them in these difficult days. Interesting enough, recently the young man who comes to read our electricity meter every month, upon seeing Juan outside said to him as he recognized Juan´s voice as they greeted each other: “You are Padre, is it not” and as Juan replied “Yes” he was, the young man added: “Oh, I listen to your programme every Sunday –*muy bueno –* very good!” So it is comforting to us that our efforts are appreciated as we put a lot of work into the production of this programme of *evangelization and concientizacion* [raising the level of consciousness of a people] that we have faithfully put to air each Sunday without a miss since 2006 for the Jesuit Radio Network in Bolivia.**

**About our boys away from Tarija: Paco and Chiqui got back to Tarija and home before the total lock-down. Juan Jose in Cordoba, Argentina...in house quarantine, some classes by virtual media. Lupo did not get out of Sucre in time -now 2 weeks also in home quarantine in his small apartment; there are 40 from Tarija at the university in Sucre held there with so little resources...The government has refused to get them home to Tarija, but now they are making a new attempt.... Hopefully a positive outcome as it seems that the total lock-down will go beyond mid-year. People are desperate and hunger is on the books for many around us and around the country. The *de facto* government has introduced very hard measures but incapable of responding adequately. Nair has to continue with her nursing duties at Tarija General Hospital; at present she is on night-duty and the hospital has to arrange special transport for her. Arminda is at home here in Barrio Lourdes as is unable to go to her work at the stationary. Marian is home as all schools are closed; she brings all her toys to the office and chatters all day –she is hyperactive and full of questions!**

**Seemingly we are on the eve of the emptiest Holy Week of our lives. A Holy Week without saints, without direct contact with the whole Christian community and celebrating together, without ceremonies in the churches, without trips or vacations, without tourists or cars, without the freedom to go out into the streets, without health and overflowing with fear, threatened by the faltering economy. And all with the question of whether politicians can get us out of the painful situation that can threaten us.**

**What remains for us, besides the fears and dangers that threaten us? That Coronavirus victims and their families get out of this situation as soon as possible… True? To many other people, we will spend these days as best as possible. And for those of us who have religious beliefs what are we left with? Believers and all people of good will, we have the Gospel. That explains the reason for being and the essentials of Easter. Because an Easter, which does not take into account the Gospel of the passion of Jesus, is like a banquet presented in elegant dishes, etiquette waiters and dream music. Let us, in spite of the limitations that our present reality presents, live this Holy Week, entering fully into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus of Nazareth –Jesus of the People – who, being lifted up on the Cross as a political criminal, gave His life so “*that all may have life and life in abundance” –* a life where, without distinction, we enjoy our dignity as human persons and as sons and daughters of His *Abba.* May each of us in our homes during this Holy Week experience the joy of the Resurrection.**

**Please continue to remember us in your prayers as we pray daily for each of you, our dear friends. A blessed Easter! With all our love:**

***GILBERTO/ARMINDA/JUAN JOSÉ/CHIQUI/MARIAN-JAVIER/NAIR/LUPO/PACO-JUAN***