

MISIONEROS MARISTAS, BOLIVIA

“CEMPAC”: Calle 11 de FEBRERO s/n

Casilla 345, Tarija - Bolivia

June 25th 2019

Dear Friends,

On this day our brother Juan enters into his 75th year as he celebrates his 74th birthday. If he was a bishop, he would be preparing his letter of resignation to the Pope and the hope that next June 25th he would be going into retirement. Thankfully he has not been made a bishop and so can look forward to actively continuing his missionary endeavours here in Bolivia for the coming years! In the rural community of Pantipampa near Tarija where we have our retreat/rest house we are automatically members of the local branch of the campesiños [peasant farmers] union, and as such enjoy the right to be buried in the cemetary of the community. Juan has been assured that there is plenty of room there for him when he is to be laid to rest and he can choose his plot! So in the meantime, together with our Marist Community and Team Juan is blessed with the health and energy to continue here accompanying our people and our ministry with the Base Church Communities [CEBs] which we have promoted and formed over the past 30 years here throughout Bolivia and the region.

In the Southern Hemisphere we are now in the midst of winter and here in Tarija our climate is generally fairly temperate, but in spite of some very cold spells and frosts, we are presently enjoying some pleasant weather in the daytime. Last weekend we celebrated our 11th Diocesan CEBs Encounter in the rural village of La Merced, that is one of the communities that pertains to our former mission of La Mamora…some 80 kms from Tarija City. Two years ago the annual Encounter we celebrated in the village of Río Negro that also belongs to the same mission; however, on that occasion we suffered throughout the whole event under freezing conditions out in the open. This year we prayed for more clement weather and were blessed, although it still was cold to a degree and we had to sleep in good spirit on mattresses on the cold cement floor of the community centre. This year´s Encounter was truly a working of the Spirit. As is our tradition, we celebrate the Encounter each year on the weekend of the Solemnity of the Blessed Trinity as the bishops of Bolivia have declared it as the National Day of the CEBs. This year we had some 170 delegates from 24 CEBs of the Diocese of Tarija and 85 of those had to be transported in two buses from Tarija City and accommodated; and most of these first had to get to Tarija City from their respective communities scattered throughout the diocese. For us, as the Marist Team and as the diocesan assessors of CEBs, the organization of the Encounter proved once again to be a major undertaking; however, our efforts bore delightful fruits for which we are extremely contented and give thanks. Communicating and coordinating with the respective communities always proves to be a major task and it is not in the life-style of our people to confirm their participation until the last minute. This year’s Encounter had as its theme *“CEBs: Church that Reaches the Heart of the People”* and the catch-cry *“Together We Are Good News”*. The Encounter progresses using the methodology of the CEBs: See-Think/Judge-Act-Evaluate-Celebrate. Our reflections centered around the illumination that Juan developed: *“A Church that welcomes, listens to and accompanies its people”.*  The presentation was followed by 4 socio-dramas that the participants in groups prepared that depicted a Church that does not receive, listen to and accompany its people and a Church that does. Their depiction proved very interesting and portrayed accurately the reality of our Church today. Saturday night was dedicated to a Popular-Cultural Fiesta in which each of the communities performed. Absolutely terrific and delightful! The Encounter reached its high-point with the very creative and participative Eucharistic Celebration before lunch on the Sunday. In all, we can say that the whole Encounter was marked by a spirit of close friendship, participation and over-flowing joy…. a true celebration of being Church –one that Jesus wanted and one that the Apostles left us. *Deo gracias!* And thanks be to God that we returned energized to our Marist home in Tarija and able to take a deserved rest.

As you are aware, our previous Circular Letter was at Easter and now we are half way through 2019. Between Easter and the present we have been occupied with other activities at home in Tarija and other parts. According to our Pastoral Plan, we as a Marist Team try to visit each of our CEBs throughout the Tarija Diocese once every two months; so we have continuously been on the road since Easter. The good news is that with the present Diocesan Encounter we are growing with the addition of 3 new CEBs in rural areas and 1 new CEBs among the indigenous Guarani community in the diocese.

After Easter, the 3 of us participated in the bi-annual meeting of the National CEBs in Cochabamba where our presence and contribution was well appreciated. It is some 15-hours’ drive there. On the way, we stopped for the nights in Sucre to visit with Gilberto’s Gilbertito [Chiqui] and Javier’s Lupo both of whom are at university there –Lupo doing biology/medicine and Chiqui doing physiotherapy. It was great to have the opportunity and to eat together. In May, we were invited to give a workshop to some 53 animators of CEBs in the Diocese of Potosi on the *“Identity, Methodology and Spirituality of the CEBs”.* The 3 of us shared in giving the presentations that involved considerable preparation. We travelled to Potosi in our “Ford Ranger”. Over the past few months in our travels in all we have had several early morning starts from our home in Tarija or returning, setting off on occasions at 3 a.m.

Over the past 20 years here in the Tarija Diocese we have formed very close friendship with each of the animators of the CEBs and their families. Earlier this month we were saddened by the instant death of one such animator, Doña Juana from the village of Cachimayo. Juana, a single mother, had with great sacrifice cared for and educated her 3 children, now in their early 20’s. When the local community lost their catechist/animator through a hit and run accident while grazing his cows along the highway, Juana volunteered to step in so as not to leave the community without their “spiritual leader”. She was fully aware that she was unprepared for the task undertaken; however, went about participating in the formation courses we offered throughout the year for animators, even though at the time the local community often did not respond in coming to the Sunday Celebration of the Word or the meetings of the CEBs. Juana persevered and today we have a very united and responsive community. Two weeks ago on a Sunday afternoon she had left her home in Cachimayo to visit her children in Tarija City. The pick-up in which she had obtained a ride went off the road and overturned. She was gravely injured and died before reaching the hospital in Tarija. The vehicle was driven by a nephew of Don Herman from the same community who was taking to market a load of tomatoes that they had harvested and looked forward to a good sale. As another passenger, was the daughter of Don Herman who is in her last year of medicine. Unfortunately, she also suffered gravely with head injuries. The last report we have is that she remained in a coma and with severe brain damage from which she is not expected to recover. The funeral for Doña Juana in her home village is a real testimony of the model of being Church that we presented in the recent CEBs Encounter. As often is the case here, the local parish priest/pastor says that he is occupied or unable to go to celebrate the Eucharist of Christian Burial and with less possibility of doing the Rite of Christian Burial at the cemetary. So after much effort to communicate with their pastor in Padcaya, once assured that he could not officiate, they ask his permission if Juan could then officiate, knowing that he is somewhat indisposed to the Maristas. Permission is finally given and the community is delighted and relieved that we Maristas will accompany them. Well, what a turn-out and celebration both for the Eucharist and the burial that followed at the village cemetary. We 3 Maristas stayed on for the community luncheon in the village during which several thanked us profusely and commented how we had accompanied the family and the community until the very end. In our subsequent reflection together we noted how the theme of our upcoming CEBs Encounter was so prophetic and assuring. We were all graced by the occasion.

In our Marist Community at this time we too have be subject to accidents; this time with Paco who suffered a knee injury at soccer. Paco is in his last year at De La Salle College in Tarija and plays A-Grade soccer for one of the local teams in which he is the star goal-keeper. After several analyses of his injury, the resonance imagines show that a ligament has been detached and if not operated on at as soon as possible, then he will be unable to return to his much loved soccer. At the local hospital in Tarija, through the Social Security scheme, there are not the doctors or facilities to do the operation required. If through the scheme he can be referred to having the operation performed in Cochabamba, there is a waiting-list of at least 6 months. We have consulted with the most respected orthopedic surgeon in Bolivia who has seen the resonance images and able to confidently perform the surgery at this time. With the very specialized implants and equipment required for a successful outcome, the whole procedure would cost up to $7000 US. As he knows something of us and our economic situation, he will endeavour to get it down to around $5000 once he has seen Paco and how to go about the operation. So it has been a hard decision for all here. The mid-year school holidays start the first week of July and the only suitable time for Javier and Paco to go to La Paz for the operation. Trusting in the Lord, we have made that decision in hope of a very successful result. As you as friends know, for all our services as the Community and Team of Misioneros Maristas in Bolivia we receive no income –no stipends, no salary; depending entirely for our maintenance as a Marist Community of 10 and for our extensive pastoral activities on the generous sharing of you, our friends. In November of each year in our evaluation and planning sessions, we set our budget for the coming year in view of the funds that have been deposited during the current year into our account. Our emergency fund for 2019 today has little over $2000US left. Meanwhile we are building up our available funds to see us through 2020. As one of our dear priest friends in Australia has repeatedly over the years said to Juan, *“Hoppy, if the Lord wants it, it will happen!”.* So we take another step, trusting in his protection.

We have just finished preparing a photo display depicting the 4 stages of our Bolivian Marist Mission that covers a period of some 29 years, starting with our foundation here on November 22 1990 and our 1st mission adventure setting up the San Pablo Mission in the Sud Yungas; then the 2nd mission in the Amazonia Region of Bolivia –the Palma Flor Mission; followed by the La Mamora Mission in the far south of Bolivia, border with Argentina and in the Andean Mountains; and as of 2009 our becoming an Itinerant Missionary Team at the service of the Tarija Diocese and other regions of Bolivia and the Andean countries of Peru, Ecuador and Colombia promoting, forming, accompanying and articulating the CEBs. In view of the fact that next year it will be our 30th anniversary, we have tried to preserve the memory. Our bodily figures have changed considerably in due course, but happily we are still young at heart!

Know that we always look forward to hearing the stories of you, our very good and faithful friends. Your ongoing friendship and solidarity continue to encourage us to reach out and move forward with the promptings of the Spirit.

May Mary of Nazareth accompany all of us in our life’s journey.

Warmest regards:

*Gilberto/Arminda/Juan José/Chiqui/Marian – Javier/Nair/Lupo/Paco - Juan*

**“Todo a Jesús por María, todo a María para Jesús”**

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