

A Marist's Missionary Journey in the Latin American Church. In the Spirit of Vatican II, Medellin, Puebla and Aparecida.

John Hopkinson SM

Early Influences

First impressions are often true impressions and remain with us throughout life. I was born in a Marist parish and 20 metres from our home was the Marist monastery where lived the priests of the parish and the missionaries who gave home/missions and retreats throughout the country. The monastery chapel was where my parents were married and where my four sisters and I were baptized. My mother told me that I was actually baptized over the sink of the sacristy! My mother in the first years of Marist presence in the district served as the honorary secretary. Within 400 metres of my home was the Marist College where I was educated by the Marist Brothers from the 4th year of primary to the end of high school. These were preVatican II days. My first teacher at Marist College was Brother Jarlath who every day before the mid-morning break would conduct a mission collection. It was organized in form of a competition between four teams (red, green, blue and gold). The team that gave most during the week was let off homework on the weekend. (Needless to say, we usually ended up with little or no money left in our pockets to buy our refreshments or lunch!). Thus started my interest and love for the missions and things Marist. Throughout the years the brothers presented us by word and example a Marist spirituality. My last year 1963 our class teacher was Brother Othmar, the college director, who was also our religion teacher. The first session of Vatican II was in progress. He enthusiastically gave us a love for Pope John XIII and for what the Council envisioned. During the year John XIII died and Paul VI announced the continuation of the Council. During these years at the same time our home was type of Bethany for the Marist priests when they came back to their Glenlyon monastery for the short rest after giving missions or retreats away. In those pre Vatican II days life was fairly ordered in the monastery and some welcomed the opportunity to "escape" and experience family friendships. (As an aside note, between the Marist Brothers and the Marist Fathers in my day-to-day life was a girl of my own age who lived in front of the monastery. Normally Mondays to Thursdays after classes there was football training for the college team and on my way home I would catch up with Noreen on her way home from college. We would sit under the camphor-laurel tree by the monastery. Upon high

school graduation I entered the Marist seminary and later Noreen the SMSM's –although there was no SMSM presence in Queensland at the time. Noreen went on to the missions in Oceania and later became the Australian provincial.). Meanwhile upon graduation from Marist College I received the honoured award for character and leadership. In one sense throughout my formative years there were strong and progressive Marist influences - home, the Marist Fathers and the Marist Brothers. (As a further aside note, between 1955-1975 from the Marist Brothers College and the Marist Fathers Parish of Ashgrove some 9 young men entered the Marist Fathers, 7 later to be ordained and 6 spent time in overseas Marist missions).

Later Influences

As a young adventurous 18 year-old I entered the Marist Seminary in Sydney (Toongabbie). Paul VI had reconvened Vatican II and one day each week at lunch hour Vatican Radio on shortwave transmitted a summary of the workings of the Council. So instead of one of the seminarians reading monotonously from a book on the pontificate of Pius IX, we listened to a distorted transmission much to our delight. During the subsequent years of the Council a number of local bishops and Marist bishops from Oceania passed through the seminary upon their return to give us a run-down on the progress of the Council. Meanwhile our professors were consciously adapting their lectures and the formation programme to the spirit of the Council. As young Marists we were able to assimilate the new in light of the old. During this time of change and transition we witnessed an increase in the number of those who decided to leave the seminary. However, among those of us who continued a deeper commitment and maturity resulted. I can recall the number of times I presented myself before the Dean of Scholastics to ask permission or to undertake a new initiative, and with a pained face he would respond, “Oh, but it has never been done before!” and I would humbly reply, “But why not? and then providing good reasons and the desirability of such a course of action. In good spirit he usually conceded by saying, “well, I will have to put it before the full faculty (which we scholastics mischievously referred to as the *Sanhedrin*) for their consideration and approval”. Needless to say, these men being good Marists were open to the Spirit and were prepared to innovate and allow us to be responsible and to be open to the world outside and filled with the spirit and hope that the Council foreshadowed.

During those seminary years on occasions passed through Toongabbie Marist missionaries from Oceania and Japan who would give to us a conference. From funds from the sale of used stamps our Seminarian's Mission Society would present them with a cheque. At times like Christmas we would also send off a cheque to our Marist missionaries. So during our years of formation the missionary dimension of the Marist vocation was never in the background.

Discernment for the Missions

After ordination I was assigned to one of our colleges, but after 4 years of teaching I asked to be accepted for missionary work. During those teaching years I also undertook by correspondence university studies in sociology and politics. In the meantime it was mutually agreed that I have a year of parish ministry. Up until this time Australian Marists who applied for the missions were posted to either Oceania or Japan. Now the Church of Oceania was moving from being a foreign mission to being a local native church. With the advent of John XIII and the Vatican Council eyes were turned to the great needs of the Church of Latin America. The then Mexican Marist Provincial had made known to Marists on visit to Mexico of his hope that Marists from other provinces could come to work in the small Mexican Province. On hearing this, in my application to the General administration I expressed my interest in Mexico and asked if I could be likewise accepted. Their reply was affirmative and so on 5 May 1977 I arrived in Mexico to begin my missionary endeavours as a Marist at the service of the Latin American Church.

Mexican Missionary Journey (1977-1988)

During the rest of 1977, living and collaborating with a small Marist team on the outskirts of Mexico City, I came to an awareness of the tremendous challenge that was ours pastorally. I was in the midst of a people who I hoped to serve and who were traditionally baptized Catholics, who with great fervor carried out a series of religious practices and traditions, but there was what appeared to me to be a great gulf between faith and life. The majorities of the people were victims and considered as objects of a social, economic and political order that failed to reflect Gospel values. One also discovered here a great gulf between the minority rich who controlled the system and the vast majority poor who were marginated and outside the system. Meanwhile preparations were underway for the Third General Conference of Latin

American Bishops in Puebla, Mexico. I had little knowledge at the time of the previous conference (Medellin, Colombia), but became caught up in the enthusiasm for what Puebla might be for the Latin American church. I recall the sadness I felt at the time on learning of the death of Paul VI and then the joy with the election of John Paul I and then again the sadness of hearing of his sudden death and all was suspended. I recall too the anxiety as to whether John Paul II would reconvene Puebla. In my short time there I had heard of Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (CEBs - Base Church Communities) and the Theology of Liberation and tried to familiarize myself as regards and so began to form the first CEBs in the barrios to which I had been assigned. While the Puebla Conference was in session I was actually away doing an intensive Spanish Language and Pastoral Course in San Antonio, Texas where our lecturers were “up-to-date” on all the theological and pastoral lines that were the hope of Puebla. Upon its conclusion a number of the Latin American bishops passed through the institute and gave us at first hand a run-down on the Conference. Over the forthcoming 10 years the spirit of Vatican II, Medellin and Puebla guided my Marist life and mission in Mexico.

In early 1984, after having been associated with the Marist Mission of San Mateo on the outskirts of Mexico City, I moved on to help found the new Marist mission in the south in the Diocese of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca. Here the diocese was structured around the CEBs. During the 4 years there I served as a member of the Diocesan CEBs Commission, the Pastoral Council and as one of the three members of the Evaluation and Planning Commission that was charged with the restructuring of the diocese, according to the CEBs model of Church.

We lived as part of a prophetic missionary church, one that was persecuted – (had its martyrs), one that was suspect, but one that was alive and committed and had clearly its option for the poor. Here I also recall the impact at the time (and to this day) on me and my fellow pastoral agents of the diocese the news of the rape and murder of one of the religious sisters in the diocese. It was the week before Holy Week and as was the tradition all we priests went off with our beloved and prophetic bishop to do a priest’s retreat. Sister Luz Marina, a young Colombian who had recently come to the diocese, had gone off alone – (given the priests were on retreat) -on a scheduled pastoral visit to a rural community (that naturally was a CEBs). After the evening meeting she stayed overnight at the quarters attached to the village church. During the night the sons of the local cacique entered, violated and shot

her, leaving her bleeding to death under the table where she was found next morning by one of the local women. It brought home to us once again the price of being a faithful follower of Jesus and faithful to the option that were his.

In retrospect, Mexico and, in particular, Tehuantepec was a training ground for me as a Marist to take the Marist vision and spirit to Bolivia. Over the years many have asked me, “How did you come to be in Bolivia”? That is another story in itself! But I know that it is the result of allowing oneself to be led by the Spirit. Although at the time Marist Administration did not look favorably at the request, I was permitted to go and in good standing to accept the invitation to be at the service of the Bolivian Church that is the poorest and most in need of pastoral agents in Latin America. So a new phase in my faith journey begins with my arrival in Bolivia in November of 1989.

Bolivian Missionary Journey (1989-)

By the completion of my first year in Bolivia where I had been “caretaking” a parish for the Dutch Augustinians in the Sud Yungas of La Paz (the Southern Andean Mountains), two young men came into my life who expressed their hope of working for their people in a missionary capacity. So before year’s end we set off to do a contemplative directed retreat in the Andean Mountain village of Yanacachi. Gilberto and Javier had never before heard of the name “Marist” nor made a retreat of any sort. Yet the Marist spirit and charism was hidden inside them, waiting to give birth as they sensed the call to be missionaries under the title of Marist, like myself. So there in semi-darkness before the image of the Virgin Mary above the altar of the Yanacachi Church on the concluding night of that 14-day retreat –it was on 22 November 1990 - the three of us signed a commitment, giving birth to this small yet grand adventure called “*Misioneros Maristas*”. This birthing of a new foundation within the Marist Family, we believe, has its origins in the original Marist Project of 1816 at the Marian sanctuary of Fourviere and is in continuity with it.

When Rome approved the “Society of Mary” in 1836 legally it was only the branch of the priests that was approved. And yet from the beginning the venture was much broader than something for priests only. For those who knew of the Marist plan, “Society of Mary” meant the “many branched tree” of priests, brothers, sisters and lay people that had been talked about from the beginning. As from the start of the missionary venture, priests were not the only Marists to work in the new

missionary territory of Oceania. The departure of the missionaries on 8 December 1840 was a good example of this. Father Colin wrote of this departure, “14 missionaries – priests, brothers, artists, engineers, booksellers - have been sent off to the other world with bag and baggage.”¹ Of the 14 people in the group, only 4 were priests, 5 were brothers, 2 were clerics yet to be ordained, and 3 were lay people. Within 5 years Francoise Perreton was to break the barrier that had prevented women from taking part in this great missionary enterprise. Colin said that we should be missionaries of action and missionaries of prayer.² The spiritual tradition of the Marist Brothers likened the three core Marist virtues of humility, simplicity and modesty to three violets hidden in the garden, giving glory to God in their smallness and hiddenness. On another occasion Father Colin commented, ‘I have noticed that those who have the Marist spirit succeed even with little talent, while those who do not have it, even when they have talents, accomplish nothing’.³ Such words and values like humility, simplicity, poverty and intimate union with God do not fall easily on modern ears. These values will be something new for our times, just as they were for those pioneer Marists.

Today our new little Marist fraternity lives this spirit and tradition at the time of the birthing of a new model of Church in Latin America, and, in particular, in Bolivia. For some nearly 19 years I have experienced its growth and development in this culture and state of poverty and exclusion. With us our people have grown to love Mary and imbue her spirit of the gentle life and compassion. From our beginning as a Marist missionary fraternity, our project envisioned that we would become a fraternity open to all who wish to live the Gospel in the spirit of Mary.

We have seen the development of this vision in a specific direction. Gilberto and Javier who have consecrated their lives as Marist missionaries have answered their double life’s call, that to the married state. Our fraternity, community and pastoral team have been enriched by this new dimension to our life together. Their young wives, Arminda and Nair, are from our Palma Flor Mission where we were based from 1994-1999. Since then we have constituted a mixed Marist community – some members called to the ordained priesthood and

¹ *Colin sup*, Dok. 230.

² *A Founder Speaks*, Doc. 190, §3.

³ *Colin sup*, Dok. 333, Colin about a home mission preached by Father Etienne Séon.

celibate state and others to married life. It is with great joy that we have subsequently integrated into our Marist life together the sons of Gilberto and Javier – (Gilberto's Juan José turns 13 in November, Gilbertito 11 in August, while Javier's José Guadalupe turns 11 in July and Francisco Javier 9 in September).

San Pablo Mission

Our missionary endeavours officially commenced on 22 February 1991 – (the 25th anniversary of my own Marist profession) – when the then Bishop Aehmar Esquivel of the La Paz Archdiocese commissioned us as a missionary body, saying, “*Vayan – Go!*”, and we literally set off high up on the back of a produce truck with only our haversacks, a hammer and nails, a rifle and a chainsaw that we had purchased in La Paz. We were to establish the new mission of San Pablo in the jungles of the Sud Yungas, along the Boppie River that is one of the early tributaries of the great Amazon. The area of San Pablo had recently been colonized by young poor peasant farmer (*campesinos*) who had come there from the now tired and limited lands of the high plains of the Andes in hope of making a new life. The dirt road down the mountains ends at Cotapata. So after a 12-hour ride we get off, wash up and take the jungle track by the river that will, after a 6 kilometer walk, have us arrive at San Pablo village. It is here that one of the locals shows us a part of the land he has acquired and offers it to us for building our mission residence. Neither of us has experience in building houses, but the first weeks see us busily building our mission residence with its thatched roof out of local materials. There are no shops, so apart from the rice and the green bananas that we get from the villagers, we rely upon our skills at hunting wild animals and at fishing in the river where we also bathe and wash our clothes. Upon completion of our home with its hand-made furniture, during weekdays we give the mornings over to our formation as Marists and as missionaries. I sit with Gilberto and Javier around the kitchen table that we made. We refer to our study centre as the “University of San Pablo”! Meanwhile we have also become expert gardeners, producing our own vegetables to supplement our basic diet of rice and bananas, and now being able to share something with our neighbours.

In the afternoons and weekends we set off on foot to the surrounding 13 established villages. Over the four years spent there in San Pablo we have been able to form and accompany CEBs in each of the villages and providing them with their own animators (lay pastoral agents). Also we

have served the people as regards to religious celebrations and to a process of *concientizacion* (*raising the level of consciousness of a people*) and evangelization. As there is absolutely no access to medical facilities or attention, the people have placed their confidence in us and we attend to them as they come to the mission in hope of attention and relief. The 4 years at San Pablo are indeed hard, yet grace-filled and full of joy and growing together as persons and as Marists.

Interlude and preparation for the Second Stage of our Bolivian Journey

Having finished this initial missionary experience we felt the need to receive deeper formation so that we be better equipped to take up the invitation of Bishop Casey of the Pando Vicariate in the Bolivian Amazonia to initiate our second endeavour that came to be known as Palma Flor Mission.

Through the good disposition and help of Brother Basilio Rueda (ex General of the Marist Brothers and then Novice Master of the Mexican Marist Brothers), Gilberto and Javier are accommodated at the brother's college in Colonia Del Valle in Mexico City that is near the formation centre for professed religious that is run by the Mexican Conference of Religious. Here Gilberto and Javier for a full semester have the opportunity of advanced studies in bible, theology and pastoral under some of the best in their respective fields in the Latin American Church. During those months in Mexico they enjoy the hospitality, community life and spirit of the Marist Brothers that has been considered by them as so enriching and determining in their lives as Marists to this date. On weekends and recesses they would be invited to join in the activities of the Marist novices and junior professed.

Palma Flor Mission

Back in Bolivia in the second half of 1995 we set about the establishment of the Palma Flor Mission, some 280 kilometers from the nearest town, that of Riberalta where Bishop Casey resides. Palma Flor is a zone composed of some 13 villages, one of which is entirely indigenous and almost in extinction. It is real Amazon territory – plenty of rain, intense heat and humidity. Here the governments of the day have preferred to forget that it exists... an area abandoned, without basic services, impassable roads for months of the year. Yet here we find a people so poor, so beautiful and welcoming – a true paradise for those who can see and listen and have an open heart.

Upon arrival in Palma Flor – (by now we have our 4x4 wagon) – like in San Pablo, we immediately set about building our mission residence and later our formation centre, known as “CEMFE” – (Marist Centre for Church Formation –San Pedro Chanel). Again we dedicate our pastoral efforts to the formation of CEBs in each of the villages. During the year we provide formation courses for the animators or lay pastoral agents of the different communities. They come generally four times a year for a week and live at the Marist Centre. Here at Palma Flor Mission it has been possible for us to organize with our CEBs what we call T.C.O. – (*Trabajos en Común Organizados* –Organized Community Works) – whereby the people have their own organization to work the land in common and thus have better and bigger production and the possibility to market their produce without being exploited by the buyers. Through this organization they are able to also have a community store and dispensary. All of which has shown them their capacity to liberate themselves.

La Mamora Mission

By the end of 1999 we have left the Palma Flor Mission to initiate our third mission at the invitation of Bishop Esquivel who had commissioned us originally while auxiliary of La Paz Archdiocese and now Bishop of Tarija. In the far south of Bolivia, bordering Argentina. We have now been in Tarija Diocese ever since. We first took on a rural area, comprised of 11 villages. Again we had to set up base, as the area had not received continuous pastoral attention for many years. So in this abandoned pastoral zone we established ourselves in the La Mamora village. First we built our mission residence and, like in Palma Flor, our “CEMFE” – which we named San Marcelino Champagnat. Our original intention was to enter into the same process of evangelization with the CEBs as we had done in Palma Flor and for a minimum of 4 years. As things have transpired, after the initial 4 years our bishop reached retirement and the diocese was vacant for two years. We saw it desirable to stay on, consolidating the process of CEBs in La Mamora so as to be a model for future development of CEBs throughout the diocese.

With more accessibility transport-wise and better communications, from Tarija we have been able to become more involved in CEBs on the national level. As a Marist team we have contributed much in experience and service to the national body. Gilberto and I were able to represent Bolivia in 2004 at the 7th Latin American and Caribbean CEBs

Encounter in Mexico. It was there that was seen the desirability of having a permanent team to serve as the articulation of CEBs throughout the American Continent. The team consists of 5 counselors, one for each of the 5 regions. I was asked to be one of the 5 and to coordinate the Andean region that comprises Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. (Today Brazil alone has some 100.000 CEBs!). In the course of events, I have been asked to try to articulate the CEBs of the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean and to be a source of contact with the CEBs of other English-speaking countries. Another reason for our staying up to the present in the Tarija Diocese is that at the 2005 National CEBs Encounter, Tarija was elected as the venue for the next encounter in 2008. So it fell to our Marist team to be the principal organizers and coordinators as we serve as the diocesan assessors of CEBs and myself as the Episcopal Delegate. Meanwhile we have been more than active in the promotion, formation and accompaniment of CEBs in distinct parts of the diocese now that the CEBs is a pastoral priority of the diocese.

By 12 September 2009 – the patronal feast of our La Mamora Mission – (the Most Holy Name of Mary) - we have arranged with the bishop to hand over the mission to the diocese so the bishop can appoint a permanent pastor and make it officially a parish. Thus we Marists will be able to dedicate more time to the promotion of CEBs throughout the diocese and on the national level and for myself to be more available to articulate CEBs throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Another aspect of our pastoral ministry for the past two years has been our production and conduction of a weekly radio programme with Radio ACLO Tarija that is part of the national Jesuit radio network. Our programme is called “*Tejiendo Redes – Weaving Nets*” whose focus is that of evangelization and raising the level of consciousness of the people, often addressing what is going on in the country and what should be a response in light of the Gospel. It reaches every corner of the Tarija State and parts of other States and northern Argentina. In addition with the Jesuit Loyola Foundation we collaborate with them in their leadership course for civic personnel and authorities. So humbly we can say that the Misioneros Maristas are integrated into the life of the Bolivian People and Church and seen as agents of change and as walking with the people in their hope of realizing that utopia of another world possible.

What this faith journey can contribute to the future direction of the ongoing Marist project

We believe that our little Marist fraternity formed in displacement (having moved from the ordinary and proper place) and led by the Spirit in a new way of being together, has been a living manifestation of God's presence. The great undertaking that we have been given is to live the compassionate way as Mary did. There is a new heaven and a new earth for which we hope with patient expectation. As the *Book of Revelation* concludes, "the world of the past has gone". This is the vision that guides us. This vision makes us share one another's burdens, carry our crosses together, and unite for a better world... one in accord with the plan of God and the project of Jesus of Nazareth.

I, for my part, have lived the past 32 years journeying as a Marist with the Latin American Church inspired by Vatican II, Medellin, Puebla and ultimately Aparcida. In my first missionary experience others revealed to me and shared with me this new vision as we integrated into our lives a spirituality, theology and pastoral of liberation. We were a prophetic voice and witness in a suffering world. A new model of being Church was emerging, along with persecution from outside and within. We were branded and held in suspicion. By the late 90's that fire had been contained severely, but not extinguished. Some prophetic voices had been silenced forever, others have been severely burnt out, others have given up, some just joining the mainstream in conformity and a remnant try faithfully to rekindle and keep that fire alight. I believe that our little Marist fraternity in Bolivia, born nearly some 19 years ago in a little unknown mountain village, is an integral part of that remnant as it tries to recapture and live the spirit of the initial Marist Project at Fourviere (1816) that set about to assist the birth of a new Pentecost in the Church as Mary assisted the first Pentecost amidst the Apostles of the Primitive Church.

Many around us today have returned and taken refuge in a more traditional evangelization and formation. They seem enticed by the promise of security, certitude, acceptance and a tranquil life. The whole prophetic tradition, and Jesus Himself is the best example, makes clear that confrontation indeed is an authentic expression of compassion. This is an essential and integral aspect of compassion that we seldom recognize. In our society, where the power of evil has become so blatantly visible, the disciple of action frequently requires the courage to confront. And this confrontation always includes self-confrontation which prevents us from becoming alienated from the world we

confront. Honest direct confrontation is a true expression of *compassion*. We cannot suffer with or opt for the poor when we are unwilling to confront those persons or systems that cause poverty. We cannot set the captive free when we do not want to confront those who have the keys. We cannot profess our solidarity with those who are oppressed when we are unwilling to confront the oppressor. Compassion without confrontation fades quickly into fruitless sentimental commiseration, and this is not the proclamation of the Good News that Jesus announced that first day in His home synagogue of Nazareth. As Marist we are called to live the compassionate way as Mary did and to proclaim the greatness of the Lord as she did in her *Magnificat*.

John Jago captured well the spirit of the men around Father Colin as “*Men of Fire*”.⁴ We call the first Marist women to go to Oceania “*pioneers*”. As Marists then, we are to be “*Pioneers*” and not “*Settlers*”. Some have talked about the dying days of the Marists. Colin worried about the many problems the Oceania mission rose and wrote to Cardinal Fransoni in 1837, “*we have barely begun*”. And then went ahead. My limited experience that I have tried to share with my fellow Marists through this contribution gives me great hope that Marists throughout the Church and in the world can rise to the present challenge that this moment in history offers us and that the forthcoming General Chapter be a moment of transformation for the Society, projecting us with courage and confidence into the future.

⁴ Superior General John Jago, *Mary, Mother of Our Hope*, 1986, p. 21.