



Palm Sunday, is always very special in Santa María, as people gather at 8.00am on the little hill (*Cerrito*) a few blocks from the church, to process with song behind the wooden statue of Jesus on a donkey that dates from the time of the Jesuit missions. They all bring branches: some have elaborate home-woven affairs with fronds from our local palm trees; others carry sprigs and leafy twigs of all kinds (for only John's gospel speaks of "palms"; Matthew and Mark just have "branches"). This year, then, the people of Santa María will be feeling more keenly than those in the UK the loss of this annual event and the other ceremonies of *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), as churches are closed and people are told to stay at home. Masses from our parish church are broadcast on the local radio station: "Sunday Mass from the house of the Mother of God. Today on Radio New Dawn from 18.00. Let's pray together."

**Misa Dominical Tupāsy róga guive.
Hoy por Radio Nuevo Amanecer
desde las 18:00hs.**

ÑAÑEMBO'E OÑONDIVE.

The actual figures of Covid-19 in Paraguay are very low compared to the UK. By last Saturday night they were reporting a total of only 3 deaths and 96 confirmed cases, mostly traceable to people who have recently entered the country. The lockdown, which is now on its 26th day, seems to be working – and just as well, because if the hospitals of advanced countries like Italy and the UK cannot cope with the pandemic what chance would there be for a developing country like Paraguay? But the level of fear is much higher in Paraguay – fear of the unknown. "How sadly we are living this time of Lent," wrote to me the animator of my basic Christian community, "We have to pray a lot because for God nothing is impossible ... pray together that this crisis will end. God is great and may his will be done."

During the last week panic struck Santa María as a couple of cases were reported in the next town. On Friday the news was that they are ramping up the restrictions and that people can only leave home to buy food or medicine and will have their vehicles taken away and fines imposed if they are found to be out for any other reason. Some local towns have piled up a heap of earth on the entrance road so that vehicles cannot get in or out.

The lockdown is causing genuine hardship and hunger among the majority of the population classed as "informal workers", who now cannot go out to their building sites or their employers' houses. There is a government scheme to give Gs500,000 (£65) to those in need, but our Institute Director Emi, who is one of the volunteers collecting names of the needy, is sceptical about it reaching the poorest. Many do not have mobile phones - which you need to receive the aid - so they had come to the inscriptions with phone numbers belonging to friends or neighbours. Who knows if they will ever receive the message, or the money? Then they have to reply with "1" to the message to confirm, and she had seen people were replying with "gracias" (thank you) and the like, and therefore not being registered into the system. Those who are really poor are not used to reading and replying to instructions. Fortunately the poor show great solidarity with each other, and there was a big collection of food in Santa María for those who did not have enough.

For the same reason, SMEF has not been able to do much so far in terms of online education. Although smart phones are common, the phone signals are very poor in the remoter areas of our municipality and the online platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom are hard to operate on a tiny phone screen. The government has also led people to believe the closure of educational institutions would only be short term: at first it was going to be just for two weeks, then just until Easter, so people have been holding back from making new arrangements. Now there is talk of classes opening again in May, or in September. Nobody really knows.

Just as I was finishing this letter I got a message from a friend, Julia, who runs a small family project to make organic sugar. She said, "I want to ask you to pray for us. It is a month now that we cannot work, because of the quarantine. Everybody isolated. This is going to last a long time and I am worried about what we are going to do to eat. You know that we work day by day to get by." I promised I would ask all those who care about Santa María to pray for its people at this time.

A very blessed Holy Week and Easter to all our supporters, in this year when we experience global solidarity in a new form, from Margaret and all the SMEF team, Palm Sunday, 5 April 2020