

## FR. STEVE BAUMBUSCH ,PIME

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c/o Bishop's Residence • Guadalupe Center - Balindog • 9400 Kidapawan  
N. Cotabato, PHILIPPINES

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December 23, 1999

Dear Mom and Dad,

*I'm starting this letter now, while I have a little spare time, even though I'll add to it later to let you know about the Christmas Day celebrations here. Actually this letter will be written in fits and starts, whenever I have a few minutes, but I'll try to keep you informed of what day it is that I'm writing. Thanks for the birthday card... it arrived here yesterday. Today the package from Jim and Ellen arrived, as well as your Christmas card and the video of the OSU-UM game. Thanks to all! So far the Christmas season has been wonderful! We began the Simbang Gabi or Misa de Gallo on December 16. We had borrowed a large speaker and put it on the roof of the church. At 3:00am each day we blast out Christmas songs, in order to wake the people up and let them know that it's time to get ready to come to church. Then Mass begins at 4:30am. I mentioned in my last letter that I had been told that the attendance at Simbang Gabi was not so large in the past, but I was hoping that it would improve this year. Did it ever! We've had people standing outside every morning. Most of the increase is due, I'm sure, to an idea that Brother Merck (the seminarian who is here for an exposure experience) came up with. We announced a "Chorale Contest" to take place at each Mass after communion and invited all the GKK's to participate. (You remember, GKK stands for the Cebuano words meaning Basic Christian Community, and it's the way the parish is organized: each of the barrios where I go to celebrate Mass is a GKK and there are 4 GKK's or "zones" within the poblacion of Columbio itself). So each day, a different group presented a couple of songs with choreography. Those from barrios outside the poblacion hired a truck to bring them in, some 20 or 30 strong. The first group to present was quite simple: just standing in front of the altar and singing. The next group did a representation of the first Christmas, with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. After that, the presentations became more and more elaborate, with shepherds, the Magi, even live animals. One group released a pigeon with a little banner attached to its leg reading "Gloria in Excelsis Deo". Others even included sparklers and Santa Claus. Then the last group presented today (Dec. 24), and they went back to simplicity. They set up a few tables with food on them, and while the choir softly sang Christmas songs, they had a man dressed in rags going from one to the other, asking for something to eat. He was refused and even thrown to the ground by the first three or four groups he approached. Finally, one family welcomed him and gave him supper. It's hard to describe the impact this simple little skit had, but it was very powerful. There was hardly a dry eye in the chapel, including mine. Afterward, while thanking the group that made the presentation, I said, "This is truly what Christmas is all about."*

*This evening we will have "Midnight Mass" at 9:00pm, and the awarding of prizes for the chorale contest. I'm the judge, and I decided that everyone will be a winner, because each group really put a lot of effort into its presentation, and it was obvious that it came from the heart. We had solicited donations for prizes, so I will just divide the money evenly among all the groups. They can apply the prize to their individual GKK funds. Last Friday we had our monthly "Center Meeting" with the leaders of all the GKK's, and after the meeting we had a Christmas party for them. They knew in advance about the party and that there would be a gift exchange, so each one came prepared. For gift exchange here, the custom is for each person to bring a wrapped gift, according to a set price limit, and place it on a table. The gifts are then numbered and everyone draws a number to receive his or her gift. So you don't really know who it is you are buying for. For the Center Meeting Christmas party, the announced price range was 20 pesos (about \$.50) and above. It's also a custom here that you do not open the gift in public, nor in front of the giver, so that no one will be embarrassed or make comparisons. Thank God for that last custom! After the party I went to my room and opened the gift I received. As I tore the wrapping away, the letters M-O-D-E-S-S began to appear.*

*That's right...I received a single feminine napkin! I was laughing so hard I had to tell somebody, so I put the wrapping back around the gift and went downstairs to let Brother Merck take a peek inside. But others gathered around and saw it too, so we all had a great laugh. One of the parish team members traded me for the hand towel she had received.*

*This is all for now. Merry Christmas. Love,*



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