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December 25, 1999

Dear Mom and Dad,

Merry Christmas! It's Christmas afternoon now, and things have finally settled down a bit. I just finished preparing my homily for tomorrow (Sunday). Midnight Mass (actually 9:00pm) was packed! I can always gauge the number by how many hosts are used for communion. We used three full ciboria, while the most we had used before was two.

I mentioned above my decision to declare everyone equal winners in the Chorale contest. Someone had told me that this wouldn't go over too well here, but the people seemed to appreciate it. For a little place like Columbio, and with the general poverty of the people, the response of the donors who had been solicited for prize money was amazing. Over 5,000 pesos were donated (this in a place where the daily wage for a laborer is 150 pesos), so I added a little myself and we were able to give 500 pesos to each of the eleven participating groups.

One reason that the "Midnight Mass" is pushed forward to 9:00 is the tradition of "Noche Buena". After Mass, families and friends gather for a huge meal. It's especially important to be together, sharing the meal, right on the stroke of midnight. I was invited by four different families, so of course I couldn't be there right at midnight for all of them. In fact, after two meals, it was already pushing 1:00am, and I was beat. The day had begun at 3:30am as I got up for the last Mass of Simbang Gabi, and of course I still had the Christmas morning Mass to say at 8:00. So I begged off the last two Noche Buena meals and got a few hours of sleep.

Let's back up to December 23: I had a great birthday too! Normally it is the custom here to sing "mañanitas" on a person's birthday. This must come from the Spanish influence, because I saw that it is quite popular in Mexico too. The friends of the birthday celebrant gather outside his or her house at about 4:30 am and sing a special song (actually many songs) to wish a happy birthday. The celebrant knows this is coming, and has food and drink prepared for all. In fact, one of the comical Tagalog songs sung here has the words: "Have a wonderful birthday; now we hope you'll feed us." In my case, my birthday fell within the week of Simbang Gabi, when there is Mass at 4:30am. So do you think they skipped the "mañanitas"? Wrong! It was simply pushed forward to 3:00am.

The night before we had had a Christmas party for the parish choir, which I left at about 11:30pm, so I was sleeping pretty soundly when they began. In fact, they were well into the second song before I woke up and went downstairs to find about 50 people gathered on the first floor of the rectory. The choir Christmas party had lasted until 2:00am, so many of them didn't have any sleep at all.

One thing I've discovered about get-togethers here is that any gathering has to have an agenda, and an emcee. So after a few songs, one of the men announced what would be coming next: a couple readings from Scripture, short talks by various individuals, more songs, and a response from me. The choir had prepared a huge card (about 2x4 feet) which read, on the outside: "Happy Birthday Fr. Steve. We love you!" On the inside, the choir members had written their own individual messages and greetings. The parish team had taken care of preparing food for everyone, and we finished up just in time to get ready for Mass at 4:30.

After Mass, the celebration continued at the outdoor hall of the Tribal Training Center right next to the

rectory. Many people brought food, and once again there was a program prepared, complete with emcee. There was a singing contest, speeches and games.

One of the games they like to play at many gatherings is based on a popular TV game show here called "Pera o Kahon?" (The Money or the Box?). A series of questions is asked, with multiple choice answers, and the people line up in front of the letter they think represents the correct answer. All of those who choose the wrong letter are eliminated, until it gets down to just a few people and eventually a final winner. Then, similar to "Let's Make a Deal", the winner gets to choose between a certain amount of money or the unknown contents of a box; the emcee keeps upping the ante on the money amount or adding money to the box until a final decision is made.

For my birthday celebration, all of the questions had to do with my life: what date I arrived in Columbio, what's my favorite color, when was I ordained, etc. I had been asked for this "bio-data", as they call it, by the emcee a couple of weeks before; so you can see that a lot of preparation went into this event. Then in the evening, we had our Parish team Christmas party, which turned into another birthday party for me.

As always, there was an agenda and emcee, and of course I had to give a little speech. But I was happy to do so, because it gave me the chance to formally thank the members of the parish team for all of their hard work, which has really been a huge help to me. As I told them that night, when I arrived here, I was brand new in every sense of the word: new to the language; new to the situation of the place; new even to parish ministry in general, since in my 15 years of priesthood I had never been assigned to a parish. There's no way I could have managed without the help of the parish team. And even now, after 6 months of getting my feet wet (figuratively and literally, if you remember my last letter), I still need them a lot and will continue to rely upon them. I told them that, even though of course I miss my family and friends in the States, and even though I continue to struggle with the language(s), and even though I still face situations that I've never experienced before and I'm not always sure what I'm supposed to do, I'm as happy here as a pig in you-know-what, and I thank God every day for His goodness and grace in calling me to Columbio.

Speaking of getting my feet wet, I will be going to Davao on Monday (the 27th) to pick up the repaired Vitara. Fr. Peter got a call from the mechanic who said that it is ready. Going one month without a vehicle hasn't been easy, and I realize just how much I have depended the Vitara. The news from the insurance company was not good. They have denied overage because the policy explicitly excludes any damage caused by flood. Really, there was no flood...just poor judgement on my part. There's no explicit exclusion of damage caused by the stupidity of the driver!

Through the Regional Superior I'm sending all the paperwork to the secretary of PIME's parish in Manila; she has a lot of experience in working through and around beauracracy, and maybe she an convince them to reconsider.

While I'm in Davao I will send this letter out via an internet café. I'll close for now; as always, I love you and miss you lots. Hope your Christmas was great and the New Year/Millennium will be even better. Love,



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