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*Happy Easter to all!*

*While I have some time here in Manila, I thought I would write and give some more detailed descriptions of our Holy Week activities, to accompany the many photos that I sent. (To view photos, click on the words "Photo Album" directly to the left of this letter. The photos are listed as Easter, 2001). As I mentioned before, right after my last Mass on Palm Sunday, I went to Davao, since the two PIME seminarians who will be with me for a two-month exposure experience were due to arrive on Monday. We went to Kidapawan on Tuesday, and on Wednesday there was a Clergy meeting in the morning and the Chrism Mass at the Cathedral in the evening. You might remember that the Chrism Mass is the time that the holy oils are blessed and all the clergy renew their priestly commitment. Then Holy Thursday morning the seminarians and I set off for Columbio.*

*The Holy Thursday Mass took place at 4:00 PM. This is a little earlier than usual for this liturgy: even though things have been relatively peaceful in Columbio, the people like to be home before dark, especially those who come from outlying villages for the Mass. During the "Lord, have mercy" portion of the Mass, some students presented a drama, portraying different kinds of sinfulness (gambling, drinking, violence, promiscuity), followed by repentance and reconciliation. It was really beautiful.*

*Following the homily, we had the traditional washing of the feet. Twelve parishioners dressed as apostles and were seated in front of the chapel. Since the people of Columbio were not present at the Cathedral for the renewal of priestly promises, we incorporated this into the foot-washing ceremony. Just before I washed the feet of each apostle, the commentator asked me a question, such as: "Fr. Steve, do you renew your commitment to the priesthood?" ... "Fr. Steve, are you ready to give of yourself totally in the service of God's people?" ... "Fr. Steve, are you ready to lead the people with full trust in God, toward the peace and justice of His Kingdom?" ... "Fr. Steve, will you love and cherish the children of this parish, even when they cause commotion?" (I liked that one!) ... "Fr. Steve, are you ready to re-commit yourself to the priesthood for your whole life?" ... And several others: 12 promises in all. Of course, I responded, "I am" or "I do" or "I will" as appropriate.*

*We also presented the holy oils at the offertory procession, with a little explanation as to the use of each type. After communion, there was the Eucharistic procession through the Church, and the placing of the Eucharist at the "altar of repose." There is not the custom of all-night Eucharistic adoration on Holy Thursday (rather, on Good Friday there is all-night veneration of the cross). In the past, I understand that there was a full meal for all the people after the Mass, but in recent years this has been replaced by a lighter "merienda" or snack, provided by the different zones of the poblacion.*

*On Good Friday, activities began at 1:00 PM, with the "Seven Last Words of Jesus". Representatives from the parish offer a reflection on each of the "Words": "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do", "I am thirsty"; "You will be with me this day in Paradise"; "Woman, there is your son; there is your mother"; "My God, why have you abandoned me?" "It is finished"; "Into your hands I commend my spirit". They take these phrases and relate them to our actual experience. For example, one spoke on the need and difficulty of forgiveness in our lives; another, about those who thirst for justice and peace; or how we deal with the feeling that we have been abandoned by God or others.*

*This year, four of the seven speakers spoke in Ilonggo, so I was not able to catch the meaning of every word, but their sincerity and intensity were obvious. Following the Seven Last Words, everyone gathered outside for the Way of the Cross through the streets of the poblacion. The individual Stations here are a bit different from those used in the States. Some coincide but, for example, the three "falls" of Jesus are not included. The first station is the Last Supper, and others are included that are not used in the US, such as Jesus' words to Mary and John. One of my "scholars" translated a contemporary reflection on the Stations from Cebuano to Tagalog and I prepared a booklet on the computer. That same scholar organized the youth to dramatize each station as we moved through the streets. The final station (the Resurrection) brought the people back to the Church where we celebrated the Good Friday Liturgy (reading of the Passion, Elevation and Veneration of the Cross, Petitions and Communion).*

*For the veneration of the cross only the servers, the "apostles" and I did so during the Liturgy itself. The congregation waited until afterward and then lined up to venerate. As I mentioned above, there is also the custom of all-night veneration. Each of the four zones of the Poblacion took a time-period to spend in prayer with our crucified Lord, while we maintained an atmosphere of reflection, with soft music, in the church.*

*With Fr. Eddie Pedregosa now residing at the parish, we were able to duplicate all of the Holy Week Services. So while I was celebrating in the Poblacion, he did so in Telefas, our largest GKK (Basic Christian Community). We had announced this to all the villages so that people might be able to attend one celebration or the other. On Holy Saturday, there was no service in the Poblacion, but we did celebrate the Easter Vigil Mass in the evening at Telefas (I presided with Fr. Eddie concelebrating). So we had the blessing of the new fire and the Paschal Candle, the many readings from Scripture relating the History of Salvation, 10 adult baptisms (the catechumens having been prepared throughout the period of Lent), renewal of baptismal promises, etc.*

*The Easter Vigil Mass in the Poblacion was celebrated at 4:00 AM on Easter Sunday. I told you last year about the custom of the "Salubong" or "Greeting." This portrays the meeting of the Risen Christ with the Blessed Mother. All of the men gather in one spot, and the women in another (on the streets of the Poblacion), and they move toward one another while singing. When they meet, the Easter Angels (little girls) break into a chorus of Alleluias, urging Mary to rejoice over her Risen Son. Then doves or pigeons are released, and there is more singing from the congregation as they move in procession to the church.*

*Here I have a little confession to make. The plan was for the Salubong to begin at 3:00 AM. So sure was I that we would be operating on "Filipino Time", I actually got up at 3:00 AM, had my shower, and prepared myself to go to the meeting place. Wouldn't you know, on this occasion the activity started close to the planned time! So, as I walked toward the meeting place, I could see that the people were already in procession to the church. I hurried back to get vested and be ready to begin the blessing of the fire when they arrived. Then the Easter Vigil Mass continued, in the same way as I described above in regard to Telefas.*

*During the Gloria, while the church bells were ringing, the youth performed a festive liturgical dance in the front of the altar. They had another one during the singing of the Our Father. Beautiful! One little mishap: during the celebration, there is one part where the baptismal water is blessed by dipping the Paschal Candle in the water basin. As I removed the large candle from its stand in order to do so, all of the hot wax gathered at the top went rolling down my arm. Afterwards, the students joked with me: "It was impressive, Father, that you didn't cry out or make any sound. But we could tell from your face that you weren't thinking, 'Alleluia!' at that moment." Anyway, no harm done. I wasn't burned, and during the Offertory collection, I had time to sit down and peel away the hardened wax from my arm. So, all in all it was a great Holy Week.*

*I mentioned before that the seminarians staying in Columbio are musicians. In the limited time after they arrived, they helped to prepare the choir. I know that they will be a big help as we get ready for the parish fiesta on May 7. The bishop will come and we will have confirmations at that time.*

*Just a quick description of the Candidates' Forum, which was held on Holy Saturday. This was sponsored by the Religious Sector, Non-governmental Organizations and Peoples' Organization, and took place at the Municipal Gym. Fr. Eddie was very active in the planning. I would have preferred a different day than Holy Saturday, but it seems that this was the only day that everyone could agree on. As you know, elections are coming up in May. So this was an opportunity to give the people some guidance in regard to political education, as well as for the candidates to present their platforms in an open and respectful way, hoping to dispel some of the tension that exists between the different camps.*

*The theme was: Be a CHAMP, by working for Clean, Honest, Accurate, Meaningful and peaceful elections. Bishop Valles came for a short time (naturally this was a busy day for him!), and spoke about the need to elect good, competent and honest leaders who are "Maka-Diyos, Maka-Bayan, Maka-Tao" (for God, country and people). The Vicar General of the Diocese, Fr. Ronnie Villamor, gave a talk on "Morality in Politics". During an intermission period, the youth of Columbio presented an interpretive dance to the song "Give Peace a Chance". The final pose of the dance (which I was unable to photograph because it passed too quickly) had a young child atop a pyramid of bodies, unfurling a banner reading, "Vote for Me!" This is to encourage the people to vote "for the children"; that is, to elect candidates who will address the needs and future of our youth. Then each political party was given 15 minutes to introduce its candidates and to present its platform. This was followed by an exchange among the 3 mayoral candidates, each one being given the opportunity to pose a question to the others; then an open forum with questions from the people to the candidates. It was a good event, well attended by people from almost all the barrios of Columbio. Of course, we hope that it will bear fruit in truly CHAMP elections.*

*Ok, I think that's about all for now. Please keep up the prayers for Columbio, that things will continue to be peaceful leading up to the elections and that the joy we have experienced in our celebration of the Risen Lord will continue to reside in the hearts of all, as we try ever harder to be an Alleluia People, witnessing to the Triumph of Jesus in our daily lives. Love,*



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