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Dear Mom and Dad,

HAPPY EASTER!!! I'm in Zamboanga City now for PIME Regional Council meeting that will start later today. I took off from Columbio on Easter Sunday afternoon, to go to Davao (where I go the flight to Z.C. on Monday morning), checking carefully to make sure that I had my ticket and that I had put the Styrofoam ice-chest in the car so that I can buy some things on the return trip. A woman from my parish asked for a ride to Kidapawan, which is on the way. As I dropped her off and took her things out of the back of the Vitara, I looked around and said, "Where's my backpack?" I had been careful to make sure I didn't forget anything...except my clothes, toiletries, breviary, etc! I didn't want to return to Columbio, since then it would be after dark before I set out again, but I would have done so if I had to. But first, I radioed back to Columbio, and luckily found that someone else would be coming to Kidapawan later in the evening from there. My secretary tracked them down and gave them the backpack, then called me back to let me know. So I spent the night in Kidapawan and left very early the next morning to catch my flight. Oh well, like I tell the people here: matanda ako (mah-tahn-DAH a-KO): I'm getting old!

Holy Week was beautiful as usual in Columbio. I didn't take pictures this year, since the activities were pretty much the same as last year, for which there are many, many pictures on my website. [By the way if you haven't seen the website in a while, you should go there. Don K. sent all the photos to Dr. Bob Nolan (from St. Andrew parish) and he made them accessible from the site, and Don has been updating things as well. It's looking good! The easiest way to get there is thru PIME's site. Go to www.pimeusa.org and click on "Links" at the top of the page. A list of links will appear, with mine near the bottom. Just click on the link and you'll get to the web page. Then put it on your "Favorites" list, for easier future reference.]

On Holy Wednesday there was a clergy meeting in Kidapawan in the morning and the Chrism Mass at the Cathedral in the evening. (You remember that the Chrism Mass is the one in which the blessed oils are distributed and the clergy renew their priestly commitment.) I attended the meeting but was not able to be at the Chrism Mass because Columbio High School held its graduation in the afternoon, so I hurried home for that. Ronald and Melanie, the two students who live in the convento, graduated this year, so I thought it was important for me to be there. I didn't have to stand in for their parents, since the mother of each was able to come from her village, but I did bestow the medal that each received in regard to their "cadet" training (kind of like ROTC).

I did my own renewal of priestly commitment during the Holy Thursday Mass. I think I mentioned that last year, I found a beautiful ceremony that combines the washing of the disciples' feet with the priestly renewal. As I approached each "apostle", the commentator would ask me a question, such as, "Fr. Steve do you once again commit yourself to the priesthood for your whole life?" or "Fr. Steve, are you ready to give of yourself whole-heartedly to the service of your people?" I answer appropriately ("Yes, I do," or "Yes, I'm ready," etc.) and proceed to wash the feet of an apostle. So there were twelve questions in all. I had to chuckle at the last question, which loosely translated from the Tagalog, would be: "Fr. Steve, do you promise to continue to love and serve the children of the parish, even if they drive you crazy?" I said yes.

On Good Friday, we began in the early afternoon with reflection on the Seven Last Words of Christ. It should actually be the 7 last phrases: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "You will be

with me today in Paradise.” “I am thirsty.” “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” “Woman, there is your son; there is your mother.” “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” “It is finished.” Different people of the parish took one of the phrases and offered a reflection, relating it to our daily lives and experiences.

From there we proceeded into the streets for the living Way of the Cross. As in the past, the young people had prepared a dramatization of each station. Of course, we don't have anyone actually nailed to the cross as you might have read about happening in other parts of the Philippines. But it's still a pretty intense and moving experience as the Passion of Jesus is re-enacted.

After the Stations, everyone returned to the Church for the Good Friday liturgy (Readings, Veneration of the Cross and Holy Communion). There had been no vigil of Eucharistic Adoration on Holy Thursday, as we're used to in the States. Instead, following the Good Friday liturgy, there is a vigil of the cross. This is in keeping with the general tradition that takes place when someone dies here in the Philippines. Family and friends keep vigil over the body in the family home, right up to the time the body is buried. In this case, the different “zones” of the Poblacion took one-hour shifts of prayer and veneration.

I was impressed, as the church was filled with people for over four hours of vigil, up to 10:00 PM. The Easter Vigil Mass would normally take place on Holy Saturday evening, but in Columbio the tradition is to hold it very early on Sunday morning (4:30 AM). It begins with the Pagsalubong or “Encounter”, which I've described to you before. By tradition it is believed that the first person the Risen Jesus encountered was the Blessed Mother. So for this devotion, all the men (representing Jesus) gather in one spot while all the women (representing Mary) gather in another, and then they move toward one another until they meet. Then angels (the cutest little kids you could imagine) sing, doves are released, alleluias are shouted, and the whole group processes to the church. I saw a devotion similar to this in Mexico, but it took place on Good Friday and represented Jesus meeting his mother on the way to Calvary.

So then the Easter Vigil Mass goes on as usual, with the blessing of the fire and Easter Candle, many readings tracing the history of salvation, joyful singing of the Gloria, renewal of baptismal promises, etc, etc. This year I managed once again to spill hot wax from the Easter Candle on my hand, but only a little, since I was prepared for it this time and managed to maneuver the candle away quickly. After Easter Mass, there is a tradition of blessing seeds, cooking oil and images (pictures or statues).

As you might remember (or could surmise from the fact that high school graduation just took place), we are now in the “summer” vacation time of the students. This year, as in the past two years, I will have two PIME seminarians staying with me for their summer mission exposure experience. One of them (Raja, from India) has already arrived, while the other (Ricky, from the Philippines) spent Holy Week in his own parish and will arrive in Columbio in mid-April.

I have also arranged for all of my college scholars to spend the month of April working at the parish. During the school year, the Tribal Training Center within the parish compound houses high school scholars of Fr. Peter from the B'laan tribe. Since they have gone home to their villages for the summer, that building will be available for my scholars (boys), and the girls will stay in a house just across the street, which I am in the process of buying for the parish (more on that in a minute).

My scholars will work during April as their contribution to the parish. The boys will spend most of their time on a fence we are planning to build around the parish compound, which is really rather large: more than a 100 yards on each side. The girls will help to prepare things for the parish fiesta. In addition, the scholars will be the core of the choir for the fiesta Mass and will prepare a special presentation during the time of the fiesta.

In my first year of priesthood, when I was at the high school seminary in Newark, I helped to direct the

musical play, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." Believe it or not, we're going to try to perform that same play here in Columbio. I was able to get a CD of the music in a format called "Minus-One", which enables you to eliminate the singing and have just the background music. Then by chance, around Christmastime, I saw that a film version of this play was being broadcast on TV, so I videotaped it. I showed the tape to some of the young people and they are excited about giving it a try. So my plan for the scholars is that they will work on the maintenance projects each morning and practice singing and "Joseph" each afternoon.

About the house across the street, it is owned by a parishioner who had given it to their daughter. But she has recently married and moved to another town, so the house has been vacant for some time. I thought that it might be a good thing for the parish to have a place like that: very close to, but not right on, the parish compound. So I talked to the bishop, who was very enthusiastic, and then to the owners and we are now in the process of transacting a deal. Actually, the paperwork is in the hands of the diocese, since as a foreigner I am forbidden to own land or real property. I have some ideas in regard to the future use of the house, which I'll tell you about in some future letter. But for now, the owners have said that my scholars can move in there this month, even if the transaction is not yet complete.

Now, about the new church... I told you last time that work had stopped for a while, and then restarted. The contractor promised me that his whole crew would come and the work would continue every day with out interruption. Half of that promise was kept. Work did indeed continue every day (up to Holy Week), but only those who were laying floor tiles showed up. These worked steadily and did a decent job, which is almost finished. But no other work was being done, nor did the contractor himself ever show up again. Twice from Kidapawan I tried calling him on his cell phone, with no answer. I sent messages with his crew to tell him to come to Columbio, with no success. I talked to his aunt again and she told me that she has sent two notes, the latest one appealing to his family sentiment, since she said she wouldn't be able to show her face in Columbio if the church is not finished on time.

It's so frustrating, because we're so close to being done: if they would just show up and work steadily, it would only take 3-4 weeks to complete the job. So, I'm hoping that the contractor did in fact go to Columbio yesterday (Monday), as I made arrangements for him to talk with the parish council president in my absence. If, by the time I return to Columbio, he hasn't showed up, I will have to find others to complete the work. I think that the amount I'm still holding in retention will be enough to finish it. Of course, I hope and pray that it will not come to that, but I am determined that the church will be ready for the fiesta, with or without this contractor.

Well, on that happy note, I think I'll close for now. I'm sure that things will work out; at least that what I keep telling myself whenever the stomach acid starts burning! Just joking: I'm trying to keep my patience and I really do believe that one way or another; God is good, all the time! I'll be here in Zamboanga City thru the rest of the week, and will have regular access to the Internet. Love and miss you both!

Love,



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