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N. Cotabato, PHILIPPINES

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Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm starting this letter now, while I have a little time, even though I won't be able to send it out until next week, when I will go to Davao to pick up two PIME seminarians who will stay with me for two months as "exposurists". One is from Italy and the other from India, and they just finished their first year of theology at PIME's new international theologate in Tagaytay, south of Manila.

It is "summer" vacation now in the Philippines, with the school year having finished at the end of March and the new school year beginning in June. My resident students at the rectory have also gone home for vacation, but they will be back at different times throughout the summer. I had planned for them to stay with their families the whole time, but due to different situations, that plan has changed.

The family of one of them (Dante) is going back and forth from their barrio of Old Bantangan to the city of Marbel (about an hour and half away) because of work, so he really doesn't have a permanent home for the summer. He went to be with the family for a while, but will return early next week. Another (Ronald) is the guitarist for the choir, and we need him to be here for Holy Week as well as the Parish fiesta on May 15. The third (Melanie) will stay with her family most of the summer, coming back just for the fiesta. So it's really only this present week that all of them are gone.

I enlisted the help of some other students, who live in the poblacion, for cooking and housecleaning this week. They get a kick out of the fact that I have given them "titles". One of them is taking care of the three pigs we are raising (to be roasted at the time of the fiesta), so I call him the pig manager. Then there is the food supervisor, the plate engineer (dishwasher) and floor manager(sweeper).

On Friday I plan to take them to Tacurong for a little outing, as thanks for their help. I mentioned last time that Filipinos cannot understand why anyone would stay alone, especially at night. As I suspected, I had several people insist that they would spend the night at the rectory so that I would not be alone. I politely refused, but it was really only two nights that I was by myself.

The members of the parish team are conducting "Days of Recollection" in the different barrios, and for some of them, it is easier to reach a given barrio from here than from their homes, so they've been spending the night and will continue to do so throughout this week. Then by next week, I will have the seminarians with me, so everyone can rest easily.

I still haven't decided what to do with my resident students when the new school year begins. The most important thing, of course, is that they continue their schooling, and I have assured them that I will continue to support them. The only question is where they will live. Dante has relatives in town, so there's no problem for him. I told you before about the group of students who live at the Tribal Training Center next door; it's possible that the other two could join that group, since it is not limited to Tribal Filipinos. But they don't seem too thrilled with that idea, even though they haven't told me why. For the reasons I told you before, I would really prefer that the rectory be a rectory, and not a boarding house for students. So, we still have a couple of months to figure out to do.

The English class is back in full swing, three nights a week. Since school is out now, many of the students who stay in town (in boarding houses or with relatives) during the school year have returned to their barrios. So rather than limiting the class to 3rd and 4th year high school students, I have opened it up to everyone, and there has been 30-40 students (of all ages, even adults) for each class. Of course, I had to go back and review the areas we had already covered, but that was good even for those who had been attending from the beginning. I really enjoy teaching and we have a lot of fun in class.

We're still moving, albeit slowly, in regard to the new church. I have drawn up a sketch of the area available once the bodega of the cooperative is removed and a rough design of the church itself. One thing I've learned here is that things take a lot of time. The Board of the Co-op has agreed to the transfer of the bodega, and had a donation of land outside of town for the new one. Then there was a complication in the agreement with the donor, so it took a couple of weeks to work that out. Now, it is solved, and we planned to begin demolition of the existing bodega last Saturday. But the Co-op board wants to have a good start on the new bodega before demolishing the old one. In order to do that, they need sand and gravel delivered to the new site, and the only pay loader in the area (owned by the municipality) is under repair, waiting for parts to arrive from Japan. So, we're on hold again, although the chairman of the Co-op has promised that demolition would begin sometime this week.

So the next step will be to call the Planning Committee back together and have them go over the design idea I drew up. I have the plans of the church in Manila on which I based the design, so if the planning committee agrees with the basic idea, it would not be difficult to proceed. We'll need the bishop's input and final approval, and then we can begin to move. Certainly, it will be a couple more months before actual construction begins, which is OK, since I wouldn't want to start until after the Parish Fiesta anyway.

I mentioned the "Days of Recollection" going on in the different barrios. They have been well attended and the people really seem to appreciate them. I have to give the credit to the parish team for that, since they are doing almost all the work. The theme is "The Call" and the activities encourage the people to examine their own Christian vocation, stemming from their baptism. Those attending are the leaders of the different GKKs, so there is also reflection on their call to serve the Christian community in their individual roles. Finally, there is a focus on the obstacles to responding to God's call (sin, pride, selfishness, broken relationships) and the need to seek reconciliation with God and others.

My part is to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Mass. It's interesting to see the different reactions and styles of the people in different areas. For example, in Telefas, which is an Ilocano area, they are very openly emotional. There were a lot of tears during the session on healing of relationships and almost everyone was crying during their individual confessions. In other areas, where the people are mostly Ilonggo, they are more reserved, although they say that they were very touched and happy with the experience. The group that gathered in the poblacion was quite emotional as well.

One of the activities was to choose from a selection of photos an image that represents their personal life journey thus far, and then explain their choice to the group. I was impressed with the openness and depth of sharing. The people talked about problems they've gone through, times they turned their backs on God, how they felt Him calling them back.

One woman chose a picture of lamp, and she said, "Living here in Columbio, with all the brownouts, we know that even with a lamp, there's not always light. In my life, I've had moments of darkness and moments of light. The darkest time was when I was 15 years old and my mother abandoned the family. The greatest source of light has been my husband, who supported and encouraged in finishing high school and college. In this picture, we see that the light from the lamp only extends so far, and then there's darkness again. So we have to expect that there will be moments of darkness in the future as well. And we have to prepare ourselves and trust that the light is still there within us."

Another woman had a picture of footprints on the seashore. She said, "I've made a lot of bad decisions in my life. I've chosen the wrong path, and I've hurt people, especially those closest to me. And even now I have to live with the consequences of those decisions. I chose this picture, because I've experienced forgiveness from God and from others, like the sea coming up on the shore and washing away the footprints of my past. This picture stretches out to the horizon, which is like the future for me. It's a hidden future; I can't see beyond the horizon, but I need to keep moving forward, making new footprints. I can't forget what I've done in the past, but I can trust that those footprints have been washed away, and that makes my journey easier."

The most common comment at the end of the day has been: "We've never done anything like this before. We should do it again, and invite all the people of the GKK." So, as I've said many times in the past, the parish team is great. They put a lot of time and effort into the planning and carrying out of these Recollection Days.

Speaking of the parish team, some significant changes will take place within a few months. Two of the members are pregnant, due in the Fall. Since each also has another child under the age of two, this will not be a temporary leave, but they will stay home permanently. A third member, Jun, had finished one year of college a couple of years ago, then ran out of money for tuition. He will return to college in the coming school year, supported by one of the "scholarships" from the States. So, we will have to find and train some replacements. Luckily, the most experienced and active member of the team will be staying on, and she will be a big help in the training. We hope to find a couple of people soon, so that they can join the existing members in the different activities, and the transition will be much smoother.

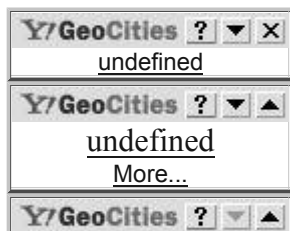
In regard to those scholarships, I'm taking Mark at his word that he can find some sponsors, and we have lined up 5 students to be the beneficiaries for the coming school year. Many people have requested help, but beyond these five, our answer has been "maybe next year". Most of the sponsored students this year will go to school in Kidapawan (Jun is the exception, since he had already started in Marbel, and will continue there) so that I can be in regular contact with them and follow their progress.

As I think I mentioned in an earlier letter, the idea of sponsoring "scholars" is not only to provide for their formal education, but also for their entire human and Christian growth. So we will be meeting as a group for prayer, discussions, etc. That's why I want them all to be in Kidapawan, rather than spread throughout Mindanao. They don't necessarily have to attend the same school though, since there are several in Kidapawan to choose from. In the future, if the number of sponsors increases, we'll see about maybe having different groups indifferent areas.

Ok, I guess that's all for now. The next time I write a full letter will probably be after Holy Week, so I can tell you about all the activities. There are several special customs and rituals which we don't have in the States, so it should be very interesting. Right after Easter, I have a Regional Council meeting in Zamboanga City, so that might be the time I send the letter. In the meantime, know that I'm thinking about you a lot. Love and miss you both! Love, Steve



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