

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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Hi everyone!

MERRY CHRISTMAS and HAPPY NEW YEAR! Hope your Christmas was great, and you know how much I was thinking about you and missing you on that day.

One big news item here in Columbio is that a diocesan priest, Fr. Eddie Pedregosa, has been assigned as resident here. His work is in inter-religious dialogue, particularly among the Muslims. That's one reason that the Bishop thought it would be good for him to live here with me: since he knows the area well and is familiar with many of the people, he is in a position to read the situation well and know in advance if any trouble is on the horizon. I'm delighted to have him. Of course, while residing here, he also helps out with the pastoral work as his schedule allows.

I finally broke down and put up an antenna for the TV. As you know, I had been waiting for the mini-satellite dish to become available, but the way it looks now, that may not happen in my lifetime. With the antenna we can receive two national stations, not very clear but at least visible. We've been following the impeachment trial of President Estrada: sometimes very interesting but often bogged down in technicalities. Last Friday the prosecution presented its "bombshell" witness: a bank employee who witnessed the president setting up a huge bank account under a false name. While this was not a specific charge of the impeachment articles, it represents evidence of unexplained wealth.

The witness testified just before the Christmas break, so cross-examination will take place when the trial resumes after the first of the year. If this evidence holds up, you would think that Estrada would resign rather than going through the rest of the trial, but just today he made a statement that he will not resign and remains confident of acquittal. So the drama continues. To be honest, I have mixed feelings about the whole process. I'm not at all confident in Estrada, but many of those leading the fight for his ouster are part of the same corrupt, crony-filled system. Some people seem to think that if he goes, all will be well. I don't see that at all. In fact, I'm not so sure that the Vice-president, who would take over, will be that much better. Of course, sitting down here in little Columbio, I don't have a finger on the pulse of the capitol. Most people in Mindanao seem to be pro-Estrada, because they continue to put hope in his promises to help the poor. Those promises have been largely unfulfilled up to now, but... "hope is the last to die."

Let me tell you a little bit about our Christmas celebrations. As you know, there is the tradition of "Simbang Gabi" or "Misa de Gallo", the early morning Mass on each of the nine days leading up to Christmas. Last year, we held a Chorale Contest among the GKK's and each day groups came from a couple of the barrios to participate. This year, since we are still on "alert", the Parish Council felt that the people would not want to travel in the dark from their villages to the Poblacion, so we decided against the Chorale contest. Instead, it was just the people of the poblacion who attended the Mass here, while in the villages the catechists led a "Bible Service de Gallo".

I was a little afraid that the attendance here in the poblacion would be light, both because of the alert and the lack of the contest. But the chapel was filled each morning. I think I told you before about the two girls who are taking a two-year Catechist training course in Cotabato. They came back to Columbio for their Christmas vacation and "exposure" experience, and they did a great job preparing the chapel and presenting

a short catechesis at the beginning of each Mass. We had an empty manger set up in the front and each day we added a different symbol, which was the basis of the catechesis.

At the time of the homily, a different representative of the 4 zones of the Poblacion shared a reflection on the readings and the Christmas season. Our PIME Superior, Fr. Gianni Sandalo, was here for visit of a few days, so the three of us (Gianni, Eddie and I) took turns presiding. When I was not presiding, I sang with the choir.

On December 22, at dinner, my secretary said to me, "Father, you must be tired after a few days of getting up early for Simbang Gabi. You should just go to bed right after dinner." It took me a minute to catch on, but then I realized that they didn't want me around as they prepared for my birthday the next day. So at around 8:00 I went upstairs. I could tell that they were trying to be quiet, so that I could indeed go to sleep. However, there was no silencing the poor pig, which was being slaughtered right outside my window.

You know the custom of the mañanitas, or birthday serenade. Usually it would take place at about 4:00 AM, but since this was the week of Simbang Gabi, it had to happen even earlier. So at about 3:00 I awoke to the sound of singing. I came downstairs to a beautifully decorated house and about 50 people gathered in the sala. I'm attaching a few pictures of the event.

Of course, for any kind of gathering, there has to be a "program", so there were songs, prayers and readings. And of course, food was prepared by the parish team for all. Then at lunchtime we had another meal with many guests, and people were coming and going all throughout the afternoon. In the evening we had a prayer service and Bible Sharing with the scholars whom I am supporting in Kidapawan, who were home for the Christmas break. So, it was a great birthday, even if pretty tiring.

On Christmas Eve, we had our "Midnight" Mass at 8:00 PM. The church was already filled by 7:30, which was a shock to me, accustomed as I am to "Filipino Time". Since this was Sunday, I had already celebrated three Masses (in the poblacion and two different barrios). After the Mass there was the "Noche Buena" meal in the family homes. I had a lot of invitations, but managed to hold out for just two meals before being completely pooped out and heading home to bed.

Christmas day we held the "Kasalan sa Pasko". I told you before about this opportunity for those in "irregular unions" to validate their marriages in the Church. A few months ago, we had done a census in all the villages, so we knew exactly who were in this situation. I had planned to follow up personally with them and invite them to participate in the Kasalan sa Pasko, but then I was out of Columbio for two months, so that follow up didn't take place. Still, 20 couples participated, and afterwards we had a mass baptism of their children. I told the people that I thought the Lord was very happy to receive such a great gift on His birthday.

I'm writing this letter on December 27, but by the time I send it out, we'll have celebrated the New Year's Midnight (again, at 8:00 PM) and morning Mass. We are also holding the Parish Youth Days on December 29-30. Youth from all the villages will gather here in the Poblacion for conferences, ballgames, sharing, and reflection. Each group will present a song or skit during the evening Fellowship Program.

A word about the "peace and order" situation. Thanks be to God, things have been calm and safe since I returned. But as I mentioned earlier, everyone remains on alert. The holdups along the road seem to have stopped, due mainly to frequent patrols by the police and military. After I first returned, I usually had a police escort if I had to go in or out of Columbio. But the last few times, this was not necessary. There are still scattered reports of cattle and carabao (water buffalo) rustling in the different villages.

I'm becoming more and more convinced that most of our problems here have to do with the mayoral and town council elections, which will take place in May of next year. I been told that there is a pattern that

repeats itself here in Columbio. The elected positions have three-year terms. For the first year after an election, there is a lot of confusion, uncertainty and even reprisals for real or imagined affronts that took place during the campaign. Then in the second year, things calm down and everything is peaceful. In the third year, instability resumes as candidates' position themselves for a run at office. From my own limited experience, I can believe that this description is accurate. I arrived in Columbio during the second year of the current term. That was my "honeymoon" period. Even when there was fighting and violence in surrounding areas, Columbio was like an oasis of peace. Now we are into the third year, and the honeymoon is over.

I've told you before about the speculation that it would be in the interest of a candidate to sow instability so that he or she could campaign on the promise of bringing peace and security. The problem is identifying just who the perpetrators or backers are, because all theories (even mutually exclusive ones) are equally plausible.

This part gets a little complicated, so try to stay with me. The adjoining municipality to Columbio is called Datu Paglas, and the municipality beyond that is called Baluan. At one time, all three were a single municipality under the control of a powerful Muslim family named Paglas. It is clear that the Paglas family would like to hold the office of mayor in each of the three municipalities. In Datu Paglas itself of course, the mayor is a Paglas brother. The previous mayor of Columbio was a Paglas brother, and he was murdered while in office. His widow, Zaharra Paglas was then elected and is the current mayor of Columbio. In Baluan, however, the mayor is a member of a rival Muslim family.

During the upcoming elections, the Paglas brothers will field candidates in each of the municipalities. It seems they view their sister-in-law Zaharra as "outside" the family now, and too much under the influence of the Provincial Governor, who is also their political rival. So, in order for them to "hold" Columbio, they need one of their own in office.

Now, it's always been the claim of the Paglas family that they are able to ensure peace and security, particularly because of their influence with the MILF rebels. In fact, this has been the case, and because of their effectiveness in maintaining peace, many Christians have voted for them over Christian candidates. While fighting between the government and the MILF was going on in many areas, the MILF presence in Datu Paglas and Columbio has been limited and quiet, which means that their "camps" have not been targets of the military, and there has been no shelling of civilian areas, no need for evacuation, etc. (Remember that the word "camp" is used loosely, since it really indicates a village where the rebels live among civilians.)

That situation ended in early November, when the military attacked an MILF "camp" within the boundaries of Columbio, and the MILF retaliated with an assault on an army detachment and a synchronized attack on several villages. This was shortly after we began to get reports of a plan to kidnap one or both of the priests, and was followed by a period of calm before the holdups along the road began. There was mass evacuation of civilians (mostly Muslim), who spent weeks in tents, relying upon relief missions from the government and church for their sustenance.

So what brought about the change? That's the \$64,000 question. Some people believe that Christian rivals of the Paglas family were behind the military attack on the MILF, in order to undercut the Paglas claim that they could ensure peace. That theory would hold that those same rivals were behind the kidnap threat, planning to make sure that it happened in a Muslim area and could be blamed on the Muslims.

Others maintain that the Paglas family itself would have the most to gain from the instability, particularly as they attempt to move into positions of control in new areas: Baluan and Columbio (where the current mayor is a Paglas in name but is no longer considered in the fold). So you see, there are two diametrically opposed theories, each of which is entirely plausible. What it all comes down to is continued uncertainty. A prime

example is the massacre in Lasak.

One school of thought says that the perpetrators were MILF rebels; another holds that they were Christian vigilantes acting in reprisal for supposed collaboration with the communist New People's Army. Who's right? Who knows...and there's not much hope of any sustained and credible investigation by the authorities. Still, as I said above, things have been pretty "normal" here since I returned, and I don't really have any fear for my personal safety at this point.

When Fr. Gianni was here, we met with the Bishop and talked about the situation. That was when the Bishop decided to assign Fr. Eddie here, to provide company and support, as well as to have a good base for his own work. We also agreed that should there be any major problems forcing me to leave Columbio again, I would stay within the diocese, helping out in other parishes or activities and always awaiting the first opportunity to return.

OK, I think I've written enough (more than enough?) for now. I plan to go to Kidapawan on Jan. 1, so I will send this out then, or on Jan. 2 if the internet café is not open on New Year's Day.

Happy new year to all! Love,



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