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December 3, 2000

Hi everyone,

It's now been a little over a week since I returned to Columbio, and I remain safe and sound. It's great to be back! I had a warm welcome from the people at Mass last Sunday, and little by little we are trying to get back to normal.

One of the first things I did after returning was to celebrate the funeral Mass for the massacre victims in Lasak. I'm sending the details of the incident in a separate e-mail message. There had been a Mass presided by the Bishop (which I also concelebrated) a week earlier, before I returned permanently to Columbio. The Mass I celebrated more recently took place just before the burial of the bodies. I told you before about the new road which had been cut out of the mountains between Lasak and Marbel, South Cotabato. However because of heavy rains, it was deemed too slippery, even with four-wheel drive, so we went the long way around to reach the chapel (in Marbel) for the funeral Mass.

There were probably around 300 people attending the Mass. In fact, I had miscalculated the number when I was preparing the hosts to bring along, and had to break all of them in half in order to give communion to everyone. Fr. Eddie Pedregosa, the diocesan priest who was covering Columbio on weekends in my absence, is staying here with me for a couple of weeks, and he also concelebrated at the Mass. At the homily time, I spoke for a while in Tagalog, and then he did so in Ilonggo. Here's a summary of what I said to the people.

"Last week, Bishop Valles mentioned that at times like this, some people, in a search for consolation, cling to the idea that it is all to be accepted as the will of God. The Bishop asserted that in this case, we can state clearly that the massacre of these innocent victims is absolutely NOT the will of God. And Bishop Valles was correct. The death of your loved ones was an evil act, and we know that there is no room for evil in the will of God! . "But this presents each one of us with a great challenge. As Christians, how do we confront evil? What is our reaction as we stand face to face with evil actions? Just as the death of your loved ones is not in the will of God, neither can it be God's will that our reaction is one of hatred or seeking revenge. Yesterday, we celebrated the Feast of Christ the King, and we know that the Kingdom of God, which is the statement of His will, is a Kingdom of peace, of mercy, of forgiveness and reconciliation. "Jesus, our King, is also our model. He too was a victim of evil. As he hung upon the cross, he had the power to respond in anger and revenge upon the perpetrators of evil. Instead, he chose to pray for them: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This is the challenge for each one of us: to face evil with a heart full of goodness and mercy. "It's not easy. After all, we're only human beings, and we're filled with many emotions at this time. Let us seek the help and the strength of the Lord, to overcome whatever anger and bitterness we feel. Let us be sure that the Lord is with us in our trials, providing us with the grace we need to be true disciples, true witnesses to His Kingdom of love."

After the Mass, as we prepared to leave in a convoy for the cemetery, a woman rushed up to the Vitara, saying that her daughter was sick. The parish team vacated the vehicle, and several people carried over a young woman who had passed out and was undergoing some kind of seizure. I took off as quickly as I could to take her to a hospital in Marbel, leaving the graveside blessing for Fr. Eddie to perform. However, within a few minutes the woman came around, and seemed to be OK. So, I dropped her and her mother off at a house nearby, and returned to the cemetery.

As always, the burial was a very emotional time. Almost all of those who had attended the Mass accompanied us to the cemetery, so there was a big crowd gathered in front of the five open graves (there were actually six victims, but five from one family; the sixth was buried elsewhere). Family members began wailing and crying; several passed out and were carried into some shade. At one point, from a distance, someone began firing a pistol into the air. This is not uncommon at funerals, but in this case, because of the circumstances of the deaths, many people reacted to the sound with fearful screams. Finally, I was able to say the prayers and blessings, and the caskets were placed into the graves.

Back here in Columbio, as I mentioned, we are trying to get back to normal. The town is still on alert because of possible encounters between the MILF rebels and the military, but most of the evacuees who had sought shelter in Columbio from outlying villages have returned home. During the time that I was away, the elementary and high school grounds were used as centers for the evacuees, so there were no classes held for about 4 weeks. Now the schools have re-opened. One remaining problem has been holdups along the road leading out of Columbio.

Recently a man was robbed of his motorcycle, money and even clothes. The next day, a jeep was stopped; the passengers were robbed of their possessions and the jeep was taken. It is not clear who the perpetrators are. The only speculation is that they are local people, since they were wearing masks (outsiders would have no need to hide their identity). It could be that they are common criminals taking advantage of the confused situation, as opposed to MILF rebels or others with a political cause. Now it seems that the military will post personnel along the road, to prevent further incidents.

Yesterday (Saturday) I attended a meeting with the mayor, vice-mayor and several others, in order to plan a "Peace Forum", to take place on December 7. This will be an attempt to bring together leaders from the Christian, Muslim and Tribal communities, in order to foster unity, identify the obstacles to peace, and make recommendations in regard to overcoming those obstacles, on the grassroots level. It's the first time such an initiative has taken place here in Columbio.

Later this afternoon, I will go to Kidapawan, because tomorrow we will begin a three-day "Macro-synchronized Meeting". This is an annual gathering of all the clergy and parish teams in the diocese, to report on their situations and contribute to some overall planning on the diocesan level. I had planned to go tomorrow morning, taking my parish team members with me. But with the situation on the road being what it is, we thought it better to go in a convoy today with Fr. Peter (who came from Kidapawan this morning for Mass with a tribal community) and others. My parish team has other activities today, so they will go by public ride to Kidapawan tomorrow morning. Don't worry: if you receive this message, it means that I will have made it safely to the internet café in Kidapawan.

We're quickly approaching the time for Simbang Gabi. I've told you before about this custom of early morning (4:00 AM!) Mass on the nine days leading up to Christmas. Last year, we had a great time with a Chorale contest among the different GKKs. I don't know if we'll do something similar this year. Next Sunday the Parish Council will meet to plan the activities.

We're also doing something special on Christmas day. We're calling it "Kasalan ng Pasko" (Christmas Wedding) and it's an opportunity for those in "irregular unions" (married civilly or before a minister of another denomination, or live-in) to validate their marriages. It seems that about 20 couples will participate. I had actually hoped for a greater number, but my being away for two months prevented the kind of follow-up that we had in mind. After the mass wedding, we will have "Binyag ng Pasko" (Christmas! as Baptism) to baptize the children of the participating couples.

Ok, that's about all for now. I know it's useless to tell you not to worry about me, but try not to do so too much. I have lots of people looking out for me and I'm being very careful about traveling. Of course, keep on praying for a true and lasting peace here, so that the people can live without fear in safety and security.

Love,



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