

## 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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*December 8, 1999*

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I wrote most of this letter on Dec. 8. Now it is Dec. 12, and I hope to get to Kidapawan this evening, and send this off tomorrow. I say I hope to get there, because it depends on whether or not I get a ride, as you'll understand from the letter below. I don't think I'll be in contact again before Christmas. This week begins the "Simbang Gabi" and I'll have to be here in Columbio everyday for the 4:00am Mass. The week after Christmas, I plan to go to Davao, so I'll write again then. So MERRY CHRISTMAS, and of course you know that I'm thinking about you and miss you a lot. Give my love and Christmas greetings to everyone.*

*Ok, fix yourself a cup of coffee, put your feet up, smoke 'em if you got 'em: this is gonna be a long story. Last week, on Saturday night, it started raining around 5:00pm, and rained hard all night long. As I went to bed, I wondered how the rivers would be the next day, since I had to go to two different barrios for Mass. In fact, on Sunday morning, several people said to me, "Get ready to walk, Father. The rivers must be pretty high by now." I answered with my usual refrain: "We'll see. Trust the Vitara." It continued to rain hard on Sunday morning, and only about half the usual number of people showed up for the 6:30am Mass here in the poblacion. By 8:00, the rain had stopped, and at about 8:30 I took off for the barrio of Old Bantangan, with the seminarian who is here for an exposure experience (Brother Merck) and a couple of the students who live with me.*

*To reach O.B., there is one river to cross, and it has given some problems before because there are a lot of large rocks. As we got close to the river, I saw a man walking along the road toward us and I asked him how deep it was. "Too deep," he said. "You won't be able to cross." "Let's check and see anyway," I said to my companions. Actually it didn't look too bad. One of the students got out and waded across, checking for rocks, and then motioned me in.*

*In low-gear four-wheel drive, we crossed with no problem. "Trust the Vitara!" Going back to the poblacion after the Mass was also easy. In the afternoon, I had Mass in the barrio of Maligaya. There's a river to cross on the way there too, but it has never given any problems. It was a little deeper than usual, but we were able to cross easily. After Mass in Maligaya, I had a pretty long discussion with a couple who want to get married. The man is in the Army, stationed nearby, but originally from the island of Luzon. One of the requirements for marriage is a baptismal certificate for both parties. He claimed that he was baptized, and even told me the name of the town and parish where the baptism took place. But when I told him that we need the certificate from the parish, he kept coming up with all kinds of reasons why he couldn't get it. It's too long to go into all the details, but I had a funny feeling that I wasn't being dealt with truthfully. He even suggested that we go ahead with the marriage next month, and then sometime later he would provide the baptismal certificate. When I insisted on seeing the baptismal certificate beforehand, he got pretty angry (even though still smiling; that's the way here) and left. We hadn't even gone far enough into the conversation for me to find out more about the couple, but I learned later that they've only known one another for about one month, so I don't plan to marry them next month, even he does come up with a baptismal certificate.*

*So, taking into consideration the time for the Mass and this conversation, it had about an hour and a half since we crossed the river, and there had been only the slightest drizzle of rain during that time. But when we reached the river on the way home, it was a raging torrent, probably about head-high with a very fast*

*moving current. I guess further up in the mountains the rain was heavy and all that water was now rushing downstream. This time I had with me Brother Merck, two teenage girls and a baby (Bin-bin, the son of the secretary; you saw him in the pictures I sent, and one of the girls with me is his aunt). There was no thought at all about trying to cross with the Vitara. We stood on the bank for a while, trying to decide what to do. There were people on both shores, and some of the men began to connect the long stems of banana leaves in order to form a kind of rope, which they would use to stretch from one side of the river to the other, so if people wanted to cross on foot they would could do so without being carried away by the current. But they weren't succeeding too well in fashioning the rope.*

*I remembered that I had just bought a length of rope and went back to the Vitara to get it. In the meantime, some of the parish team showed up on the other side of the river. They had heard about the rising water and came to see if we were alright. I tied the rope to a branch and threw it across, but it was just short. I found some more rope in the car and after a few attempts, finally got it to the other side. But even with the rope, the people were afraid to try to cross, and I didn't blame them. I certainly wouldn't have expected the girls to try it, nor would anyone think about carrying the baby into that current. So I coiled the rope up and shouted over to the parish team members that we were going to go back to Maligaya and spend the night there. As we began to drive back to Maligaya, some people arrived from there, looking for us. They figured that we wouldn't be able to cross the river, so they had come to bring us back to their home for the night. They were very gracious, feeding us dinner and insisting that I take their own bedroom for the night.*

*There was no more rain during the night, and everyone said that the river had probably gone down quite a bit by morning. In fact, when we got to the river, we saw that this was true. I watched as several people waded across, and it seemed like it was about waist high: not shallow by any means, but the Vitara had handled that depth before. So, then I did something really dumb. I began to drive across. What I didn't realize is that the current had scooped out something like a bowl on the bottom of the riverbed, maybe about ten yards in diameter.*

*The people I had seen walking across were to the side of this "bowl", while I happened to drive right through the middle of it. The next thing I knew, we were floating down the river! We only went a few yards, until we reached the lip of the "bowl" and came to rest, but by then the engine had died and we were stuck there, in water almost up to the windows. Some men came from the shore and tried to push us, but were not able to. Meanwhile, water was coming inside the vehicle. My first thought was to get the baby and girls to shore, which we did very quickly. Then I began to pass all the things (Mass kit, songbooks, stuff from the glove box) to Brother Merck who made several trips back and forth. Finally I went out through the window and made my own way to the shore.*

*Then there was nothing to do but watch as the Vitara continued to fill up with water, up to the steering wheel. Someone went to call for a truck, and within about twenty minutes, one arrived on the far shore; we attached a thick rope to the Vitara, and the truck was able to pull us across and out of the river, and then towed us back to the parish in Columbio. The truck driver was a great guy. He didn't want any money for his service, but I insisted on giving him something, at least to replace the rope, which had become frayed during the towing. So, the good news is, everyone is fine, (in fact, it may sound scarier than it was: there was not really much danger to the people involved). The bad news is, water got into the engine and caused a lot of damage. I had the Vitara towed to Kidapawan, where some mechanics tried to work on it, but they weren't able to do anything, so I had it towed to the Suzuki dealer in Davao. It looks like it will need a complete overhaul. They said they would have an estimate in a couple of days, so I left them the name and number of Fr. Peter in Kidapawan; he can then contact me by radio.*

*While I was in Davao, I went to the branch office of the insurance company with which we have coverage. The person I needed to see wasn't in, but I left all the information, and called the next day from Kidapawan (where I had to return because of a diocesan meeting). The adjuster told me that he was faxing all the info to Manila, where the policy originated, and they would evaluate it and decide whether the damage is covered.*

*It seems this is not a very common claim (as you can imagine!) because there was no real accident. I had to return to Columbio for a pastoral fiesta Mass (Immaculate Conception) in one of the barrios. So once again I gave him the number of Fr. Peter. Fr. Peter was able to talk to the mechanic, and got the estimate for repair: just under \$2,000.*

*We still haven't heard from the insurance company; I will try to go to Kidapawan soon and call them again. Even if they don't cover the damage, I can pay for it with my Visa card and the bill will be paid from my account in Detroit. The mechanic says that it will take five working days to complete the job, which means it will be finished right smack in the middle of "Simbang Gabi", so I won't be able to go to Davao to pick up the Vitara until the week after Christmas.*

*So now, in terms of transportation at least, I'm learning firsthand just how the ordinary people of my mission are living. You remember my telling you about the "skylabs", those large motorcycles that are used for public transportation between the barrios? Well, that's how I'm getting around these days. When I say large, I mean it: it's not unusual to have four or five passengers, besides the driver, on the motorcycle. When I visited here in 1985, I saw some motorcycles with a wooden plank going across the seat, and four or five people sitting on either side. Maybe they've been outlawed, because I haven't seen any this time. Come to think of it, that might be where the name "Skylab" came from, because they do kind of resemble the skylab satellite, with that plank sticking out both sides. Really, travelling by skylab is not too bad. It's comfortable enough, and they can actually move faster than a car or truck, because they can more easily go around the holes and mud in the road.*

*Yesterday, when I returned from Kidapawan, I took a van until the town of Paglas, which is where you leave the paved road and cut in toward the mountains to reach Columbio. From there I took a skylab (I was the only passenger this time) for the half-hour trip, and I discovered the real inconvenience of travel by this method, as it started to pour down rain. The driver asked if I wanted to stop and wait it out, but I told him I'd rather continue. I was holding a nylon duffel bag on my lap, and that protected most of my legs from the rain; and I reached inside and pulled out a t-shirt to cover my head. Actually, I was pretty lucky, because it didn't start raining REALLY hard until after we had already reached Columbio.*

*I had agreed upon a price with the driver, but I felt so bad for him getting soaked that I added quite a bit to the fare. Other than the car troubles, everything continues to be great here. This past week the town of Columbio celebrated its 38th Foundation Anniversary with lots of activities all week long. One of them was an Evening of Praise and Worship, with all the different religious denominations participating. I gave the opening invocation. It was really a nice evening, and great to see people from different religions coming together to worship the Lord.*

*Most were Christian denominations, but the mayor, who is a Muslim woman, gave a welcoming address, and there was a great effort to include the Muslim belief in the prayers. I joined our parish choir in contributing a few songs. The guest speaker was a former gang leader and convict who converted and is now a Baptist minister; he goes all around the Philippines preaching and singing (and what a great voice!). He said that in all his travels, he had not seen an event like this one in little Columbio, where the people of different faiths were united in praise of God. That might have been an exaggeration, just to make the people feel good; but if so, it worked! I think it was especially important for our young people to be involved. They had a great time.*

*Now we're getting ready for Christmas of course. I told you last year about "Simbang Gabi" or "Misa de Gallo" (the rooster Mass). Beginning on December 16th, there will be daily Mass at 4:00am. When I was in Manila last year, I saw how packed the churches are at this time. I was told that here in Columbio the Simbang Gabi is not so well attended, but it could be different this year. The choir will certainly be there every day, and that's already about twenty-five young people who probably didn't attend in the past; and maybe that will inspire their parents to come as well!*

*There's also a tradition here in the Philippines of caroling as a means of fundraising. Our choir will be going around to raise money for the new church building. I mentioned this to one of the parishioners, who owns several large trucks, and immediately he said, "I'll provide a truck and driver, and they can go all over, not just in Columbio. They don't even have to get down from the truck, because it will be like a stage for them." People are good, aren't they?*

*I've mentioned the choir several times; that's been completely the work of Brother Merck. He is a Filipino who has applied to join PIME. He came here in October for a one-month exposure experience, and immediately organized the choir. At the end of the month, he went for a retreat, but requested to return here until Christmas, and has done so. At our Regional Council meeting a couple of weeks ago, we approved him for entrance into PIME, and in January he will leave for Italy to begin his formation. Selfishly, I almost wanted him to be denied, so that he could stay here longer in Columbio! He's been a big help to me in many ways, even beyond the choir, and he will be missed by many people when he leaves.*

*In my last letter, I told you about the changes the Bishop suggested in regard to the design of the new church. He wanted me to take a look at a church in Davao to get some ideas. I did so, and even requested the plans and blueprint of that church and another one that I looked at and liked even better. A Sister at the chancery promised to get everything together for me the next morning, but when I went there I was told that she wouldn't be in all day. So I left her a note asking her to mail (to the Bishop's house in Kidapawan) whatever was available. I haven't received anything yet.*

*Now I've been talking to the Parish Council President about still more changes. I told you that the only open space available was next to the existing church. Just beyond that space there is a bodega (like a warehouse) belonging to a rice-milling cooperative, but within the parish compound. If the bodega were to be moved, it would give us a lot more space and a lot more options in regard to design. I hadn't mentioned the idea to anyone before because I knew that the co-op is struggling to stay afloat, and I didn't think they would be open to such a suggestion. But I talked to Fr. Peter, who was instrumental in helping the co-op get started years ago, and he thought it was at least worth pursuing. I'll present the idea to the Planning Committee at our next meeting on December 11th and we'll see where it goes from there.*

*Well, I've been rambling on for pages and pages, and your coffee's probably cold, so I'll close for now. Love you and miss you, especially as Christmas draws near! Love,*



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