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Dear Mom and Dad,

After the quick message I sent out from the internet café in Kidapawan, I thought I would would write a longer letter to catch you up on how the new year/millennium is going here in Columbio. I plan to go back to Kidapawan next Monday and will try to send it out then. If the computer connection at the café continues to be as good as it was yesterday, it will be a real blessing. I always felt a little awkward using the bishop's computer (the employees in the office told me that I was the only one he allowed to touch it), which in any case was often an exercise in frustration (or a lesson in patience? If so, I flunked it) because of the very slow response and so many disconnects.

It never ceases to amaze me how isolated the folks here really are, particularly the young people, some of whom have never gone even as far as Kidapawan. Recently I bought a hand-operated can opener (the kind with a crank on the side). I'd been meaning to do so for months, but always forgot when I had the opportunity. My students had never seen anything like it. Up to now, they've been taking a large knife and cutting the top off the can. They said, "Wow, Father, this is really easy!" I just smiled. When I was in Davao just after Christmas to pick up the Vitara, I bought a cooked ham, which I thought would be a nice treat for New Year's Day. It was actually January 2, when the parish team members were here, that we decided to serve it. One of the students asked me how to prepare it, and I told him to just slice it, and we can make sandwiches or whatever. "No Father, I mean how do we cook it?" "It's already cooked," I said, "ready to eat." He looked at me doubtfully, as if he thought I didn't really understand his question (I get a lot of looks like that, and half the time they are correct). Sure enough, when I went to the kitchen later, he was busy frying up slices of the ham. I told him that he could fry it if he wanted, but it wasn't necessary. Even the parish team members who were there said, "Well, we can't eat it raw, Father." So I explained again that it was already cooked and at lunch I ate two sandwiches just to show them that it was OK. But only one of them (Jun) dared to follow my lead. Later that day, the parish secretary told me, "Jun has an upset stomach; it was probably that raw ham he ate at lunch." "It's not raw!" I cried. "Well, whatever you say, Father, but I'm glad I didn't eat any of it." I give up! Last Sunday I had a very pleasant surprise. A young man about to graduate from High School (the school year ends in March here) came to see me, and told me that he wants to be a priest, in fact a missionary priest. I knew him already because he is active in the choir. We talked for quite a while, and I told him that the first step is to finish college, whether on his own or in a college seminary. Then, if he still has the desire to be a missionary (as opposed to a diocesan priest), we can talk about his becoming a candidate for PIME.

As a community, PIME does not actively recruit vocations in the Philippines, because the needs of the local church for clergy are still great. We are open to individuals who approach us on a one-to-one basis, once they are finished with College. This young man (Jake) wants to do his College at a seminary, with a view to joining PIME afterward. His situation is little different, because his father is in the Army, and the family came here to Columbio when his father was stationed here. Now he has been transferred back to Ilo-Ilo (in the north of the country), and Jake has stayed on to complete his high school here, living with one of the teachers.

So I told him that I didn't know whether it would be better for him to enter the seminary here (college seminarians of the Kidapawan diocese attend the seminary in Davao), or in Ilo-Ilo, close to his family. He

expressed a preference for here, since in his formative years, this has really been more "home" to him than Ilo-Ilo. I spoke to the Vocation Director of the Kidapawan Diocese, and his first reaction was to suggest that Jake enter a seminary in Ilo-Ilo, since contact with the family (both on the part of the student and on the part of the formation staff) is important during one's seminary years. But, he said, let's see how things go. The first step would be to take the entrance examination for the College Seminary in Davao. Then, if Jake passes that, there will be an interview with the Kidapawan Vocation Director and if that goes well, he will contact Jake's family for further discussion as to the best way to go. I'll be taking Jake to Kidapawan next Monday for the entrance exam. For my part, I just plan to be as supportive as possible for him. If he does indeed enter the seminary in Davao, he could spend his shorter vacation periods here at the parish, rather than going all the way to Ilo-Ilo. And I would make it a point to stop and see him whenever I am in Davao. So, as always, God is good!

Things continue to move slowly in regard to the new church. I spoke to the managers of the rice-milling cooperative which owns the bodega which we would like to remove in order to have more room for the church. I had heard that perhaps the co-op was going to fold, so it wouldn't really be a matter of transferring the bodega to another place, but rather simple demolition. They are still not sure what the future holds for the co-op, but said that they hope to have a clear picture by the beginning of March. In any case, even if the co-op continues, they have no objection to moving the bodega; it's just that they don't have the money to do it, so we would have to include that cost in the budget of the new church.

I also have not yet received the plans I requested for the churches in Davao that we were hoping to use as models. I'll try to contact them again, and I will also ask for the plans for PIME's church in Manila, which is really beautiful. It's more than twice the size we need, but the design can always be adapted.

On January 21-22, the Diocese of Kidapawan is celebrating the Jubilee Year with various activities. A couple of hundred of people from Columbio will attend. I'll write after the event to let you know how it went. Ok, I guess that's all for now. I don't know if I will have a chance to use the internet when I go to Kidapawan for the Jubilee celebration, because the schedule is pretty packed. But if not, I will try to get there again the following week. If worse comes to worst, I'll be in Manila for PIME's Regional Assembly on Feb. 8, so that 's the longest you should have to wait before hearing from me again. Love,



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