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Dear Mom and Dad,

Greetings! As I promised, I'm writing another update to send out when I go to Davao/Manila at the end of this week. This one should not be quite as long as the last one! About the situation here in Columbio: things remain tense. After the shooting of the Town Council member (Willy) and the reaction by his family and friends against the Muslims (shooting at the mosque, harassing the neighbors of the suspects), a task force was established to look into the incidents.

Fr. Ed Pedregosa (the diocesan priest in residence here) is the chairman of the task force. They did a lot of interviews and the picture which emerged is this: since there is no real "law and order" provided by the police/government, everyone feels that they have to take matters into their own hands. Almost everyone, Christian or Muslim, is armed. When an incident occurs, such as the attack on Willy, the "natural reaction" of the victim's family and friends is to go after the perpetrators, or anyone they feel is connected to them. I used quotation marks for "natural reaction" because these are their own words to explain their actions; as if to say, "What we did was absolutely normal. Why would anyone question that?"

The next thing that happened was a couple of weeks later, when the house of a Muslim official was burned to the ground. He is a neighbor of the suspects in the attack on Willy, and just after the incident armed men came to his house asking where the suspects were. When he said he didn't know, he was punched and had the weapons pointed at him. The armed men left, but apparently it was still believed that he was covering for the shooters of Willy, so after a couple of weeks, his house was burned. No one was present at the time because the family had already begun to sleep elsewhere at night, out of fear of continued harassment. So, the burning is "under investigation", but there is no confidence that the perpetrators will be caught.

Then came a very strange twist: Willy, the Council member who was shot, went to a neighboring town for a check-up on his wound, and there – are you ready for this? – he was arrested for the 1998 murder of the Muslim mayor of Columbio! He's now in jail, awaiting trial! Even to begin to understand this development, you have to know that in crimes against persons, including murder, the charges are brought by the victim or victim's family, not by the state.

Often, accommodations or settlements (read: payoffs) are reached and no charges are ever brought. The accused are thus "forgiven" by the victims. [A short aside: This was the source of a lot of confusion back in 1985 when Fr. Tullio Favali was killed. His family stated that they forgave his killers. In the minds of many people, some kind of settlement must have been reached and this should have ended the process. Why go on with a trial and imprison the killers when the family has already forgiven them? Of course, Tullio's family was speaking of forgiveness in a moral sense, not a legal one, but that distinction was lost on many people. The same confusion reigned more recently when one of the killers (Norberto Manero) was granted a pardon by then-president Estrada, a pardon that was protested by many, including PIME, and was ultimately revoked.

Yet, the opinion was put forth, even by some church people, that the time had come for PIME to forgive Manero. Our response was that we had already forgiven him, but that doesn't mean he should be released from jail. The pope forgave his would-be assassin, but the man continues to serve his sentence.

At any rate, when Mayor Paglas was killed in 1998, no charges were brought forth by his family. Instead the presumed masterminds of the killing (one of whom was the father of our current mayor) were themselves killed. Again, someone just took the law into his own hands. So, at least you can understand why there was no murder charge up to now. What is still beyond my understanding is why the family has chosen this time, almost four years after the fact, and just after an attempt had been made on his life, to file charges against Willy as the alleged trigger man in the Paglas killing.

One theory could be that they tried to get him through the attack, and when that failed, they decided to go the legal route. But if the earlier killings are any indication, those who are seeking revenge for Mayor Paglas are pretty efficient; they don't miss. The suspect identified in the attack on Willy was a teenager, certainly not a "professional." So it could be that there is no connection, other than timing, between the attack on Willy and the filing of the charges. But the question remains in regard to both: why now? In the meantime, there is tension. But to be honest, I see the "heat" coming much more from the Christian side than from the Muslims. To me, the Muslims seem frightened. They know that they are outnumbered and out armed in Columbio.

The hot rhetoric is being spoken by some of the Christians. In fact, even the task force headed by Fr. Ed has come under criticism. Some people are saying that their report is biased toward the Muslims. In fact, the taskforce itself is made up 7 people, six of whom are Christian. They interviewed both Muslims and Christians about the attack on Willy and the incidents of harassment in the aftermath. There's no bias that I can see. Yet just this morning I heard that Fr. Ed has been called "the Muslim priest." Lots of times you hear about what "people are saying" as if it is widespread, and then later you find out that maybe one or two people hold that opinion, and I have the feeling that this is the case in regard to the criticism of the task force: limited to a couple of people.

The new church is really coming along. I will try to attach a few pictures. The ceiling is just about finished, and I imagine that next week they will begin to install the floor tiles. In the meantime, they have also been working on new pews, and on the office and sacristy, which are attached to the church. Once the floor tiles are installed, it will just be odds and ends to finish up. As I mentioned last time, I would expect the work to be finished by the end of March, giving us plenty of time to prepare for the dedication on May 19.



We are planning to have a big celebration for the parish fiesta and church dedication. There's a tradition in some parishes of a "Novena" of masses leading up to the fiesta (kind of like the Simbang Gabi Masses leading up to Christmas). We haven't done that in the past here in Columbio, but this year we will. So, beginning on May 10, we will have Mass each afternoon at 4:30, and each evening there will be some kind of activity, like a singing contest, Variety show, etc. I have a lot of ideas, but I won't go into them all now; rather, once we decide on the actual activities, I'll let you know. On the Friday and Saturday before the fiesta, the people from all the different barrios will come, sleeping in tents, in the old church, etc. So we'll have lots of activities for them too. It seems like a long time away, but I'm determined to get the planning started so that it doesn't sneak up on us.

OK, I've put this off for 2 pages and many paragraphs, so it's time for confession. I did it again! Last Saturday afternoon I went to the barrio of Libertad to anoint a sick person. Recently they built a bridge over the river you have to cross to get to Libertad. But it is small, more suited for foot travel or motorcycles than a car. The last time I went there, I saw that the river was kind of deep, so I parked the Vitara on the near side and walked to the chapel, less than a kilometer away. This time, one of the young women with me, herself from Libertad, assured me that the river was down. Usually I would check it myself, but since I was in a hurry, I accepted her assurances and drove on in.

It was pretty deep but we emerged from the other side OK. Coming back, however, was a different story. I tried to cross but stalled out about 10 meters from the other side. There were lots of people around and they pushed me on out, but...you guessed it...water got into the engine. I got a ride back to the convento from a passing vehicle, then a neighbor accompanied me with his truck back to the Vitara and we towed it home. I let everything dry out for a couple of days, then yesterday we drained the oil and replaced it, and started it up. It started, but there is a knocking sound, like something is not right with one of the pistons. I shut it off right away and contacted the dealer in Davao. They will send a truck and mechanic tomorrow. If it can't be

fixed here, they will tow it to Davao for repair. At least the timing is right, since I was planning to go to Davao this week and then go to Manila for about 10 days, so there is plenty of time for the repairs. I just hope that it will not require a whole new engine...again! By the time I send this out, I should know more, so I will add a note at the end.

Speaking of the end...here it is! As I said, I'll be in Manila for about 10 days, and should have regular access to the Internet, so we can be in frequent touch. Love and miss you both! Love,



P.S. Just dropped the car off at the mechanic, who said that the damage is "minimal." Thanks be to God. He also said it can be repaired in a few days, so it will be ready when I return from Manila. God is good...all the time!

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