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Dear All,

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! Sorry that you've had to wait so long for my first letter. As you can imagine, once I got back to Columbio, things got busy in a hurry and did not let up until after the New Year; that is, now. I'll be going to Davao on Jan. 6, to take back my scholars after their Christmas vacation, so I will have a chance to send this out at that time. Of course, when so much time goes by, the length of the letter increases proportionately, so I foresee that this will be a long one.

I ended up staying in Manila longer than planned. We had scheduled a Regional Council meeting there for the day after I arrived from the U.S. But two of the Council members could not make it from Zamboanga City because the airport there was closed for several days, due to fighting between the government and the rebels. We were finally able to have the Council meeting on December 4-5, and on the 6th I flew to Davao. One of the topics of the Council meeting was the situation in Columbio. Just before I left for vacation last August, things were getting tense, with kidnap groups roaming around the area. During the time that I was away up to the time of my return, things remained about the same: tense, because of rumors of kidnap groups at large, but without any new incidents. As a council, we decided to continue as we have in the past, going as as normally as possible, while keeping our eyes and ears open to possible dangers. Basically, that just means that I don't travel around more than necessary, and am never alone when I do. Up to now, there have been no problems in this regard, nor even any rumors that I or other priests would be targeted.

So, arriving back in Columbio at the beginning of December, I jumped right into the Advent season and preparation for Christmas. As you know, this is a great time of year here, with a lot of activities. The "Simbang Gabi" or "Misa de Gallo" (that 4:30 AM Mass on each of the nine days leading up to Christmas) was as well-attended as usual. This year, since Fr. Eddie Pedregosa is here, we were able to offer the Misa de Gallo in different villages, as well as the Poblacion. We decided that it would be more prudent for me to cover the poblacion, while Fr. Eddie would go to a different barrio each day. Again, not that there was any specific danger, but we just thought it would be better if I were not travelling around in the pre-dawn darkness. There are two young women whom I am sending to the Notre Dame Center for Catechetical Studies in Cotabato City, for a two-year course in Catechetics. Part of their training is an "Exposure" experience in their own parish, and that is taking place now. They did a great job preparing things for the Simbang Gabi Masses here in the Poblacion: decorating the church, working with the lectors, etc. Then, each day, one of them presented a short catechism lesson to the whole congregation on the meaning of Advent and Christmas. Again they did a super job and it was very much appreciated by the people.

Before I left for vacation, I had suggested to the parish team and Fr. Eddie the possibility of blessing each family and house in the parish during the Christmas season. While I was away the idea was presented to the people and they responded very enthusiastically. So upon my return, we made the specific plans and schedules. Again, Fr. Ed covered most of the barrios (blessing houses and families on the same day that he celebrated the Simbang Gabi Mass in a given barrio), while I handled each of the four "zones" of the Poblacion, plus one barrio that Fr. Ed wasn't able to get to. Of course, in the Poblacion there are a lot more houses, but they are also a lot closer to one another. In the barrios, they are fewer, but quite spread out, so Fr. Ed spent a lot of time walking from one to another. For me, it was a great experience. Each morning at about 7:30 I set out, accompanied by the leaders of a given zone, and sometimes by some of my students as

well. I don't know...maybe it just appeals to my romantic or dramatic side, but there is something immensely satisfying about traipsing through the hot and dusty streets with a stole around my neck, holy water in one hand and prayer book in the other, surrounded by a group of parishioners as we go from house to house and ask God's blessings upon His people.

At any rate, it was a great way to get to know the people and the town better. Unless there is a sick call, funeral or some kind of celebration (wedding, baptism, birthday, etc.) I don't usually see the people in their homes. I went to parts of the Poblacion that I had never seen before. I can admit to being a little tired after blessing 50-plus houses a day (my record was 80!), but it was a good kind of tired. The people were so happy for the experience too. Of course, some of it comes from their desire to drive away "evil spirits". Many times, someone would say, "Please bless this bedroom very well, Father, because my children have been sick lately." I told Fr. Eddie that by the time we're finished there won't be any evil spirits left in Columbio. On the other hand, many were simply happy to have the priest visit them and bless their family. I imagine we will try to do the same thing next year and beyond. Of course, the people also gave a little donation at the time of the blessing. They never want to give their offering directly to the priest, which works out well because I'm always embarrassed to receive it. But the zone leaders have no such compunction, and in fact it has been a big help to the overall operation of the parish.

Another help to the parish was a fundraising effort that was the brainchild of Fr. Eddie. We called it "Edad Ko, Alay Ko" (My Age, My Offering). As a "Birthday Present for Jesus," the people were encouraged to make a donation equal to their age, from children all the way up to the old folks. We stamped the slogan "Edad Ko, Alay Ko" onto more than 3,000 envelopes and distributed them throughout the parish. Then during the Christmas Midnight Mass here in the Poblacion, we had a special Offertory, in which the people came forward according to the month of their own birthday and placed their offering in boxes marked "January", "February", etc. The envelopes from the other barrios were collected in various ways and brought to the convento during the Christmas season. I was impressed by the response. More than half of the envelopes distributed came back, and the amount collected was really significant, especially for the poor people of Columbio. Between the donations for the house blessings and the "Edad Ko" envelopes, we brought in almost 58,000 pesos, or just over \$1,100. December was also a good month for Weddings and Baptisms, bringing the total income to over 92,000 pesos. Just to give you an idea, throughout the course of the year, a really good month for the parish is about 15,000 pesos, so you can see how great December turned out to be.

Another activity during this time was the Parish Youth Days. (You might remember from my first year here, how I misunderstood the pronunciation of the parish team and at first thought they wanted to plan for "Parachute Days", which made me wonder why skydivers would be coming to Columbio!) The youth from all over the parish gathered here in the Poblacion for two days of seminars, games, and prayer. This too was well attended and enthusiastic.

However, all this good news is tempered by some tension that is going on now in Columbio. On December 30, some of the young people were playing volleyball just outside the convento, and I went out to watch them for a while. We heard what sounded like gunfire, but all of us just assumed that it was the fireworks which are so prevalent at this time of year. As the sounds continued, however, it became clear that it was in fact gunfire. The next thing I knew, the kids were scattering, and two of them grabbed me by the arms and pulled me toward the convento. It's not as if I was resisting... in fact, I ran right out of my sandals.

So, everyone was safely inside the convento, and we waited for news. In fact, the shooting was not as close to us as it had seemed. One of the Municipal Council members (a Christian, known for a strong anti-Muslim attitude) was attacked by a Muslim. The first shots we heard were those of the would-be assassin, who wounded the Council member (Willy) in the shoulder; the following shots came from Willy himself as he pulled his pistol and fired on the other as he ran away. But he did not hit him, and the shooter escaped. All of this was followed by some more shooting. Here in Columbio, as in most areas, there are CAFGU (Civilian

Armed Forces Geographical Unit), or paramilitary groups designed to defend the area from rebel attacks. Some CAFGU members just began firing into the air, I suppose to let everyone know they are around. This seems to be the normal course of events when something like this happens. I remember back when there was trouble at the time of the elections, the same thing happened, only that time it was the regular military who did it. It seems so stupid to me. It sounds like there is a real fire-fight going on, when in fact it is just indiscriminate shooting into the air. And not without consequences: bullets have to come down somewhere after all. In fact, this time a Muslim women and child were wounded.

So things were pretty tense. Earlier in the day we had a brownout, which continued on into the next day. Rumors started going around that the electricity had been cut intentionally. This turned out not to be true, but it gives an idea of the mindset of the people. The next morning a Muslim Ustadz (clergyman), who is also a friend, came to the convento and told me that the mosque had been fired on the previous night. We went together to look at it, and sure enough there were bulletholes both outside and inside the mosque. I talked to some of the Muslim people who live near the mosque and found that they were really frightened that they would be attacked in retaliation for the assassination attempt.

The Christians were also pretty scared. Normally there is a "Midnight Mass" on New Year's Eve (actually 10 PM), which is very popular. On Sunday (the 30th) I had told the people that if the brownout continued we would not have the Midnight Mass, but if the electricity were to return, we could go on with it. In fact, the current came back on Sunday evening. But during the day on the 31st, many people came to the convento, suggesting that we cancel the Mass. They were afraid that there would be retaliation, and escalation, following the shooting at the mosque. So, we had no Midnight Mass, but only the 9AM Mass on January 1.

On January 2, there was a special meeting of the Mayor, Vice-mayor, Police Chief, religious leaders (including myself, Fr. Eddie and the Ustadz) and others. The Police Chief reported that they know who the original shooter is, or at least they have a suspect, but (get this!) they cannot get a warrant of arrest because no judges are available during the holiday season! In fact, he said, even when it is not the holidays, a judge is available for Columbio only once a week, on Wednesdays. I guess that means if you want to commit a crime, you should do it on Wednesday night or Thursday morning, so you'll have at least a week before they can arrest you. Of course, in regard to this suspect, he's long gone. The whole family is nowhere to be found, and neighbors don't know (or won't say) where. Unfortunately, the "search" of the suspect's house was conducted, not by the police, but by armed civilians, who were not so gentle in their methods, nor in their questioning of neighbors. Naturally, this just added to the tension. So, at the meeting, we talked about a lot of things: the original shooting, the reaction and aftermath, underlying causes, etc. A task force, with Fr. Eddie as chairman, was established to gather data and will make its report next week.

So, that's where we stand now. It's been a week since the incident, and the tension has eased quite a bit. I can honestly say that I have not felt personally threatened at all. I feel bad for the situation, but really do not perceive any danger to myself. Of course, I'll continue to be prudent and watchful, but I want you to know that, up to now, there is no need for you to worry.

On to a couple of other things. The new church, as I expected, was not completed by the time of my return. But it is coming along pretty well. I am attaching a few photos. During the time of the holidays, no work was going on, but I expect them to get back at next week. It really will look great, I think, when it is finally finished. Thanks be to God and the generosity of His people, I think we will have enough funds to complete the project. So, it looks like another couple of months of work before the church would be useable. My plan is to have the official dedication at the time of our parish fiesta, in mid-May, so we have several months to take care of all the finishing touches.

I got lucky on my birthday this year. You know about the custom of ananitas, or the early morning serenade by friends on one's birthday. Since my birthday falls within the time of Simbang Gabi, when we're already getting up early for the Mass, the mananitas usually happen even earlier, around 3:30 AM. However, this

year, the 23rd fell on a Sunday, so we reverted to the usual Sunday Mass schedule (6:30 AM), and my birthday serenade came at about 4:30. As usual, the parish team suggested that I go to bed early the night before so that they could prepare the house, which was filled with parishioners for the mananita. The "business sector" of the town donated a pig, so we had my favorite, lechon (roasted pig) and a kind of open house with people coming and going throughout the day. It was a really nice time.

Oh, I almost forgot: I had heard that the mini-satellite dishes were now available and that there was a dealer in Davao, so I checked it out when I arrived. Sure enough, I found the dealer, and arranged to have a dish installed in Columbio. This was on a Thursday; would you believe that on the following Saturday, they arrived and installed the dish? It's true! So now out here in the boondocks, I get the international versions of CNN, ESPN, National Geographic, Fox News, and a host of other local and international channels, over 40 all together. Isn't technology wonderful?

I guess that's all for now. I think I've given your eyes enough of a strain for the time being. Please keep on praying for me and my people and know that I am praying for all of you as well.

Love and prayers,



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