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Things have been really busy here lately, so I thought I would take a little time to get you up to date.

[PARENTAL WARNING: The following is not intended to worry you any more than you already worry about me. I'm still quite safe, and what I'll describe below seems to be an isolated incident, which in any case, took place some distance from Columbio.]

Dear Mom and Dad,

Last Sunday (July 16), we were awakened at about 4:00am by the sounds of explosions and gunfire. I realized immediately that although it was loud enough to wake me up, it was still far away, and so there was no immediate danger. Later we got the story. About 100 armed members of the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) entered the barrio of Natividad (part of my parish, about 15 kilometers away), apparently expecting to encounter government and/or paramilitary troops there. When it became clear that only civilians were there, they chased them out of their homes, burned several houses, and raided supplies, money and animals. Thankfully, no one was killed, but two residents were slightly wounded by stray bullets.

It's not really clear what the motivation of the attack was, other than to raid for supplies. This seems very plausible, since the government troops have taken over most of the MILF "camps", and their lines of supplies have therefore been cut off. A word about these "camps" that the army has "conquered". They are not military camps as we are used to thinking of them: a self-contained compound, where soldiers reside and train. Instead, they are just like regular villages, except that many of the residents are MILF soldiers, who live among the civilians.

So, when the government troops move in, especially when they are preceded by shelling, the civilians are inevitably affected. That's why there is such a large number of mostly Muslim evacuees or refugees, who leave the area before the troops arrive. On the other hand, there is often very little active resistance to the entry of the government troops, since the MILF soldiers have also evacuated (or we could say, escaped). So while the government is proud of the fact that they have "conquered" these camps, in the sense that they are in control of the physical territory, you don't see any list of "captured enemy". The MILF has simply moved out to another place, or become roaming bands. Then, as I mentioned above, when they need supplies, they are apt to raid villages where no government troops are stationed.

In the case of Natividad, quite a few carabao (water buffalo) were taken, along with food, money and dry goods. Twenty-one houses were burned to the ground, and the families of those houses lost everything. As I began to talk to others about how to help these families, I thought of the donation which came from the St. Vincent DePaul Society of St. Andrew, which of course was earmarked to help the poor. So yesterday, while I was saying Mass in Lasak, a faroff barrio, some members of the parish team went to Tacurong, and bought a lot of supplies: pails, dishes, bedding, mosquito nets, canned food, dried fish, soap, etc. Last night we were able to assemble 21 bundles of supplies and this morning we went to Natividad to distribute them to the affected families.

They are now staying in tents (provided by the provincial governor) on the grounds of the elementary school. I put a note on each bundle reading: "With love from the St. Vincent DePaul Society, St. Andrew Conference,

Columbus, Ohio, USA." Before the distribution I explained to the people about the source of the donation and we spent some time in prayer, thanking God for the generosity of the benefactors and asking for true and lasting peace. I took a lot of pictures, which I will send to the group at St. Andrew.

Meanwhile, the regular pastoral activities are continuing. Now that the new school year has begun, there are once again about 100 high school students attending daily mass. Recently, I decided that instead of a sermon about the readings of the day, I would use the homily time for some general religious instruction. I've begun by explaining the meaning of the Mass: the commemoration of the Last Supper and the Paschal Sacrifice, the real Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, a celebration of thanksgiving, a celebration and source of unity for the Christian community which is also the real Body of Christ. Now I'm going through the different parts of the Mass one by one (Penitential Rite, Liturgy of the Word, Offertory, etc.) and explaining the meaning of each. I'm trying to stress to the students the importance of participating fully, with thought and feeling, in the Mass, rather than just reciting words. The prayers of the Mass are beautiful if we take the time to make them our own.

One other thing about these little catechism lessons: for the first time, I've been giving talks of substantial length without preparing a text in Tagalog beforehand. In other words, I just speak spontaneously to them. Once in a while I get halfway through a sentence and realize there is no way I'll come up with the words and/or structure to finish it. Then I stop, and think...and think...and think... The kids start to giggle, and I say, "Ok, let's start that thought over again." And I figure out a different way to express the same idea.

We're also in the midst of conducting Assemblies in each GKK. I've explained before about the GKK (Base Christian Community) structure here in the Philippines. Each of the 12 barrios where I go to say Mass is a GKK and within the poblacion there are four "zones", each of which is a GKK. (Thus, within the parish there are 16 GKKs.) A GKK itself is made up of several "Family Groupings", each of which might have anywhere from 10 to 25 families, sometimes more. So, for these Assemblies, on the first day, the people gather within their own Family Grouping. The parish team and I prepared a questionnaire for their discussion: how many families in the group; how many are active/inactive; reasons for inactivity; what they believe is the purpose of the group; what role each individual needs to play in order to achieve that purpose; a ranking of the importance of various parish programs; identifying people within their FG who would be willing to take leadership roles in those programs; and recommendations in regard to encouraging inactive members to become more active.

Then on the second day, they gather as a complete GKK. First there is a report from each FG about their reflections of the previous day, and general discussion about the results. Then there is input from the parish team, in the form of a short seminar entitled: "The Family: An Evangelized and Evangelizing Community." My part is to address the people with my thanks for their participation, and I give a short talk, similar to what I've been doing with the students at daily Mass, about the meaning of the Mass. Then we celebrate the Eucharist. I've been impressed by the reflections and insights of the people. One great thing is that there have been many volunteers for the various roles within the GKK: catechist, lay minister, choir, lector, Justice and Peace contact, Health contact, etc. In the future, we will offer seminars on these issues to train the people how to take on leadership roles, and now we know precisely whom to invite to the seminars.

As far as active/inactive families, I'm starting to see a pattern of about a 60/40 split. As I tell the people, that's not terrible...at least there is a majority of active families...but it certainly presents us with a challenge and room for improvement. It might not be realistic to expect 100% participation, but a reasonable (and measurable) target might be 80% or more. The most prevalent reason given for inactivity is, as you might expect, the fact that many are "too busy". But the FG leaders are committed to go house-to-house and on a personal basis encourage greater participation.

As you can imagine, these Assemblies take quite a bit of time and energy, especially on the part of the parish team. One of them attends each of the FG meetings on the first day, and all of us are present for the general

meeting on the second day. Since the Assemblies take place in the different barrios, it also means travel, and since it's still the rainy season, it often means walking part of the way. For me, it often means two Masses a day, since I return to the Poblacion in time for the afternoon daily Mass. We've scheduled two Assemblies each week during July and August, so that by the end of August, all will be completed. Then in September we will begin the Leadership Skills seminars.

Then, in the evenings, I've begun the English class again, for 3rd and 4th year high school students. We meet on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. There are not as many participants as last year: usually about 15-20 show up, which is just as well, since that's a more manageable number, and makes for a more effective class.

Last Sunday, I said Mass in Ilonggo for the first time. I had already begun saying Mass in Cebuano, but there are only two Cebuano communities, and they are the farthest away from the Poblacion, and so have only quarterly Masses. There are four primarily Ilonggo barrios, each of which has a monthly Mass, so almost every Sunday I will be saying at least one Mass in Ilonggo. I prepared and had printed a Mass Guide for the people, with all of their responses, and typed up the whole Mass for myself. Last week, at the barrio of Libertad, was my first try. Just to give myself a little bit greater challenge, I forgot to bring my glasses! So imagine me standing there holding the book, stretching out my arms as far as they would go, and squinting to read a language I'd never read before. Anyway, it turned out OK, I guess. I really find the pronunciation to be much easier than Tagalog. The people are just happy with the effort. Of course, the sermon is still in Tagalog, but everything else in their language.

The "scholar" program is going well. Mark Hammond came up with 22 sponsors, and I've been able to identify a like number of needy students. Actually, ten are in school now, having begun last June. A couple more will begin in the second semester at the beginning of November, and the rest are high school seniors who will begin college next June. I already have pictures and "thank you" letters from those who are already in school and next Saturday I will meet with the new ones and their parents, explain the program and get their pictures. Then I will send the sponsors a letter and picture of "their" student. I meet at least monthly with the group already in college in Kidapawan. We have Mass and talk about how things are going. In addition, they are living in a boarding house with a similar group from Arakan Valley (where another PIME priest is pastor), and that group also has monthly meetings, which my students attend too (as the Arakan students attend our monthly Mass).

So it's not just a matter of paying for their education; this follow-up and Christian formation is really important. There are two students in Cotabato, who attend a Catechetical School, where they already have daily Mass and formation, so my contact with them is a little less frequent and more informal. One of the things to discuss with the new scholars this Saturday will be where they plan to go to school. I really think that I'll have to limit their choices to either Kidapawan or Marbel (there are a number of schools in each of these cities), so that the follow-up will be manageable. If they are spread out all over Mindanao, there's no way I would be able to keep in touch with them regularly.

Coming up next week is the annual PIME retreat, which will take place in Kidapawan, so at least I don't have to travel to Manila or Zamboanga. Following the retreat will be the celebration of PIME's 150th anniversary. The Bishop of Kidapawan will preside at the Mass, followed by a program and lunch. We have invited all the priests and religious of the diocese, and people from the parishes where we work. In fact, it turned into a kind of embarrassing situation for me. I had announced the celebration at one of our monthly Center Meetings, saying that the leaders of the different GKKs were invited. Then later at one of the barrio Masses, it was announced as if all the people of the GKK were invited. And that's the news that spread around. I didn't correct it, because I figured there wouldn't be that many interested. Well, at last week's Center Meeting we did a count, and it came to over 400! That's the full capacity of the hall where we're gathering, so it's the TOTAL number we were expecting from all quarters. So I had to shame-facedly tell them: sorry, but we have to limit it to ten from each GKK. They were very understanding though. And, I told them, for the next 150 year anniversary, I'll be sure that all get invited.

Ok, I guess that's about all for now. I won't be getting to Kidapawan until the end of next week (July 27, to be exact), when we gather for the retreat. I will send this out before the retreat starts. Love,



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