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Dear Mom and Dad,

At the end of my last general update, I mentioned that there were actually things other than the fiesta and new church dedication going on in Columbio, and I promised to fill you in on those the next time. Well, now is the next time, so here goes:

The beginning of June marks the start of the new school year, so I get real busy with the "scholars," as we call the students who are sponsored for their college studies. This year I have 35 of them, with the majority attending school in Kidapawan. In fact, the owners of the boarding house I was renting last year (near Notre Dame of Kidapawan) built an extension and I now have 24 students staying in the same house (18 girls and 6 boys). The newer portion is separated from the old and has its own bathroom facility, so the boys are in that part while the girls occupy the other section. There is a rather large porch in front of the older section, and the owners screened that in, so there is space available for all for eating and study. Of course, the students organize themselves in regard to cooking, cleaning, etc.

Still in Kidapawan, I have five more boys attending the University of Southern Mindanao. They live in a different boarding house, closer to their own school, but they spend a lot of time with the Notre Dame group. Another PIME priest, from Arakan Valley (the northern part of the diocese) has about 10 scholars at Notre Dame and they live in a house across the street from my kids. I'm usually able to check in on those in Kidapawan every couple of weeks, and once a month we have Mass at the boarding house in the evening.

I also have 4 scholars in Davao. Three of them attend Holy Cross college, pursuing Maritime Studies (to become seamen) and one attends the Ford Academy of Fine Arts, since he is a really talented artist (drawing and painting). All four live in a boarding house near Holy Cross. Of course, I am not able to follow these guys as closely as the Kidapawan group, but I do get to Davao every 6 weeks or so. Then there are two "special" case scholars who attend schools kind of far away and without others from Columbio. My contact with them is limited to their school breaks and vacations.

So, as I mentioned, the beginning of the school year is a busy time, as I arrange for the students to take their entrance exams, register for classes, get settled into the boarding houses, etc. Actually, as time goes on, the process becomes easier, since the older students can help the others through all the red tape. The first couple of years were really chaotic for me, with lots of trips back and forth to Kidapawan and Davao. This year, the most time consuming part was making sure that the boarding house in Kidapawan was sufficiently equipped and furnished, since there are so many more students there this year. The owners provide beds, but I had to get a couple of tables, chairs, kitchen utensils and supplies, some shelving for clothing, etc. I think they are pretty well set now.

When I arrived in Columbio three years ago, I "inherited" three high school scholars, who lived in the convento. Coming from far-off barrios, they would not have been able to attend high school without this arrangement with my predecessor. I didn't mind, especially since all three are great kids. Now they have graduated (and are included in the number of college scholars), and I did not plan to bring any new high school students into the convento. However, the need is obviously still there for some kids who live far away from the Poblacion.

I mentioned before that I was able to purchase a house and lot just in front of the parish compound. The family had moved away, and the house stood empty for quite some time, so I contacted the owners and we worked out a deal. With the new house available, I decided that we could accommodate six high school scholars. The house had also included a small store in the front and two rather large storage areas, so after a little remodeling, we have plenty of room. My secretary/cook, who was living on the first floor of the convento, has moved across to the new house and acts as guardian of the students. Two girls are in the second year of high school and four boys are in first year. Of the boys, two of them are nineteen years old! They never had the chance to attend high school and are so happy to be able to do so now. All six of them contribute their time and energy to the parish compound: cutting grass, sweeping and mopping the church floor, preparing for Mass, etc.

So, you're wondering: does this mean that you are alone in the convento? Sometimes, but not usually. Don't forget that Fr. Ed Pedregosa is in residence at the parish. Occasionally he goes to Kidapawan or elsewhere for meetings in regard to his Interreligious Dialogue work, so he might be away overnight. But otherwise, the two of us are there. And, I can tell you: while I love being around people, I don't mind the quiet either. Is that a sign of age?

Another project that we undertook at the same time that the church was being built was a fence around the perimeter of the parish compound. The compound is pretty big, a bit more than 100 meters on each side. On three sides, the fence is pretty simple (concrete posts and base, with chain link). For two of those, the work was done by volunteers from the parish. They scheduled themselves according to different "zones" of the poblacion, with each zone responsible for so many spans of the fence. I hired 2 or 3 masons to act as "foremen" and then each day 20 to 30 volunteers showed up. Of course, materials (cement, hollow blocks, fencing, round steel bars, GI pipes) are not available in Columbio. But one of the parishioners is a trader with a large truck which goes regularly to other towns with deliveries, and might not be full coming back; so he is always willing to "backload" the supplies we need. The third simple side faces the Tribal Training Center, which is Fr. Peter's responsibility, so he has offered to take charge of the fencing there. For the side in front of the new church, the fence is a little more decorative, and it is being financed by donors from the parish, each of whom sponsors a span of about 3-4 meters. Actually, this part has been a real blessing for me, because the trader I mentioned above took charge of the whole project: soliciting the donors, collecting the donations, arranging for the work, everything. I literally did not have to do anything. Well, one thing I have to do is remain patient, because that side is only about half finished. Naturally, the parishioner is busy with his own business, and it is not easy right now to find more donors. But I'm really not in any big rush anyway.

I'm just about ready to start on the renovation of the old church. I plan to turn it into a Youth/Catechetical Center. Since PIME decided to move out of the Newark, Ohio facility, I asked them to send me the books from the library there, particularly the reference books. So, in the new Youth Center will include a small library, something that Columbio is sorely lacking. At the high school, there are not even enough textbooks to go around, let alone research books like encyclopedias, atlases, dictionaries, etc. Of course the books from Newark will be a bit dated, but they will certainly be a blessing. The kinds souls there, led by Fr. Dino, are in the process of sorting and preparing the books for shipment. I imagine it will take several months for them to arrive, which is OK, since it gives plenty of time for the renovation. In addition to the library, I hope to make it a place where the youth can gather for socializing and relaxing, as well as a suitable space for Bible Study, Catechesis, seminars, etc.

The new church has proven to be wonderful in terms of attracting people to participate in Sunday Mass. In fact, I would say that attendance has more than doubled since the new church was dedicated. I've re-started (again!) the daily Mass at 4:30 PM, and each day about 75-100 attend, most of them high school students on their way home after the end of classes. That is a terrific opportunity to touch a lot of lives with the Eucharist and the short reflection/homily that I give each day. We are also starting to teach catechism in the schools themselves. You might remember that I sent two young ladies (Mary Joy and Jenelyn) for a 2-year course in

Catechesis. They have graduated now and are members of the Parish Team. They contacted the principals of the two high schools in the area and arranged for a time to teach catechism twice per week. Now they are in the process of training volunteer catechists to go into the elementary schools in the different barrios. When I was talking about the fence project above, I said that it is not easy to find donors. That's because the people here are going through a particularly rough time right now. The months of April and May were unusually dry, which delayed the planting of rice. The rains finally came in June, but of course that means that the harvest is delayed as well. So while the people would have expected a harvest about now, or early August, it will not arrive until late September. Since they live from harvest to harvest, with very little savings, it's not easy. Lots of folks are coming to the parish for help or for loans until harvest time. Actually, in talking with the Pastoral Council, the picture I get is not one of looming starvation. Most people are still eating three meals a day. It's the "extras" that are more difficult to provide for the family: things like school fees and supplies, allowance for the children, a new T-shirt or shoes to wear to school. And then of course, if someone gets sick and needs medicine or hospitalization, that's a big "extra" that is difficult to handle. I do what I can to help: small "loans" here and there (even though I know that most "loans" will not be repaid). As far as peace and order, things have been very quiet. I think I told you before what I was told by some of the people here about the pattern of troubles, according to the timeframe of the local elections, every three years. During the year before the election, there are problems as candidates try to position themselves (and maybe eliminate the competition); then the year following the elections is a time of revenge for what went on before; then there is a year of relative peace and calm, before the preparations begin for the next elections. I arrived in Columbio during that peaceful year (my honeymoon), then saw tensions rise and fall over the next two years. Now, we're back in the calm time. It doesn't mean that we stop being careful and prudent, but we can surely thank God for a peaceful situation, however long it lasts.

Well, as usual, I've been rambling on for several pages, so I will give your eyes a break and stop here. Love and miss you both! Love,



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