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Dear Mom and Dad,

Happy 4th of July! It's been quite a while since I've written a full letter, so I thought I would do so while I have a little time today. I'll be going to Kidapawan next week and I'll send this out then.

Well, the rainy season is really here. Almost every afternoon we have a strong thunder- storm and often it rains on into the night. I don't know why it wasn't this way last year at this time...maybe some after-effects of El Niño, which had hit this area pretty hard with drought. At any rate, last year I had very little trouble crossing rivers (except for the one famous incident, which took place in December, after the rainy season was supposed to be over!). Now, almost every time I go out the barrios, I have to leave the Vitara at the river and cross on foot. In some cases, I suppose I've been extra-cautious and maybe could have made it across if I tried, but most of the time there's no question about it. Besides, even if I were to make it across, there's always the chance that the river will be higher on the return trip, and then my vehicle would be stranded on the other side. So, I figure if I walk, the worst that will happen is that I'll be tired; then I'll rest and I won't be tired anymore.

Luckily, most of the barrios are not so far from the rivers. The longest I've had to walk was just under an hour and a half. That was a tiring one since the barrio (Lasak) is pretty high up in the mountains. In fact, they say that it is only a ten peso jeepney ride from Lasak to Heaven. Coming back, of course, was downhill all the way, so it was a lot more comfortable. Other than that trek, I usually have to walk no more than 20 or 30 minutes. Sometimes a skylab motorcycle is operating on the other side of the river, so once we cross we can catch a ride to the barrio, and then after Mass we can ride the skylab back to the river. About half the time, there's a hanging bamboo foot-bridge somewhere along the river, so we don't have to wade across. But I've learned to be prepared: I wear a swimsuit under my trousers and sandals rather than shoes. That way if we do have to wade across, there's no problem.

I mentioned that it wasn't so rainy last year at this time. Yep, that means that I've been in Columbio for just over a year now. It's hard to believe how quickly the time has passed. Here's a list of some things I've learned in my first year in the mission. Some will require a little explanation, which will follow.

1. Mission life is everything I had hoped it would be...and more.
2. If a Filipino tells you how far away a destination is, in time or distance, automatically add 50%.
3. If you invite the people to participate, they will respond...on both sides of the Pacific.
4. If my entire house were made of Tupperware, the ants would still find a way to get into my cornflakes (besides, it would be very hard to "burp" the lid).
5. Teenagers are the same all over the world.
6. Funerals are tough.
7. If you can't see the bottom, don't drive across the river.
8. Patience, patience, patience.
9. I'm really not THAT fond of rice and fish.
10. Love is not a feeling, it's a commitment.

To elaborate:

1. *(Mission life is everything I had hoped it would be...and more.) Just before leaving for the Phillipines, I was talking to a friend of mine about how lucky I considered myself. At an age when many of my contemporaries were beginning to question their career choice, I was just started to do what I'd dreamed about all my life. "You're right," he said, "You are lucky. But what if you finally get there and then find out that this isn't it for you?" That was a scary thought, but only for a moment, since I was fully caught up in the enthusiasm of finally going to the missions. Now, the answer to the question is clear: this IS it for me. You just have to go over my previous letters to know what I mean.*

2. *(If a Filipino tells you how far away a destination is, in time or distance, automatically add 50%.) Self-explanatory.*

3. *(If you invite the people to participate, they will respond...on both sides of the Pacific.) It never ceases to amaze and edify me to see the goodness and enthusiasm of people. God is truly at work, all over the world. Here in Columbio, I think of the response of the people to daily Mass and to the invitation to join the choir; I think of the dedication and hard work of my parish team members, of the high school kids who are training to teach catechism to their peers, of the volunteers on the new church planning committee, of the women who come every Saturday afternoon to clean the church and grounds, of the volunteer catechists in the different barrios, and so many others. Then on the other side of the ocean: I was floored by the response of the St. Andrew parishioners in regard to the new church, and even more so by the desire of so many (not only at St. Andrew) to be involved, connected with the mission. I really feel the results of the many prayers said on my behalf.*

4. *(If my entire house were made of Tupperware, the ants would still find a way to get into my cornflakes (besides, it would be very hard to "burp" the lid). Just joking. Actually, the tupperware does a pretty good job of keeping the ants out of the food. But other than that, they're certainly ubiquitous. I can never remember the Tagalog word for "ant" so I just call them my "kaaway" (enemies).*

5. *(Teenagers are the same all over the world.) As you know, I spent a good portion of my priesthood in the States working with high school and college-age students. Now, with the choir, the kids who come to daily Mass and the scholars, I have the chance to spend a lot of time with teenagers here. Sometimes it amazes me as I listen to their banter, watch their expressions and see their interactions with one another. Here we are in the middle of the boondocks, and if you gave them longer noses you'd think you were with American kids! They have the same self-consciousness and desire to "fit in" with the group, the same bubbly excitement one minute and feigned boredom the next, the same generous spirits, the same kinds of put-downs and pranks to make sure that they themselves are not the target of laughter, the same open and optimistic natures, the same devastating end-of-the-world despair when they think they have been slighted by one of their friends, the same attempts to show how mature and grown-up they are, and the same episodes of childish irresponsibility when you'd like to wring their necks. God, I love 'em!*

6. *(Funerals are tough.) Funerals are tough. That's something that's the same all over the world too, I suppose, but here I've seen that emotions are not held in check the way they are in the States. People hold up pretty well during the funeral Mass itself, but at the end, when the family gathers around the casket for a final farewell, the tears begin...and the shouting...and the jumping...and the wailing...and the being held back by relatives and friends. It's even more severe at the cemetery or family plot, just before the casket is lowered into grave. I remember my first experience of this, shortly after I arrived. The adult daughter of the deceased was inconsolable. When the time came to bury the body, she became hysterical, trying to reach the pallbearers. I couldn't understand her words, because she was speaking Ilonggo, but from the expression on her face, her message was clear: "Don't you even think about putting my mother into the ground!" As a priest, it's not something that I can just shrug off as a cultural oddity. These are my people, and they are hurting in a deep way, and there's not a whole lot I can do or say to relieve their burden. Yeah, funerals are tough.*

7. *If you can't see the bottom, don't drive across the river.) Some lessons you learn the hard way.*

8. *(Patience, patience, patience.) You know, I'm the kind of person who, when I get an idea or project in mind, I want it finished yesterday. Actually, I'm getting a little bit better: I'm satisfied if I can see some kind of progress being made. But now I have to resolve myself to the fact that things take time, a lot of time. The specific example I'm thinking of is the new church. Two weeks ago, I was excited with the prospect of at least getting the land ready. One of the first things needed is to clear a space of banana trees and an old outhouse. Some men came and cut down the banana trees to stumps, and the next day I went out myself and cleared away all the debris and demolished the outhouse, leaving just the concrete foundation. "Ok," I thought, "now we just have to get a bulldozer in here to clear away the stumps and concrete and compact the ground, then this phase will be finished, and we can order the sand and gravel." Then I met with the planning committee: "Well Father, the bulldozer of the municipality is under repair, and we don't know when it will be fixed. And the municipal draftsman needs more time to draw up the new plans anyway. So, why don't we think about trying to proceed at the end of next month?" So, we wait another month before even getting started with the ground preparation. In the meantime, the banana trees are starting to grow back, right out of the stumps!*

And don't even get me started about the LTO (Land Transportation Office)! After the ordeal of getting the registration for the new engine of the Vitara, I went to the LTO in Kidapawan at the beginning of June to renew the general registration of the vehicle. I was there for three hours! First, they said they had to inspect the car. "You just inspected it last week, when I was here for the engine registration," I said. "Oh, that's right," the clerk answered, and filled out a form as if he had inspected the car. "Just take this over to the payment window." So I paid my forty pesos, and the clerk there said, "Take this receipt to the typist." There, my receipt was put at the bottom of a large pile, and I waited almost an hour until the typist got to it. But get this. That was the receipt just for the inspection. We hadn't even begun the process for the registration yet. "You need insurance," they said. "I have insurance," I replied, "here's the policy." "No, you need the government mandated insurance. Please go to this office (a kilometer away) and get it." So back I came to the window with the insurance policy. "Ok, I see that this renewal was supposed to have been done in May. So you'll have to pay a late fee." "But hold it," I said, "I've been waiting since January for the LTO to send me the necessary papers for my new engine. I couldn't renew the general registration without them. They arrived yesterday and here I am." "Yes sir, that's correct. So you have to pay the late fee. But it doesn't matter; you have lots of money. Just take this over to the payment window." And this particular clerk is the parish council president of a neighboring parish! This time, after payment, the receipt didn't go directly to the typist, but had to pass through three or four other hands first. Then, back to the bottom of the pile. I was fuming as I paced back and forth waiting. "Why don't you take a seat, sir?" said one of the clerks. "I don't want to take a seat, I want to get out of here!" That got the attention of my "friend", the parish council president, and he tried to speed things along for me. Finally, another clerk called me to the window, and said, "Go down the block and make Xerox copies of these papers." When I returned he gave a Xerox and said, "Ok, here is your TEMPORARY registration. Come back in 30 days to get the final one." "This is a joke, isn't it?" I said. "Oh, no sir, we have to verify everything with Manila." "What about the sticker for my license plate?" "Out of stock, sir. We don't have any stickers available at this time." "The whole reason I came here was to get the new sticker. Now what if I get stopped on the road and they want to know why I don't have the current one?" "Oh, just show them this little note that I wrote on your Xerox copy." So now I have to go through the whole rigmarole again next week. It's going to be 2001 before I get my 2000 registration. Knowing the corruption of the bureaucracy, I'm very tempted to go to the window, and just say, "Look, what's it going to cost me to be out of here in half an hour?"

So yes, I'm working on my patience. Think I'm making progress?

9. *(I'm really not THAT fond of rice and fish.) Self-explanatory*

10. *(Love is not a feeling, it's a commitment.) Not so often, but every once in a while, I get a little moody and irritated (even outside of incidents like the one described above). I think about that song, "You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling." (I don't know if that's the actual name of the song, but it's the chorus that's repeated) One of*

the symptoms described in the lyrics is "You're starting to criticize little things I do." During those irritable moments, I recognize that that's exactly my tendency: inwardly, I begin to criticize the little things the people do. "Why do they do it like that?" "Can't they ever be on time?" "Do they HAVE to be so indirect?" "Why not just give me a straight answer?" And so, I begin to wonder if maybe I'm losing "that lovin' feeling" toward the people. That's when I remind myself that love isn't a feeling, it's a decision, a commitment. It's not always easy or automatic. The test of the commitment is to keep on loving, even when I don't "feel" like it. And of course the model for that kind of love is Jesus himself. His commitment took him to the cross, where he DECIDED to be faithful to his mission, faithful to his God, even though he FELT abandoned by God.

So, those are some of the things I've learned during this year in Columbio. Naturally, I've got a lot more learning to do, as God continues to lead me in this mystifying, arduous, wonderful, life-giving journey called mission.

I'll close for now, because it's getting late. Love and miss you both! Love, Steve



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