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Hi everyone!

It's been a while since my last update, so I thought I would write now while I have a little time. The big news is that we are FINALLY beginning the construction of the church. I had been relying on the heavy equipment of the municipality, which always seemed to be occupied or under repair. Right after our parish fiesta way back in May, there was one day of delivery of filling material and then nothing more up to now. Finally, I lost patience (after a year and half, that's not too bad!) and decided to hire a construction company to take care of the entire project. They have their own equipment, will handle delivery of materials, etc. Just yesterday I signed the contract with them and they will begin on Monday. We are proceeding in "stages", so the contract is for the construction of Stage One, which includes foundation, columns, roofing, etc. The church would be "usable" but certainly far from finished by the end of stage one. The reason we are going this route is that so far we have raised only enough money for that much construction.

The time frame promised by the company for Stage One is two and half months, so there should be some significant progress made before I leave for my vacation at the end of August. The parish is ready to re-launch a fundraising campaign, and of course while I am home I will try to solicit some more support from various sources. My hope is that when I return in November we will be able to pick up where we left off. I have a theory in regard to the long delay in beginning this project, aside from the practical matter of the equipment availability. I noted that among the people (parish council, planning committee, etc.) there was no real sense of urgency about getting started.

When I look back on it now, I can perceive a possible reason. When we discussed design and layout of the church, we were limited by the area of land available for the building; if facing the road, the front entrance would be rather close to the road itself. Considering the possible need for expansion in the long-range future, I suggested to the people that we could simply turn the church sideways, so the entrance would be facing the driveway of the parish compound, since there is more land available on that side. A few people mentioned that it would be better to have the church facing the road, but there were no strong objections to my idea and eventually everyone agreed.

However, as I see it now, that was when enthusiasm for the project took a nose-dive. Then more recently, without even consciously considering this, I happened to look at the whole plan again, and mentioned to the Parish Council president that maybe it could work with the church facing the road. Immediately people started talking about the project again and suggesting ways that we could get started. So, my theory now is that I had failed to recognize the Filipino way of non-confrontation, indirectness and respect for the priest. No one wanted to criticize my idea or to insist upon another way, but at the same time they couldn't really get behind the project either. So there was a kind of passive resistance.

Of course, this is just a theory and I might be talking out of my hat. There could be a lot of other factors involved, such as the busy time of the elections, uncertainty about security, etc. At any rate, it's made me aware of the need to be more attuned to the subtleties of the culture.

The last time I wrote, I mentioned the minor disappointment I had in regard to the Lector/Commentator Workshop planned for the Ilonggo and Cebuano speaking GKKs; only three people, from one GKK, showed

up. Well, things were much better for the second workshop (planned for Tagalog speakers but opened up to the others as well). There were about 30 participants, and 13 out of the 16 GKKs were represented. I gave a presentation on the role of the Lector/Commentator ("Pray, Proclaim, Praise"), and an overview of the Bible, the Liturgical Year, the Lectionary and the Mass. That took us through the first afternoon/evening, and on the second day, we had a "practicum". Each participant had the chance to read in front of the group, and I gave pointers and comments after each one.

I think it turned out very well, and the next day (Sunday) the Lectors and Commentators were already at work in their respective chapels. Even more exciting is the ongoing "kaabag" training. Kaabags are the lay catechists and ministers of the Eucharist who lead the communities on the Sundays when there is no Mass. I was a little concerned because only about half of our GKKs had a kaabag. So we began to recruit men who would be willing and able to take on the role (by Church policy here in the Philippines, a kaabag could also be a woman, but in practice, they have been men only).

Actually, this training was originally scheduled for last year, in November, but that was the time of tension and "alert", when I had to leave the parish for a time. So it's only recently that we've been able to get things going again. I was very pleasantly surprised at the response: every GKK except one is represented in the training, and some GKKs sent two or even three candidates. The training consists of five seminars, the second of which is taking place today. A representative from the Diocesan Pastoral Team presented the first seminar, while the parish team and I will handle the rest. At the end of the training, new kaabags will be installed and current ones will renew their commitments.

I had another interesting experience with the LTO (Land Transportation Office) recently. This one was my own fault, but turned out OK. I've mentioned before that there are Mobile checkpoints along the road, at which LTO officials stop vehicles and examine registration, license, etc., primarily looking for a violation in order to impose a fine. (Remember I told you that sometimes their signs are misspelled: "LTO Chokepoint," which is really a more accurate description of their activity.)

Last week, I was stopped on my way to Kidapawan and the official noted that my compulsory insurance had expired on June 6. While he said "June," I heard "July" and replied indignantly, "It's only July 4 today!" He showed me the registration, with the June date, and I sheepishly admitted, "I guess you're right." He said that the fine would be 500 pesos (about \$10) and that he did not have an Official Receipt to give me. I had learned that it's important to get an OR; otherwise, you have no idea what the fine is actually supposed to be, and you are likely to be charged more than once for the same offense. So I told him that I would not pay the fine without a receipt. "Ok," he said, "then I'll keep your license and registration and you can pay at the office in Cotabato City" - three hours in the opposite direction.

Just then his supervisor came over and we went over the whole process again, with the same result. Finally, I told them that I would just pay the 500, get my papers back and be on my way. They huddled together, and the supervisor came back and said, "You know, you're a very nice guy, and I feel like we've become friends already. And so for a friend like you, there's no fine!" "Really? Thanks!" I replied. "But you know," he said, "it would be nice if I could give my men a little snack." "That's true," I said, "they've been out here all day and could probably use the energy. Can I help with that?" "Well, 200 pesos would probably cover it." So I gave him the 200 pesos and was greeted by smiles all around. He kept saying things like, "It's good to be friends, isn't it?" Just as I was pulling away I said to him, "Since we're such good friends now, the next time you see me coming, you'll just wave me on, right?" "Of course, my friend!" he replied.

In Kidapawan I renewed the insurance, which was also a relatively painless process. I had dreaded waiting at the LTO office all day. But all I had to do was go across the street with an LTO employee to an insurance company and the whole thing took only about 15 minutes. The employee took the papers back to LTO, so I didn't even have to return there and stand in line. Naturally, he accepted a tip from me for his services. I'm learning!

On the way back to Columbio the next day I approached the same mobile "chokepoint" and was being waved over. I slowed down, put my head out the window and told the official, "I'm continuing on." A look of recognition came to his face, and he said, "Oh, of course, sir. Go right ahead."

Of course, all of these happy experiences are tempered somewhat by my mom's recent diagnosis of cancer. Thanks to all of you for your prayers: please keep them up! I will send this out when I go to Kidapawan next week. We have a Clergy meeting on Monday, and on that evening I'll celebrate Mass with the group of scholars. Then on Tuesday I will go to Davao, to catch a plane for Zamboanga City. There I'll attend the ordination of the first Filipino PIME priest and the annual retreat. I'll get back to Columbio on July 23.

Because of my absence, we are delaying the official "groundbreaking ceremony" of the new church until July 29, even though the work will have begun a couple weeks before that. This Sunday, after Mass, we will have a small informal turning over of the dirt, just to get things started. It's a tradition here that when a building project begins, you kill a goat or pig and provide a meal; that's what we will do on the 29th, with invited guests (mayor, vice-mayor, barangay captain, GKK leaders).

OK, I guess that's all for now. Thanks again for your prayers; looking forward to seeing as many as possible when I'm home in September. Take care,



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