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Dear Mom and Dad,

I've been a busy, busy boy lately. Now I know how parents must feel as they get their kids ready for a new school year, since I've been taking care of my "scholars". There are a total of 6 of them. Two (both girls) are attending the Notre Dame Center for Catechesis in Cotabato City. They were given a scholarship by the school for the tuition, but there is still a parish "counterpart", plus support for room, board, and allowance.

Last Friday I took them to Tacurong to shop for school supplies, then on Saturday, I drove them to Cotabato to get settled in. The closer we got to Cotabato, the more checkpoints were along the road, and more soldiers were visible, since that had been a place where some fighting had gone on earlier. But we didn't encounter any problems, and the school administrators assured me that the students are absolutely safe there. After they finish this two-year course, they will be hired by the parish as professional catechists. One is seriously considering entering a convent eventually, after working at the parish for a couple of years.

Another scholar is attending Notre Dame University in Marbel. This is kind of a special case, since she is just one and half years away from graduation, but would have been unable to continue without help. So I'm giving her financial help only, as opposed to the follow-up that I will be doing for the rest of the scholars, who are attending Notre Dame of Kidapawan. When I say "follow-up", I'm referring to what I mentioned in previous letters: the idea of sponsoring "scholars" is not only to provide for their educational expenses, but also to attend to their total human and Christian development. So we'll have regular meetings (probably monthly), to talk about how they are doing as a group and as individuals, as well as prayer, Bible sharing, etc. They will be staying in a boarding house, together with a group being sponsored by another PIME priest, from Arakan Valley. The sponsorships that I offered to these students were "tuition-only" in theory. That is, their families are expected to contribute something as well for their board and lodging and allowance. However, it's not really turning out that way.

One of them is valedictorian of his graduation class and received a full-tuition scholarship from the school. So, rather than paying for his tuition, I'm covering his other expenses (which is just as well, because I know his mother would not be able to contribute anything; as a single parent, she has been working as a day-laborer on different farms, when she could find the work. As a matter of fact, I just hired her as a housekeeper/cook for the rectory; more on that later). Another is an older student (25 yrs. old), and I've asked him to act as a kind of guardian of the group. Remember that here in the Philippines, high school ends at grade ten, and college begins immediately after, so the first year students are only around 16 years old. In exchange for his service as guardian, I'm covering his living expenses as well.

Then there is one who receives tuition-only support, since her family can afford to help with other expenses. Finally, there's one girl whose family never asked for help, since they are relatively well-off, but because she is friends with the others, she wanted to live with the group. And since she's a great kid, I was happy to accept her. She'll participate in the "follow-up" activities, even though I am not supporting her financially. So, Friday it was to Tacurong (about an hour away) for shopping, and Saturday to Cotabato (about 3 hours away). Then yesterday (Monday) I had to go to Kidapawan for a diocesan meeting, and drove back today. Tomorrow morning, back to Kidapawan with the scholars who will be attending school there, to get them settled into the boarding house and make sure they have everything they need. Lots of driving.

There have been no problems on the roads, but it is tiring after a while. In addition to these college scholars, I still have three high school students here in Columbio. You know that I was unsure about what I wanted to do in regard to their living arrangements. I finally decided to have the two boys continue living at the rectory, while the girl will be staying with relatives here in the poblacion, and I will still support her school expenses. I told you that I was not comfortable having a mixed group of teenagers living here, so this works out well. In the meantime, as I mentioned above, I just hired a woman to be housekeeper and cook. Actually, she will cook only lunch, and the boys and I will fend for ourselves for breakfast and dinner. More important to me is the cleaning that she will do. The kids were doing an OK job, but teenagers are teenagers everywhere, and some days they are less ambitious about it than others. So I'll have the boys take care of outside work, and she will make sure the rectory is kept clean. She'll also take care of the laundry. I lost the previous laundry woman a while back, and the students or parish team members have been handling it, but I was never quite sure who was going to do it, or when.

Let me share with you a little more about the "Muslim situation" here. As I said last time, Columbio continues to be peaceful, thanks be to God/Allah. But that doesn't mean that there is no tension. I've begun to realize that the prejudice and bitterness run pretty deep, even among my good parishioners. I tried to address that in a homily a couple of weeks ago, on the feast of the Good Shepherd.

Here is part of what I said: Jesus tells us in today's Gospel, "I have other sheep who are not of this fold. I must lead them too, and they shall hear my voice. Then there shall be one flock, one Shepherd." So, Jesus is shepherd of ALL people, and he died for all people, in every age, every place, every nation, every tribe or religion. His sacrifice and the salvation he has won is for all. And this means that we are all brothers and sisters: Catholics, Protestants, the Lumad, and Muslims. Now we know that there is conflict here in Mindanao. We hear news of atrocities and alerts in many places. It's a very delicate and dangerous time, and while we'll be thankful that it is peaceful here, we naturally have some fear that maybe the fighting will come closer to us. It's all the more difficult because we really have no control over the situation, no power. All we can do is wait and hope. ; But we do have control and power over our own hearts, our own feelings. And, especially during times like these, the big challenge for us as Christians is to ask ourselves, what is my attitude toward those who are different from me; what's my attitude, for example, toward the Muslims? Are they my brothers and sisters, or simply my enemies? For example, every once in a while someone says to me:

"Father, I have a lot of Muslim friends, but when you come right down to it, I don't trust them." It saddens me to hear comments like that. It saddens me even more to hear slogans, like "the only good Muslim is a dead Muslim." Is it possible that a true follower of Jesus Christ could really believe that? Of course not! Now, someone might say to me, "Well Father, you're still new here. You don't know the real situation." That's true. I don't know the whole story. But I know the teachings of Jesus Christ; I know what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I'm not saying all of this to judge anyone, but to challenge all of us. Let's examine our hearts. Are they open to all people? Or are they closed and hard? Let's remember what Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, what credit is there in that? If you do good to those who do good to you, what's special about that? Instead, love your enemies, and do good to them; be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful. Don't judge and you won't be judged; don't condemn and you won't be condemned. Forgive and you'll be forgiven."

So that's our challenge. Let's avoid sweeping generalities, about the Muslims or any other group. We know that in any group there are good people and bad people; the same is true for ourselves. But God is one, our Father is Father of all, and that means that all of us are brothers and sisters. Let's pray for peace, realizing that the real starting point for peace is within our own hearts.

That's what I told the people. But have you ever had the experience of speaking to people, and they listen attentively and politely, but as you watch their eyes, you just know that they're not buying what you're selling? That's pretty much the way I felt. I realize that the resentment is deep, even if it doesn't spill over into aggressive acts. Recently, I got a little more insight into all of this. As we were driving back from

Tacurong, through a Muslim area, one of my parish team members said to me, "Did you see that man who just passed us on the skylab? That's the man who killed my father." She went on to tell me that there had been a land dispute between Muslims and Christians, and her father as a member of the town council was trying to help the Christians through the beaurocracy. One night, while her family was gathered around the TV set, a man came to their home and shot her father. She said that there was no real investigation, even though everyone knows who the killer was: one who was on the Muslim side of the land dispute.

She said, "Sometimes we're still very bitter about it, and we'd like to seek revenge. It wouldn't take much money to hire someone to kill him. In fact, someone told me that if I want him dead, I should just say the word, and there wouldn't even be a charge. But we know that we couldn't live with ourselves if we ordered the death of another person. That's why we sent my younger brother to Manila to study, because he's still hurting so much, and he can tend to be a hot head. We're afraid he might try to seek revenge." "But you know, Father, during the preparation for the Jubilee Year, when the travelling Jubilee Cross came to Columbio, I prayed for justice for my father. Anda couple of days later, one of the ringleaders of the killers died suddenly. This isn't something that I would testify to as an act of faith, but I really believe that God heard my prayers, and that was a miracle of the Jubilee Cross."

Throughout the long and sad history of Mindanao, there are lots of stories like that one, stories that could be told by Christians and stories that could betold by Muslims. So overcoming the resentment and bitterness is not easy, even for those who are committed to their faith. But, as I told my parish team member, we have to keep trying...trying to forgive; trying to break the cycle of violence and suspicion; trying not only to have peaceful co-existence, buttruly to open our hearts and accept the others as our brothers and sisters. That's the only way that true and lasting peace will come to this land.

Ok, that's enough for now. It's getting late and I'm heading to bed. I will try to stop at the internet café tomorrow when I go to Kidapawan, and send this out. Love and miss you both! Love,



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