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Dear Mom and Dad,

Nothing too exciting to tell you about these days. I guess that's good, since it means that things are calm and normal. We had expected that maybe the months of February and March would bring some troubles in view of the elections in May but so far, thank God, no problem. So this letter will just be a kind of potpourri of little experiences and reflections.

Speaking of the elections, the candidacy applications have been filed and it seems that there will be two Muslim mayoral candidates and one Christian. That's different from past elections, when the Muslims have been united behind one candidate while the Christians have fielded two or more. I told you before about my parish council president and a member of my parish team who were planning to run for municipal council. Both have officially filed. So I have mixed feelings: both would make good council members, but then they would no longer have the time to devote to the parish. Anyway, selfish motives aside, I hope they do well.

It's been strange weather around here lately. This should still be the tail end of the rainy season, but it's actually been quite dry. We've had no rain for two weeks, and then it was just a one-day thing after a couple of dry weeks. I heard on the news that there may be a new El Nino coming. I hope not. The last one happened just before I arrived in Columbio, but I heard about the hardships the people went through. Our farmers could really use some rain now.

However, that one storm two weeks ago was a doozy. It was on a Saturday afternoon, and I just happened to be in one of the barrios for Mass. The rain started just as I was finishing the homily, and poured so heavily on the metal roof that it was impossible to hear. I walked down the aisle to be closer to the people, cupped my hands around my mouth and literally yelled at the top of my lungs, "Please stand for the Creed!!!!" We made our way through the Creed, but then I decided it wasn't worthwhile to go on, and I told the people we would just wait it out a while. The roof had several leaks and the worst one (naturally!) was directly over the place of the altar table. We moved it three times before we found a place that would stay relatively dry. After about 15 minutes the rain let up somewhat and I was able to continue with the Mass. But all the while I was thinking about the river we had crossed to reach the barrio. There was no problem coming in, but with the volume of rain coming down, going home could be tricky. As always, after the Mass, some people invited me to their home for "merienda" (a snack), but I deferred this time in order to get to the river before it got too high. Luckily we made it across without problem, but if it had been just a little deeper I wouldn't have tried it.

You would think that the dry weather, while tough on the farmers, would be a blessing in regard to getting started on the new church. You would think so, but you would be wrong! We did finally finish the extension of the concrete dryer and the new basketball court. But the municipal equipment (two dump trucks and a payloader) is still broken down, so we can't bring in the filling material for the area of the new construction. It's a little maddening. I saw on the edge of town that a new warehouse has just been built by the NFA (National Food Authority) to store rice. It took two months to complete. We've been waiting two years and haven't even started yet! Actually, I shouldn't complain too much. I have a friend who is Missionary of the Sacred Heart in Columbia (S. America) and he says that his church construction is going on 15 years and counting. Oh God, preserve me from that!

Speaking of maddening, I dread what I have to do next Tuesday. It's time to renew the registration on the Vitara, and I'll have to go to the blessed LTO (Land Transportation Office) in Kidapawan and endure probably a full day of bureaucratic nonsense. This time I am going as prepared as possible: I have all my insurance papers, old registration, etc. I even made a stencil of the registration number etched on the engine block. So I hope that every time they ask for something, I'll be able to smile and hand it over to them. Dream on!

This is also the time of year to get things organized with the scholars. People in the States (most from St. Andrew) is now up to 27 students sponsoring me. The last couple of weeks I have been getting information on different schools, since there is a pretty wide variety of interests among the students and thus a variety of colleges they would like to attend. The majority wants to major in education and Notre Dame of Kidapawan is good for that. Some want to take technical courses in Automotive or Electronics; there is a good school in Kidapawan for this kind of course (University of Southern Mindanao), but it is not so easy to pass the entrance exam there. Since Columbio High School doesn't give the best preparation in the world, I'm looking for an alternative just in case some of them can't make it.

It's interesting that the public college (USM), which has a tuition of next to nothing, is more difficult to enter and more highly respected than the private one (Notre Dame), which charges a relatively high tuition fee. I also have a few students who want to go into maritime studies, in order to become seamen. Holy Cross College in Davao seems to be the best for that, and a Maryknoll brother who has some contacts there has been helping me get the necessary information. Of course, besides finding the right school for the students, I also have to find a place for them to live. There are no dormitories connected to the colleges here. Rather, students live in private boarding houses nearby. This current school year, in Kidapawan for example, I have 6 scholars, who live in a boarding house near Notre Dame with other scholars from Arakan Valley (the other PIME parish in the Diocese). That has worked out well, but with my new scholars coming in, there won't be room for all. Plus, the current boarding house is close to NDK, but far from USM. Plus, I think it would be best to have the boys and the girls in separate boarding houses. Plus, I need to arrange things so that I can keep in contact with all the scholars.

So, you can see, it gets a little complicated. If everyone were in Kidapawan, even in different schools, that would make it easier, but I don't think that will be the case. I already mentioned that some might be in Davao. If USM doesn't work out for the technical courses, the other schools I'm looking at are in Tacurong and Marbel (the other direction than Kidapawan from Columbio). But there's still a lot of time before the school year begins in June, and I'm sure that we will figure everything out.

Here in the parish, I restarted the daily Mass. Since I was forced to be away for those two months at the end of last year, the practice kind of died out. On the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, I announced to the people that we would start again, and that this could be a good Lenten commitment, to attend as often as possible. The response has been good; not overwhelming numbers, but 25-35 each day. As I told them, we will continue at least through the Lenten season, and probably carry on afterwards as well.

This past week, Fr. Joseph Bui has been visiting here. He is a Vietnamese American (PIME's first) ordained just 10 months ago and now assigned to the Philippines. He has quite a story: imprisoned by the communists in Vietnam for being a seminarian, escape from prison and then from the country, refugee camp in Indonesia, then 10 years of work in the U.S. in order to help his family before finally re-entering the seminary (with PIME). You can read all the details in the latest PIME World magazine. At one time, on the level of the Regional Council, we had thought that Joseph would end up being assigned to Columbio with me after his language school, since we know each other pretty well (in fact, he constantly tells people, "Fr. Steve was my superior in the U.S. He's the one who accepted me into PIME."). But now it seems more likely that he will go to a different parish. For that reason, he will study Cebuano rather than Tagalog, because then the options will be greater. Among the areas where PIME works, Tagalog is useful only in Manila and Columbio. For all the others, Cebuano is more appropriate.

Oh, before I forget. I AM going to buy the freezer next week while I am in Davao (to take Fr. Joseph to the airport). We are a step closer to getting the generator in place, but even though that's not finalized yet, I'm going to get the freezer. It's been a long time (months really) since we have had a brownout of any significant duration. Of course, I know I'm tempting fate: as soon as I get the freezer here and filled with food, we'll probably lose electricity for a week. But...courage! No retreat, no surrender!

Ok, I guess that's about all for now. Love and miss you both!

Love,



[BACK](#)

