

## FR. STEVE BAUMBUSCH ,PIME

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May 29, 2000

Dear Mom and Dad,

*I'll be going to Kidapawan tomorrow to enroll the students I am sponsoring in college, so I should be able to send this out from the internet café. I actually planned to write this earlier today, but just as I was about to get started...brownout! The electricity just came back as we were finishing dinner. I had bought a couple or rechargeable"emergency" lights, so we were able to see what we were eating.*

*Last time I told you about the fiesta and other activities during the month of May, but I forgot to mention the "Flores de Mayo". Throughout the whole month of May, kids from 6 to 12 come to the parish everyday (and to the chapels of the individual barrios) for catechesis, and at the end of their class they offer flowers to Mary (thus the name, Flores de Mayo). I'm assuming this is a custom from the Spanish colonial time, since they use the Spanish words. There are teenagers who volunteer as catechists. The kids learn their prayers, sing songs, play games, etc. It's also a time to prepare for First Confession and First Communion if they have not yet received these sacraments.*

*I had a group for First Confession last week. After the individual confessions the kids all gathered around and we just chatted for a while. I told them that now all their sins are forgiven and they have completely clean hearts, and stressed the importance of trying to be good and kind to their family and friends. Later, as I getting ready for Mass, one little girl came up to me to thank me for hearing her confession. Just the idea of doing that is touching enough but the words she used just about blew me away. She said, "Father, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't have a clean heart right now." Wow! Talkabout validation of your ministry! I've talked to people before about how lucky we missionaries are. People think we have it tough in terms of physical surroundings, but we get "strokes from the folks" that I doubt many parish priests get, at least in the States. And each time it happens it's a real blessing.*

*On to other things. I know you're concern about the reports of conflicts in the Philippines. Like I said last time, so far Columbio has been peaceful. In fact, just this morning I attended a meeting of the Muncipal Peace and Order Council at the town hall. Present at the meeting were the Mayor, Chief of Police Commander of the local military detachment, the Barangay Captains of each of the barrios, and representative of the religious sector (Catholic,Protestant and Muslim). The overall feeling of the meeting was one of thankfulness for the peace that we're experiencing here and commitment to to work together to ensure that it continues.*

*Many people (not only at this meeting, but at other times as well) credit the Mayor, who is a Muslim woman, for maintaining an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and understanding among the diverse groups that make up the municipality (Christian, Muslim, Tribal, Cebuano, Illongo, Ilocano, Tagalog). One important resolution of the Council is the outlawing of vigilante groups in Columbio. The comment was made: "Let's not return to the 70's." That was the time when such vigilante groups were used by the military in the anti-insurgency campaign, because they were fanatically anti-Muslim and anti-communist. But in fact they ended up terrorizing the common people. In some parts of Mindanao, it seems that there is a resurgence of this type of group. We hear about the "Christian Liberation Army"and the "Christian Alliance for a Muslim-free Mindanao."*

*As I told my people at Mass a couple of weeks ago, these groups are NOT CHRISTIAN, even if they use the word in their titles. They cannot be Christian if their hearts are filled with hatred and suspicion, and certainly not if they advocate genocide (and what else could a "Moslem-free Mindanao" mean?). In the same way, the Abu Sayyef (the Muslims extremists who have engaged in kidnapping and murder, especially in Basilan) have been condemned by Muslim leaders as acting contrary to the teachings of Islam. In any case, while in the 70's and early 80's these fanatic groups were condoned and even armed by the military (it was the members of such a group whom murdered Fr. Tullio Favali), now it is good to see that they are not going to be tolerated, much less condoned, at least in Columbio. The Chief of Police was very clear and strong about this. He said that even in the worst-case scenario, in which a military conflict came close to Columbio, it is not up to civilians to become combatants. The responsibility of the barangay captains is to ensure the safety of their people, so a coordinated plan should be in place should evacuation become necessary; but this would be true even without a military conflict, for example in the case of a natural calamity like flooding.*

*So that's the situation here in Columbio. Nationally, a new round of peace talks between the government and the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) is beginning tomorrow (Tuesday), and of course all of us are praying that it will be successful and this conflict can truly come to an end. In the meantime, life goes on as usual for me, with all the everyday joys and hassles.*

*After nine months without a flat tire (which some people have said must be some kind of record), I've now had three within the last three weeks. Naturally, there is no one in Columbio who can fix a tubeless tire, so each time I have to send the flat to Kidapawan for repair. Now that I think about it, after the first time, the repaired flat became the spare, which replaced the second flat, and it was that same one that became the third flat. (Are you following this?) So maybe it really wasn't repaired very well. Luckily enough, the flats have not occurred while I was on the road, and just as luckily, I didn't have much driving to do while I was without a spare. When I go to Kidapawan tomorrow, I'll pick up the repaired tire, so if I can make there without getting another flat, every thing will be back to normal.*

*Ok, I think that's all for now. I want to assure you again that I am well and safe. I love and miss you both.  
Love,*



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