

FR. STEVE BAUMBUSCH ,PIME

• • •

c/o Bishop's Residence • Guadalupe Center - Balindog • 9400 Kidapawan
N. Cotabato, PHILIPPINES

May 3, 2000

Dear Mom and Dad,

As you know, things have been quite busy for the past couple of weeks, but now I have a little time to write, and as I promised, let you know a little bit about the Holy Week celebrations, and other happenings here.

On Wednesday of Holy Week, there was a clergy meeting in Kidapawan, followed by the Chrism Mass at the Cathedral. I think I told you last year about the Chrism Mass, which I celebrated in the diocese of Lipa (on Luzon), where I was staying for my Tagalog practice. All of the clergy of the diocese gather with the Bishop, and we renew our priestly promises in front of the people. There's also the blessing and distribution of the Holy Oils which are used throughout the year for baptisms, anointing, etc.

Here in Kidapawan, the Chrism Mass is also the time when new assignments of the diocesan clergy are announced. In fact, I was surprised to learn that even the individual priests don't know their assignments until the announcement at the Chrism Mass. There is discussion and consultation of course, but the final decision is unknown until that time.

This year, we were eager to hear the assignments, because a diocesan priest will be joining my PIME confrere, Fr. Giorgio, in the mission of Arakan Valley. He will take the place of another PIME priest, Fr. Joseph, who will be doing sabbatical studies in Italy for the next two years. This is the first time we have had a "mixed" parish: PIME and diocesan. The one assigned is someone that Fr. Giorgio knows already, and he has some experience in working out in the boondocks, so it should be good.

The Holy Thursday celebration back here in Columbio was pretty similar to the way we do it in the States. One difference is the time: 3:00 in the afternoon as opposed to an evening Mass. Twelve "apostles" (3 from each of the four zones in the poblacion) come in costume, and there is the traditional washing of the feet after the homily. I had been told that after the Mass, there would be a "meal", right there in the chapel, served by the "apostles". And indeed, there was a table set up along one wall, with food piled on it. I assumed that this would be a real "sit-down" type meal, and I wasn't too thrilled with the idea of it taking place in the chapel, where we had put the Eucharist on the altar of repose. But in fact it was just snacks, handed out by the apostles, and within a few minutes everyone was gone.

There is no Eucharistic Vigil throughout the night; rather, on Good Friday, there is an all-night Vigil of the Cross. Good Friday celebrations began at noon with the "Seven Last Words of Christ". This is a tradition that I saw in Mexico too. Different individuals offer reflections on the words of Jesus from the cross:

"Father forgive them for they know not what they do." "Today you will be with me in paradise." "Behold your son; behold your Mother." "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" "I am thirsty." "It is finished." "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Of course the depth of sharing differs according to the individual: a couple were pretty brief and rather devotional, but many really took the words and tried to relate them to the lives of the people. For example, one described how we all feel abandoned at times, and the faith that is needed to carry on in those moments. Another spoke about the "thirst" of people for peace, for meaning in our lives, and for justice. And still

another reflected that the salvific mission of Jesus was complete with his death upon the cross, but not really "finished" because it continues in the struggles and witness of the Christian community.

Following the Seven Last Words, we had the Way of the Cross throughout the streets of the Poblacion. Different families set up the stations in front of their homes. A young man dressed as Jesus carried the cross, followed by the same "apostles" who participated in the Holy Thursday Mass. The characters of the stations (Veronica, Simon, the Blessed Mother, etc.) were in costume and waiting at their respective places. For songs and prayers, we had a portable speaker system, powered by a car battery and transported by a bicycle with sidecar. All of this was done in early afternoon, so it was hot! But usually most of the crowd was able to find some shade near the different stations.

The way of the Cross ended near the church, where we all gathered again for the Good Friday Liturgy: Proclamation of the Passion, Prayers of the Faithful, Veneration of the Cross and Communion. Only a few representatives participated in the Veneration of the Cross during the Liturgy; the other people stayed afterwards for their individual veneration. Then throughout the rest of the day and evening, until midnight, different groups (by turns, according to zone) held a vigil of the cross in the chapel. Naturally, we had a brownout, but they managed by candlelight.

There are no activities here on Holy Saturday. Even the Easter Vigil Mass, which is celebrated elsewhere on Saturday night, is postponed until early Sunday morning (4:00 AM). Everything starts at the edge of town, with the "Pagsalubong" or "Meeting". All the men gather about half a kilometer one way down the road, and the women do the same down the other way. They walk toward one another and meet where there is a gathering of little kids dressed as angels. This represents the meeting of the Risen Christ with the Blessed Mother early on Easter Day, since the tradition here is that Mother Mary was the first to see Jesus after his rising from the dead. (In Mexico, there is the same kind of custom, but it takes place on Good Friday, representing the meeting of Jesus and his mother on the way to the cross.) The angels sing, pigeons (in lieu of doves) are released, and the whole crowd processes to the church.

We gathered outside of the chapel for the blessing of the fire and Easter candle, then processed into the dark church. The Easter Vigil Mass is celebrated just like we do in the States, with the candles, many readings, blessing of water, renewal of baptismal promises and the sprinkling rite, and of course lots of singing and bell ringing. We had no baptisms during the Mass this year (apparently this is not something that they are used to), but I would like to introduce the practice for next year, because I think it really adds something to the celebration. Fr. Peter did celebrate quite a few adult baptisms in one of the barrios. These were tribal people to whom he has been giving regular catechesis for the past several months.

After Mass in the Poblacion, I was invited for breakfast at the home of one of the parishioners, then went on to a barrio for another Mass. And in the afternoon, yet another. The Masses in the barrios were much simpler, of course, without all the activities of the Vigil Mass. So, by the end of the day, I was pretty wiped out, but very happy. Like anywhere in the world, the congregations at Easter are quite a bit larger than usual, and it was great to experience the joy and participation of the people.

Early on Monday morning, I left for Davao, in order to catch a flight the next day for Zamboanga City, where we had the Regional Council meeting. The two PIME seminarians who are staying with me for their exposure experience spent the week I was away in a tribal village, living with a family there. So they are actually ahead of me in the "immersion" experience, since although of course I've been to the different tribal villages, I always return to the convento at night.

Now we are busy preparing for the Parish Patronal Fiesta (San Isidro Labrador) on May 15. There will be a "novena" of Masses on the nine days leading up to the fiesta, but since we already celebrate daily Mass, this won't be much different than usual, other than perhaps larger congregations. On the 15th, the Bishop will come for Mass and Confirmation. It's a custom in Kidapawan during parish fiestas that the clergy of the

diocese play basketball against a group from the place here too. I don't know yet if I will play on the side of the clergy or that of the parish. Then in the evening there will be the coronation of Mr. and Mrs. Columbio. This is another tradition for the fiestas, and it's used as a fundraising activity. Different areas of the parish put forth "candidates" for the coronation, and seek donations in support of their candidate. The one who raises the most is crowned. I've seen it done with little kids or teenagers as the candidates, but this time they will be adult couples. Like any gathering here, there will be a full program with speeches, intermission numbers, etc.

Speaking of patronal fiestas, here's an interesting custom that I had never seen before. Three of the barrio chapels have as their patron St. Vincent Ferrer, whose feast day is April 5. Since there are three with the same patron, we celebrate the individual fiestas on different dates throughout the month of April. The first time, I was surprised when the kaabag (catechist) of the chapel asked me when we would placing the statue of St. Vincent on the heads of the people. "Pardon me?" I said. "You know, Father. You bless them with the saint." "No, I don't know. You'd better explain it to me." "Tell you what, Father, I'll handle it, while you're celebrating the baptisms after Mass."

So during the baptisms I watched out of the corner of my eye as the kaabag held the statue of St. Vincent (about 2 feet tall) and the people came forward and bowed their heads. Then he raised the statue and brought it down on top of their heads (gently of course!). No one has been able to tell me the origin or significance of the practice. The next two times I was ready for it, so after the Mass I went immediately to the statue and the people came forward. The last time, though, I noticed that when the first woman was walking away, several people were brushing her head with their hands. I looked at the statue and realized that the bottem was filthy and covered with ants! I quickly wiped it off and then placed a handkerchief between the statues and the heads of the people. Lucky for me (and for the people too!) the statues are pretty small and light. I can just imagine what it would be like with a heavier one, if my strength gave out and I ended up braining someone!

Another thing about fiestas in the barrios is that they always include baptisms. I think this stems from the times when a barrio would be visited only once a year, at fiesta time, so all sacraments were administered at that time. Now, of course, with monthly Mass, there are other opportunities, but the custom remains. I like to do the baptisms at the beginning of Mass, if all of those to be baptized are present. But often one or more of the couples is late, so I go ahead and celebrate the Mass and do the baptisms afterward. Sometimes there are problems because people just assume that at the time of the fiesta they will have their child baptized, whether or not they've attended the Pre-baptismal seminar, whether or not they are practicing church-goers, whether or not they are even married. It's a constant challenge to educate them that the sacraments are not "automatic", but require preparation and catechesis.

I mentioned before about the Parish General Assembly and the goal to strengthen the individual communities and the unity of the parish as a whole. We've started to concretize the plans with a series of seminars to be offered either at the poblacion or in the various GKK's: leadership skills, music and liturgy, lector training, Kaabag recruitment and training, youth recollections, etc. I made a big calendar (from now to the end of the year) and posted it on the door of my office. Seeing things laid out graphically like that makes you realize just how much work is to be done. It will be a busy time for sure. To be honest, though, the bulk of the work will be done by the parish team and resource persons from the diocese. My role will be more in terms of presence and encouragement, with some specific input on occasion.

I also mentioned the coming transition in the parish team, since two members are pregnant and one other is going back to school. We've already approached a couple of people who seem willing to come on to the team, so in June, they will begin working with the existing members, so that by September they will be ready to take over. There is also a three-week Summer Formation Institute in Kidapawan, for the training of parish team members, so this will be helpful to them in getting started.

Ok, I think that's about enough for now. I will go to Kidapawan next Monday for a clergy meeting, so I hope to send this out then. In the meantime, as always, I'm thinking of you a lot.

Love and miss you both! Love,



[| BACK |](#)

