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Dear Friends,

As time passes quickly, I thought I would write another update. Quite a bit has been going on at the parish, so I'll jump right in.

As you know, the month of October is traditionally dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and especially to the praying of the Rosary. Here in the Philippines there is the custom of "Birhen ng Barangay" or the "Virgin of (our) village." Every afternoon or evening, the people gather in one home or another in their neighborhood and pray the Rosary. It's also a time for socializing and even a bit of fundraising, as they take up a collection each day for the needs of their particular Basic Christian Community group (BCC, or GKK using the Cebuano words).

I have been receiving rosaries from the States (Fr. Nicholas Maestrini in Florida and PIME's main office in Detroit) for some time now. So, at the end of September, we prepared Rosary guides in Tagalog and Ilonggo (the two most prevalent languages in the parish), and distributed over 1,000 rosaries to the people. Of course, they were delighted to receive them. We also distributed some beautiful pictures of Our Lady, "Medatrix of All Graces", provided by the Diocese to each Family Grouping of the different GKKs. So this was a way to make their traditional "Birhen ng Barangay" activities even more special.

Another activity that we have just started is an association of the widows of the parish. This is the brainchild of Fr. Ed Pedregosa, the Diocesan priest who is in residence with me in Columbio as he carries out his work in Inter-religious dialogue with the Muslims of the area. Last year, as we set out to bless all the homes of the parish, Fr. Ed noticed how many widows there were, some living in quite poor conditions, even by Columbio standards. So, he suggested that we organize a Widows' group, to meet together, share their experiences, offer solidarity to one another, and eventually maybe even band together in some income-generating project to help those more in need. The response was great: over 120 signed up and over 80 came to the first organizational meeting. That's a lot of widows for a little place like Columbio; many of their husbands were killed during the Christian-Muslim hostilities of the 70's and early 80's.

I wasn't present for the organizational meeting, since I was preaching a retreat to PIME's seminarians in Manila, but I heard that it went very well and the group is quite enthusiastic to get started. My contribution, so far, has been to provide the name of the group: "THE WIDOWS' MIGHT." I have also arranged for a small "Canteen" to be included in the new Youth Center, and we will give the management of it over to the Widows. This will not only allow them an opportunity to generate some income, but will be a nice way to bring together the young and the "experienced" on a regular basis.

As you might know, Nov 1&2 (All Saints/All Souls Day) are very important feasts here in the Philippines. In fact, they are secular holidays as well, since the tradition is for everyone to go home to their place of origin, gather together as a family and pay respect to departed loved ones. Graves are carefully tended and often the family spends the night in vigil. To be honest, the vigil often turns quickly from a time of prayer into a simple family reunion, with lots of eating, drinking, card playing, etc. Maybe the closest parallel in the U.S. would be Thanksgiving Day, when the families gather together to thank God for His blessings, but also take the opportunity to enjoy each other's company, eat way too much, watch football, etc.

At any rate, the religious dimension of the feasts is not lost completely, as it is important for the people to celebrate Mass and to have the graves of their loved ones blessed. Fr. Ed and I made a schedule whereby we were able to reach all the villages; in some we had both Mass and grave blessings, and in others we proceeded directly to the cemetery and private graves.

This is only the second time I have experienced these days in Columbio. Last year at this time, I was home on vacation. Two years ago, this was the time of the kidnap threats, when I was forced to stay in Kidapawan for two months. So it was nice to be with the people once again on these feasts that are so important to them. I was also reminded how the people tend to choose the most remote and inaccessible places possible to place their graves. So, there was a lot of walking: across rivers, along the edges of rice paddies, through brush and brambles. You might remember that the first time (3 years ago), I made the mistake of walking to a cemetery with my alb and stole on! What a mess they ended up being! This time, I was prepared, with a simple T-shirt and blue jeans, carrying my stole and holy water through the fields.

When I was home for vacation last year, I bought a book on the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), which includes a full Catechetical Program for adults who want to join the Catholic Church (or for Catholics who desire a return or renewal of their faith). Since I got back to Columbio, the book has been sitting on my shelf, as I got busy with many other programs and activities. Just recently, I pulled it out and began to translate the content into Tagalog. I plan to train the Parish Team to use it, primarily for those adults (teenagers and up) who want to join the church, but also for just about everybody in all the GKKs. I've noticed that while the people are enthusiastic about their faith and very dedicated to certain devotional practices, they tend to lack some basic awareness of just what we believe as Catholics. And while there are prepared "modules" on certain subjects, like Baptism or Matrimony, I haven't been able to find a general systematic presentation in Tagalog. This one seems good, since it is not like a classroom setting with teacher and students, but combines prayer, Bible sharing, and personal reflection with the catechetical content. These are things that the people are already used to in their GKK experience.

OK, I think that's about all for this time. As you know very well, things will get quite busy as we enter the Advent and Christmas seasons, so it might be after the New Year before I write another full update. But you can be sure that all of you remain in my prayers that the grace and joy of the Lord will be with you always.

Love and prayers,



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