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Dear Mom and Dad,

In one of your recent emails, Mom, you mentioned that it has been a long time since I sent a full letter. When I read that, I thought to myself: "Not really. I just sent a report a couple of weeks ago." Well, today I looked at my last letter and I see that you are right: it's pushing two months! Time is really flying by! So, while I have some time, I thought I should get off a few lines.

The renovation of the old church has started. So far, we have replaced the roof and are now getting to work on window frames, wall and floor repair, etc. I told you that I plan to make a Youth Center there, including a small library. You know that a generous donation for the renovation came from Charmin and John's parish collection. However, I never did tell you about the source of the rest of the funding. I think you'll like this.

You know that in Detroit, there is an annual "Golf Day", which raises a lot of money for the missions. During my time as Regional Superior, I got to know the members of the organizing committee, and in some cases, their families as well. They are a great bunch of guys, and they really work hard to make the event a success. In recent years, Don Kuester has been the coordinator, and well over 1,000 golfers per year have participated. Each year, an "Honoree" is selected from among former or present members of the committee, and he is recognized and thanked for his contributions to the cause. A few years ago, I had the idea of using some of the proceeds of Golf Day to allow the honoree to choose a place in the missions where a chapel would be built, dedicated to a loved one of his, or perhaps named after his favorite saint. And that has been happening ever since.

This past year the honoree was Paul Shapiro. He had been involved with Golf Day for many years before I arrived in Detroit, and we hit it off right away, especially since he is originally from Columbus and is, if possible, an even bigger Buckeye fan than I am! He's the one who took me to the U of M game last year, which if I remember correctly...let's see...oh yeah...the BUCKEYES WON! (That's for any of my beloved Michigan friends who happen to read this.) Even beyond that natural attraction, I became close with Paul's whole family, officiating his daughter's wedding and baptizing a couple of grandkids. So I guess you can say that it wasn't too surprising that Paul chose Columbio as the designated place for his "honoree" chapel to be built.

I got in touch with Paul, told him about the renovation plans for the former church, and checked to see if it was OK with him to use the funds for that purpose rather than a chapel; he was happy to agree. I also asked him about dedication and naming of the center. This is the part I think you'll like, Mom. Paul suggested that it be dedicated to St. Peregrine, the patron saint of cancer victims, in thanksgiving for two recoveries: his wife, Mary Jo, and you! I can't think of a better idea! So, the San Peregrino Youth Center should be open in a couple of months. I'll send pictures.

As for the new church, I've been fighting a running battle with dogs, who like to come in at night (the tile floor is cool, I guess) and leave "souvenirs" throughout the church. You know that the sides of the church walls are made of grilles, set upon a low wall of cement, but in the doorways of course, the grilles go all the way to the floor level. I realized early on that this would allow access to animals, and put some metal screening (like heavy chicken wire) along the bottom of the gates. But I continued to find evidence of

overnight visitors, and finally saw one jumping over the wall and through a narrow space in the grille. I realized that the dogs had to be skinny and athletic, but they could still enter. So I put screening along the cement wall on every side of the church. I was quite proud of my handiwork, until the next morning I went into the church and found MY dog, sleeping peacefully on the presider's chair! So, I went back to the store again for more screening and went up another 18 inches. So far, it seems to be doing the trick.

In regard to pastoral work, the biggest thing would be the creation of two new Basic Christian Communities (or GKKs, using the Cebuano abbreviation). In each village or barangay, groups of families make up a GKK. They gather together for the weekly Scripture and Communion Service led by the Lay Catechist (or "kaabag"), for the monthly Mass, and other opportunities for prayer and sharing. That's a nutshell explanation: there's actually a lot more to it than that. Essentially, the GKK is the way of "being Church" in the Philippines. As opposed to a large parish experience, which can be virtually anonymous, the GKK is intentionally kept rather small, so that the people come to know one another well and can share deeply about their experiences in the light of the Gospel. Particularly in times of tension, violence, and oppression (e.g. during the Martial Law years here under Marcos), the GKK offers a chance for solidarity, mutual support, and just trying to make sense of what is going on. It can also be a vehicle for community organizing among the poor, in order to work together to better their condition.

When I arrived, the Mission of Columbio had 16 GKKs: four "zones" of the Poblacion (the town center), and twelve villages. That is relatively few in comparison with many parishes, which might have as many as 50 or more. As I mentioned above, we have just established two new ones. One, named Sinapulan, has been in formation for quite some time, under the care of Fr. Peter Geremia, the head of the Diocesan Tribal Filipino Program, since the area of Sinapulan has a good number of tribals residing there.

The other one was split off from a larger GKK called Telafas, so we now have Telafas I and Telafas II. The people in the area of Telafas II live a good distance away from the chapel in Telafas I, so they tended to be less active, even in regard to the basic sacraments. So, we're doing a lot of catechesis there now, preparing teenagers and adults for baptism, since they were never baptized as children. Last week, after interviews and preparatory seminars, I celebrated a mass validation for couples in "irregular unions" (married outside the church, or in most cases, not married at all, but simply having lived-in for years) and baptized their children. I'm finding out more and more that there are lots of these cases, since so many people live in far-flung and rather isolated areas. They are geographically included within a given GKK, but since they are far away, they are not involved in the life of the small community. I'm thinking that at least one or two additional GKKs should be established soon, in order to reach those in that kind of situation.

Another activity we have been busy with is the "Family Encounter." Next January the 4th World Meeting of Families will take place in Manila. It had been hoped and planned that the Pope would attend, but his health will not allow it. In any case, in preparation for that event, we are focusing attention on the family. Every Sunday, in a different GKK, the Family Encounter takes place. It consists of a full day of seminars and activities for fathers, mothers, youth and children. The parish team handles that while I am saying the usual monthly Mass at another GKK. Then I show up in the afternoon for confessions and Mass. The people have very well received it.

In my last letter, I mentioned that this a time of financial crisis for many people in this area, because of late rains delaying the planting and eventual harvesting of rice. Since people live from harvest to harvest, a two-month delay hits them hard. Now a lot of harvesting is going on, but because everyone ended up planting at exactly the same time (when the rains finally came), the harvests also take place simultaneously, which drives down the price for which they can sell the product. In fact, I've heard that the going rate for rice right now is just over half of what it was a year ago. So, things continue to be difficult for the people, as they try to use the reduced proceeds of this harvest to pay off the debts they incurred during the two-month hiatus. It's no wonder that they are never able to save anything. And so the cycle continues. Like I said last time, it's not really a matter of looming starvation: the people are surviving and getting by as best they can.

But in terms of bettering the situation for themselves and their children, I can see how frustrating it can be for them.

That may not be the happiest note to end on, but I will wrap this letter up here, since I am getting ready to go to Kidapawan today and will send this out from the internet café. You can be assured that I am still healthy and happy. There was a pretty strong 3-day virus going around, causing fever and intense headaches, but thanks be to God, it seemed to jump over me without landing. Love and miss you both!

Love,



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