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Dear Mom and Dad,

It's been almost a month since I last wrote a full letter, so I expect that this one will be kind of long. I don't know why, but the month of August seemed to drag by interminably, while so far the month of September is whizzing by more quickly than I could imagine. Maybe the people here are right: once you get into months ending in "-ber," time picks up the pace and before you know it, Christmas is here. At any rate, things have busy as usual.

We finished the GKK Assemblies and have now started general Leadership Skills training in all of the GKKs. That will take us through the month of November, and then we will start seminars for the individual "Program contacts". The GKK Assemblies allowed us to identify individuals within each GKK who are willing and able to be the contact person for various programs, like Justice and Peace, Community Based Health Program, Catechist, Worship and Liturgy, etc. So these individuals will be invited to the training seminar in regard to each one's commitment. The hope is that by the end of next year, every GKK will have trained persons in each area.

Let me tell you about another language gaffe, this one not so much on the humorous side. First a little background. A while back, one of the parish team members (Marlyn) told me that a couple was requesting a baptism for their child on the following Thursday, after the daily Mass. "Ok," I said, "and everything is in order? They've already been through the pre-baptism seminar and we have the birth certificate of the child?" It's necessary to have the birth certificate in order to issue the baptismal certificate, because both of these are used as official identification for governmental purposes (school registration, application for passport, etc.) and if there are differences between the two, it causes a lot of problems later. Marlyn assured me that the couple had finished the seminar and that they would be bringing the birth certificate to the office before the baptism.

So, on that Thursday, minutes before the time for Mass, they all showed up: parents, grandparents, sponsors (there are usually several sponsors for baptism, not just the two godparents), relatives from out of town...and guess what? No birth certificate. I hate when things like that happen: at the last minute, some problem comes up that should have been handled long before. In addition, at that moment about a dozen things were happening at the same time: people were coming in for Xerox copies, someone wanted to schedule a funeral, students were asking me about the readings for the Mass, etc. So my patience was pretty short, and I curtly told the grandmother: "If there's no birth certificate, there's not going to be a baptism." She ran and got her daughter, the mother of the child, who came in and gave me a story (which I frankly didn't believe) about why they didn't bring the birth certificate, and promised that they would bring it the next day. Pretty calmly (really!), I explained to her the reasons that we need the birth certificate, and finally we decided to go through with the baptism, but we would not issue the baptismal certificate until the birth certificate was in our hands.

So we began the Mass. As I mentioned above, there was quite a big group of people in connection with the baptism, and throughout the Mass, it seemed like there was constant commotion among them: moving around, whispering to one another, etc. So I was getting more and more irritated. When Mass was over, as I was preparing for the baptism, the grandmother came up to me, and this is where the miscommunication

took place. "Father, after the baptism, will you come to our house?" She spoke very softly, and I was already preoccupied, so I didn't catch everything. I heard the words "baptism" and "our house", and I thought she was saying, "Father, can't we have the baptism at our house?" That set me off. "No!" I answered harshly. Her eyes got huge, and she said, "You're not coming?" "Of course not! It will be here!" She gave me a confused look and mumbled something about food, and then meekly backed away. As I continued setting up for the baptism, it dawned on me what her initial request was, and I felt like an idiot. I found the grandmother and put my arm around her shoulder, and said, "I'm sorry. I misunderstood what you said. I thought you were asking to have the baptism at your house." "No, Father, I was inviting you to come and eat!" Then we could laugh about it. Thank God people are understanding. And of course, I did join the family for dinner at her house.

Looking back, I realize how foolish it was for me even to have that idea enter my mind. Everyone was there, in the church, waiting for the baptism to begin. Why would they request to have everyone move to their house for the sacrament? To be honest, I think what really happened was that deep down I was looking for a reason to go off, to vent my frustration with the whole situation, and she became a convenient target. While I wouldn't wish for something like this to happen again, I guess it's good every once in a while to have a vivid reminder of my own weakness, lack of patience and tendency to jump to negative conclusions. I just pray that the reminder stays with me the next time I'm faced with a similar situation.

On to other things. We have made a tiny step in preparing for the church construction. I mentioned to you before about the need to extend the existing concrete "dryer/basketball court" on one end, in order to make use of the space on its other end. The municipal pay-loader finally arrived to clear the land where the extension will take place; then, a couple of days later the bulldozer came and cleared out the site of the demolished bodega, which is the primary area for the new church. We have an agreement with the municipality for the use of its equipment (pay-loader, bulldozer, dump trucks, etc.) at no cost, except for the fact we will provide the fuel. So I arranged to have two fifty gallon drums of diesel fuel delivered and it is on hand to refill the machines as needed. Now we are waiting for the dump trucks to be available in order to deliver filling material.

Speaking of the diesel fuel, shortly after it was delivered, I made a quick trip to Kidapawan. When I returned, I saw that the students who live here were making a fire in order to cook some fish...about two feet away from the drums! "What are you doing?" I cried. "You can't make a fire here. Don't you know that this is fuel?" "Well, the drums are closed, Father," they replied. "Put it out NOW!" Thank God nothing happened. And, speaking of fires, I had an interesting experience last week. Three men came to the rectory in uniforms identifying them as coming from the Fire Prevention Bureau. They said they were there to inspect the house. The inspection consisted in kind of looking around from the middle of the room. They asked where the fuse box was, but when I pointed it out to them, they didn't even open it. Finally, they asked if we had fire extinguishers on the premises (as well as at the Tribal Training Center next door). When I told them that we did not, they said that this was mandatory and that immediate compliance was expected. To effect the immediate compliance, they just happened to have with them a representative of a fire extinguisher company with the product on hand. I told them that I could speak for the rectory, but not for the Training Center, since Fr. Peter is in charge there. They said they would stop at his residence in Kidapawan to speak to him, and I ended up having to buy two fire extinguishers for the rectory (one for downstairs, one for up), at what I'm sure was an inflated price. In fact, I'm not so sure that the whole thing wasn't a scam. But at least the fire extinguishers look real (and charged), so even if I paid more than I should have, it is good to have them in the house.

There's been some progress on the generator too. I finally was able to get a mechanic to work on it. After getting different parts that were lacking (I understand that through the years of inactivity parts were cannibalized for other purposes), he got it running. He said that it will be more efficient if the motor is separated from the generator and operated with pulleys, so that is the step he's taking now. I have high hopes that within another week, it will be operational. Then I will see about getting the freezer.

I think I mentioned to you the changes in the parish team, due to the pregnancy of two members, and my desire to have a combination cook/secretary. The woman I hired as a combination housekeeper/cook does a great job of cleaning but is not at all confident in her cooking skills. In fact, she was so worried that I wouldn't like what she cooked, she actually did very little cooking at all, leaving it to the students or buying already cooked food at one of the stands around town. No amount of reassurance on my part could change her mind. I noticed that one of the new members of the parish team (Jovie) seemed right at home in the kitchen, so I asked her to switch over from parish team member to parish secretary and cook. She was reluctant at first, because she really enjoys the pastoral work of the parish team, but finally she agreed. And, she has moved into the rectory.

So, now we have a secretary and cook who is here all the time. In addition, with an adult in the "women's quarters" I felt more comfortable in inviting Melanie, the high school student I am sponsoring, to return to live in the rectory. She has been staying in a boarding house, with very little supervision. So this works out well all-around. We have already found another person to Jovie's place on the parish team, and she might become "live-in" as well. Then there would always be someone here, even if Jovie has a day off, etc.

Last week, I went to Lam-alis for Mass. This is one of the furthest villages, up in the mountains, where Mass is celebrated quarterly, in Cebuano. There are two ways to get to Lam-alis, since a "shortcut" trail has been recently been made. I've gone that way before, and found it passable, if difficult. Now work is being done to widen the trail and spread gravel, so this would be the ordinary way to reach Lam-alis.

So, that's the way we went. As we made our way up the mountain, we saw that piles of sand and gravel had been deposited for future spreading. At one point, right at a sharp curve, there was a large rock between the gravel pile and the side of the mountain. I got out to remove the rock, and that gave me a view of the trail as it continued up the mountain. I could see that further along, the gravel piles were spaced in such a way that there would not be room for the Vitara: if I went on one side, I would scrape the side of the mountain, and if I went on the other, I would be dangerously close to the edge of the trail; that is, to the abyss. So, I decided to turn around. It looked like there was just enough space to do so between two piles of gravel, but I miscalculated and ended up burying the tires in gravel and sand. Not even the four-wheel drive would get me out (I had three women members of the parish team with me, and they were not able to provide much pushing power). So I had to scoop out the sand and gravel (by hand) until I had the clearance to get out. It took about twenty minutes, and by the time I was finished I was covered with sweat and dirt. We went back to the main trail and took the alternate route, which we were able to follow for quite a distance before it, too, became impassable because of deep ruts created during the rainy season. From that point, we walked...all uphill, in the sun.

To make matters worse, the thermos of water I had brought along just in case we would have to walk some distance, had fallen over in my attempts to get unstuck from the gravel, and all the water leaked out. So by the time we arrived in Lam-alis (after about an hour and a half of walking), the sweat and dirt were even more pronounced. Of course, this would also be the time I forgot to bring along an extra shirt. But one of the ladies there ran home and brought me a T-shirt, so that at least during Mass I could feel a little cleaner.

After Mass, the catechist said to me, "Father, there's a family here who wants to bless their daughter, because she has an evil spirit." I went to the family and asked what the problem was. "It's an engkanto, Father. She wakes up screaming in the middle of the night and it's hard for us even to hold her down." Engkanto is a generic term for different types of spirits which bother the people. Even if I were inclined to believe in evil spirits manifesting themselves in this way, it was clear to me the "classic" symptoms of possession were not present.

The girl, 16 years old (but appearing much younger than that), was present during the Mass and even received communion without any problems. If novels and movies are to be believed, this wouldn't be possible were an evil spirit present. Still, I learned in Mexico that it's useless to pass off experiences like this as mere

superstition, or to try to convince the people that such evil spirits do not exist. So I told the girl's father: "You know that the power of God is greater than that of any engkanto. And as God's children, we don't have to be afraid. Now we just finished the Mass, where Jesus is present in a very special way, and your daughter received Jesus into her heart through the reception of communion. These are the things that protect us from evil. I'm going to bless your daughter and pray for her peace of mind and heart. And all of you, as a family, should continue to pray, to be close to Jesus, and feel him close to you. Then I have one more suggestion for you. If your daughter seems to be sick, don't assume right away that it's the work of an engkanto. There could be some physical problem, and if so she should be examined by a doctor." He seemed appreciative and open to what I was saying. The girl herself sat there very calmly as I blessed her and sprinkled her with holy water. Ok, I guess I'll close for now, since I've been rambling on for quite some time. Love and miss you both! Love,



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