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Dear Friends,

Greetings! It's been a while since my last update, so let me catch you up on what has been happening. At the beginning of August, we PIME priests had our annual retreat, in Kidapawan. The retreat master was Father Adrian Pelosin, who came over from Bangkok for the occasion. I was able to give him a rundown on the alumni he knows and he sends his greetings to all. Several times, Father Adrian made mention of what a unique and great group of guys were gathered together in those college years: such a wide range of talents and abilities, together with a good mix of characters and personalities. He's right! We were (and are) pretty special, right?

At the end of the retreat, we celebrated the 150th anniversary of PIME. The bishop of Kidapawan presided at the Mass and we invited all the clergy and religious of the diocese, plus the people of the parishes where we have been serving: currently in Columbio and Arakan Valley and, previously, in Tulanan where Father Tulio Favali was killed in 1985. I think I mentioned the last time about the embarrassment I felt when I had to tell the people in Columbio that we were limiting participation. But they took it well, and we had a good number there: about 120. After the Mass, there was a program (as is always the case in a Filipino gathering), with songs drama, speeches, etc. Father Peter's group of Tribal scholars, who live at the Tribal Center next to the rectory here in Columbio, performed an excellent drama portraying the history of PIME in the Philippines, focusing on the work for justice, peace and inter-religious dialogue. Columbio's contribution to the program was a folk dance performed by our senior citizens.

After the retreat, there was a Regional Council meeting. Then, I took two priests to Davao to catch their planes for Manila and Zamboanga. When I returned from Davao, I stopped in Kidapawan. There, Father Peter told me that there were reports of large groups of armed men roaming around the Columbio area: MILF rebels who no longer have "camps" (you remember from previous updates that the "camps" of the MILF have been taken over by government forces), and so become roaming bands who survive as they can, often by raiding villages for supplies. In this case, it seems that they were just passing through and not causing any problems (e.g., no stealing or threats to the populace). Still, the bishop was a bit concerned and advised me to stay in Kidapawan for a few days. Even if these groups had no plan to cause trouble, if they happened upon a foreign priest the temptation might be too much for them to resist. So, I waited until the end of the week to return to Columbio for the weekend schedule of Masses. On the following Monday, there was the regularly scheduled monthly Mass with the scholars who attend college in Kidapawan. So, I turned right around and went back there on Sunday night. This time I just stayed until Tuesday, and then came on back to Columbio.

As of now, there continue to be reports of these groups of armed men, but they seem to be further up in the mountains, not so close to Columbio town. There have been a couple of hold-ups on the road and lots of carabao (water buffalo) have been stolen. But! it's not really clear just who is doing the mischief. Some say that it is MILF, but others say that they are just common criminals, taking advantage of a confused situation. In fact, the last thing I heard is that there are three groups of carabao rustlers: one Muslim, one Christian and one Lumad (Tribal Filipino); and that each operates in its own area. That is, the Muslim group steals from the Muslims, the Christian group from the Christians, and the Lumad group from Lumads. If this is true, then we're not really talking about any political or ethnic conflict. In any case, the common consensus

here is that the town of Columbio itself is safe. We just have to be careful when travelling around.

Back here in Columbio, we have finally taken the first step in the church construction: clearing the land for an extension of the concrete "dryer". I think that I've mentioned the dryer before: it's a large expanse of concrete. The people spread grain on it (rice or corn) to dry in the sun. It also doubles as a basketball court. We need to use part of the land on which the dryer sits for the new church. So, first we we'll extend it on the other side, before tearing up the portion we need. That way the use of the dryer will not be interrupted. The municipal payloader, which had been "under repair" for a long time, was finally replaced with a new one, and in less than an hour, the area was cleared. Of course that was a week ago, and nothing else has been done since. We need to fill in and compact the land before constructing the extension to the dryer. That requires the use of the municipal dump trucks to haul the fill, and the municipal roller to pack it down. No, they are not "under repair", but are being used for other projects...so, once again, we wait.

Speaking of waiting, I'm also in the process of getting the generator fixed. So far, it's been about a six-month process. You might remember that there has been a generator here for a long time, but when I arrived, it had not been used for at least 6 or 7 years. Parts had been cannibalized for other machines, etc. Since we have frequent brownouts, I wanted to have it repaired. Over the course of several months, a mechanic would look at it and assure me that he could fix it; then I never saw him again. So I would have someone else look at it, with the same result. This happened no less than four times! Finally, just last week, a guy got it running, but he said that he still needed some other parts to make it work efficiently. Of course, those parts are not available in Columbio, so he gave me a list, which I handed onto Fr. Peter's mechanic in Kidapawan. Yesterday, Fr. Peter called (by radio) saying that his mechanic was going to Davao and could get the parts, but had some questions about the details. They were questions I couldn't answer. So I sent one of my students to talk to the mechanic here. He said he would come by later and give me the information so that I could call Fr. Peter before his mechanic left for Davao. You guessed it! He never showed. So who knows when the thing will finally be repaired. Patience!

One reason that I want the generator working is that I'm planning to get a small freezer. Actually, my folks are springing for it as an early Christmas present (God bless them!). This way I'll be able to stock up some things, especially meat. Of course, a freezer is useless if we have brownouts, so I need to have the generator running first. Then, it should also be helpful once the actual church construction starts, so that in case of brownout, the work can keep going. I told you that I've begun to say Mass in Ilonggo now. It's not that I've studied the language. I found an Ilonggo missal and read over the Mass one time with the parish team in order to get a sense of the intonation. Then I just had to go at it. (If I need patience with some things here, I guess some things I do require their patience as well.)

Last week, a parish team member translated my homily from Tagalog to Ilonggo and I tried to deliver it in one of the barrio chapels. But I wasn't very satisfied with the result. The translation was fine, I'm sure. But, just reading the homily (and stumbling through the reading at that) takes something away from it. It felt kind of lifeless. So for now, I will stick to Tagalog for the sermon. Since everyone understands Tagalog anyway, it makes more sense to use the language with which I'm more comfortable and can speak with feeling and expression. The Mass itself, and all the readings and prayers, will be in Ilonggo for the chapels where that language predominates.

Ok, I guess that's about all for this time. Please keep me in your prayers. Pray especially for those areas that are more troubled than Columbio, so that a true and lasting peace can come to this island of Mindanao. Be sure that you are in my prayers as well. All the best,



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