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Dear Mom and Dad,

Well, I tried to send this via e-mail yesterday while I was in Kidapawan, but the Bishop was busy at his computer and I didn't have time to wait for him to finish. And since I know that I won't get to the internet for another couple of weeks, I'm sending this by snail mail...will go ahead and re-send by e-mail when I get the chance.

We'll see which one reaches you first! We had a bit of excitement here last week, although I have to admit that I slept right through it and was only told about it the next day. At about 3:00am a woman who lives close to the rectory went into labor, but the baby was coming out feet first. It just so happened that one of the parish team members, Marlyn, was spending the night here. Actually, she had tried to go home in the evening, but missed the last "skylab" (I told you about them before; they're large motorcycles for public transportation) to her village.

One of the family members of the pregnant woman came to the rectory for help, and since Marlyn was sleeping on the first floor, she is the one who was awakened. She went over to see what was happening, then came back and woke up one of the students here and had him run to get the midwife, who lives on the other side of town (there are no resident doctors in Columbio). He had trouble rousing the midwife because her house is set back from the road and there was a locked gate. So he had to keep yelling. Finally she went to the house, where Marlyn was comforting the mother-to-be.

When the midwife saw the situation, she said to Marlyn, "Ok, we can handle this, but you're going to have to help me." To which Marlyn replied, "Hindi ako makakatulong!" This would be the Tagalog equivalent of: "I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies, Miz Scarlett!" Anyway, they managed to get the baby turned around and delivered without much of a problem. I told Marlyn that it was God's will that she missed the last skylab, so that she could be here to help.

Mom and baby (girl) are doing fine; in fact I can tell you that she has a healthy set of lungs because I hear her crying all the way to the rectory. Then there was a sad, but touching incident more recently. In one of the barrios, a ten year old boy (the little brother of one of the students who lives with me) came down with a fever. It didn't seem too bad, and his parents decided that if it wasn't better by the next day, they would get him to a doctor. Instead, quite unexpectedly, he died during the night.

Here in the Philippines, when there is a death, the embalmed body is usually kept at the home for several days before the funeral, while the family keeps vigil over it. In this case, it was even longer because some of the siblings are living in Manila, so it took time to get word to them and for them to get home. Anyway, the family asked for a funeral Mass, which we celebrated in their home. Just previous to this, at our last Center Meeting (monthly gathering of representatives from all the different barrio chapels), I had requested that the catechists (called kaabag here) preach when there is a funeral Mass in one of the barrios. Because they know the family situation much better than I, plus they can speak in the language of the place.

In this particular barrio, there are two kaabag, one of whom is the father of the boy who died. I assumed that the other one would handle the sermon, and he did say a few words; then the father began to speak. He was

speaking in Ilongo, so I didn't understand every word, but certainly enough to get the gist. He said, "At a time like this there are so many questions. Why did my son have to die? Why did God take him away from us? Is it my fault? If I had taken him to a doctor sooner, would he still be alive? So many questions, and no answers to them. I only know one thing: God is good, and Jesus is Lord. This should teach us that God is control of our lives, and that Jesus has to be at the center of our lives. Jesus had to die too, but he rose again and now watches us from heaven. I know that my son is with Jesus now in heaven. It still hurts to think that he's no longer with us here, but I just keep thinking: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. If I keep his name in my mind and heart, I find some comfort and peace, because I know he loves me and he loves my son." Afterwards, I thanked him for speaking and said, "Your words are precious and holy, because they come from a father and a man of faith."

Back here at the parish, I've been a busy, busy boy. I painted the front of the church, which is the only side that is plastered; the other three walls are bare cinderblock. Then I took a large bulletin board from inside the church and hung it on the outside wall, with the name of the mission (San Isidro Labrador) and the words: "Iisang Panginoon, Iisang Katawan...Iisang Pamilya" ("One Lord, One Body...One Family").

Under that, on one side, I listed the names of all the different barrios (here they are called GKK's: the initials for the Cebuano words for Base Christian Community); and on the other side I put the schedule of activities here at the Center: Sunday Mass, Daily Mass, Catechism Classes, Pre-Cana, etc. It looks pretty good. Then this past week, I've spent a lot of time on yard work. I think I mentioned before that in front of the church is a gravel path leading from the road, and on either side of the path there is an area in which a lot of trees were planted several years ago.

Actually, too many trees in my opinion, and too close together. I wouldn't think of cutting any down: in this part of the Philippines, the mountains have been practically denuded of trees by legal and illegal logging, so in the consciousness of the people it's practically a mortal sin to unnecessarily cut down trees. In fact, many of these trees were planted because they are indigenous to this area (the town of Columbio is named after them) and almost extinct. So, I've been working around them. On one side, where there are fewer trees, I managed to level the ground and am trying to get some grass to grow. I should say WE managed to level the ground, because some people saw me working on it little by little and one Saturday about 30 showed up, and we finished it in one morning.

On the other side, there are A LOT of trees, as well as two rows of pineapple plants. I've been working at clearing away the underbrush to bare ground, so it doesn't look so much like a jungle. I'm a little more than halfway finished, and it's looking pretty sharp.

I mentioned to you before that we will eventually have to build a new church, since the existing one is small and old. With Mass attendance picking up it is even more apparent. Every Sunday we have people standing outside. I talked to the Bishop and he is in favor. In fact, he has a special interest in liturgy, so would like to be involved in the planning. Then I spoke with the president of the parish council and he advised that the topic be brought up at the various "zone meetings" of the parish, which are taking place during the next few weeks. So far, the response has been positive.

I did some measuring in the only open space available (so we don't have to cut down any trees!) and I think it will suffice for about 400 people, which is more than adequate; and I've made a preliminary sketch of the design. I'm thinking very simple, with columns and grilles rather than walls, so that plenty of air will pass through. Of course, we'll put a committee together, so many more ideas will come out, I'm sure. I really want to preserve the existing church and turn it into a youth and catechetical center.

The daily Mass continues with good attendance. I think the number has settled down to just about 100 each day. The good Sisters who make hosts must be very happy, because I'm using so many each day. I preach 3 or 4 days a week. A couple of days ago, I forgot the notes I had prepared for the short homily, and had to

wing it. It came out OK, so since then I've been trying to do it without notes. On Wednesdays we pray the novena to Our Lady Perpetual Help, so that takes the place of the homily. Then occasionally I just don't have time to prepare anything, so we have a few moments of silence.

We've also instituted a "Children's Liturgy of the Word" during Sunday Mass. After the Opening Prayer, I call the children forward and pray a special blessing over them; then they go out of the church to the rectory where some volunteers give them a bible lesson (stories, songs, etc.). They come back to the church at the time of the Offertory. Actually, last Sunday I met with the volunteers and we decided to change things a bit. They felt like there wasn't enough time. So from now on, the younger kids (ages 4-8) will go out for the bible lesson, which will take the entire time of the Mass. The older kids (9-12) will have a more structured catechism class after the Mass, taught by trained catechists.

During this past week, a young man who wants to join PIME arrived at the parish for a one-month "exposure experience". PIME doesn't do active recruiting in the Philippines, but if individuals approach us, we go on a case-to-case basis. Right now there are two such candidates, one staying with me and one staying in Arakan Valley, also the diocese of Kidapawan. They have already been in contact with PIME for some time now. If all goes well, they would go to Italy in January for the Period of Spirituality, and then it would be decided whether they would theology in Italy or in the Philippines (the two places where PIME has a theology formation community).

Anyway, this young man's name is Mercedito (Merck, for short) and he seems like a nice guy. He's 30 years old, and comes from Zamboanga City. Since he is very talented in music, he has already organized a youth choir, which sang for the first time at this morning's Sunday Mass. They did a great job too: lots of spirit and life! I told him that we have to find someone with a good level of expertise on the guitar and/or keyboard, so he can train that person while he's here, and the momentum can continue even after he has gone. Let's hope for the best.

Well, it's getting late: 8:45 already! Don't laugh. These days I'm usually in bed by 9:00 at the latest. I get up between 5:00 and 5:30. (Now, am I the son of my parents, or what?) That's about all that is new for now. I will be here in Davao until Tuesday morning (Monday evening your time) and will try to check e-mail again before leaving. In the meantime, love you and miss you lots! Love,



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