

PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS

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**Fr. Steve
Baumbusch**

Fr. Steve Baumbusch was born in Columbus, Ohio. He is a graduate of the former PIME Saints Peter and Paul High School Seminary in Newark, Ohio. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Detroit, and studied theology at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Following his ordination in 1983, he spent six years as a teacher and dean at Sts. Peter and Paul High School Seminary. In 1989, he began a six-year stint as PIME US Regional Superior at the regional headquarters in Detroit. During his tenure as Regional Superior, he initiated the formation of the PIME mission in Cuanacaxtitlan, Mexico, among the native Mixtec Indians, PIME's first mission in Mexico. From 1995-1998, he served as Formation Director for PIME's college seminarians in Detroit. In August 1998, Father Steve left the United States to begin his permanent mission assignment in the Philippines, where he now resides on the island of Mindanao in the village of Columbio.

Most of us are comfortable within our American homeland and do not seek to carry God's message beyond a familiar radius. We have become so secure within our small boundaries we do not know how to live without the conveniences of modern technology such as computers and PDAS, not to mention the shortage of electricity to run them. But those who venture away from the safety of family and homeland to bring God's message are people with a vision, a purpose outside of themselves. CatholicView is proud to bring its readers this interview with an American Priest who saw the reality of bringing the Gospel to God's precious souls in a foreign land.

PIME, the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, is an international community of priests and brothers involved in missionary work and, in particular, the evangelization of non-Christians. It seeks to promote inter-religious dialogue between Christians and members of other religions. The duties of a missionary priest are dependent on the needs of their individual location. In keeping with the mission of PIME, activities of a priest or brother include but are not limited to establishing the Kingdom of God through the proclamation of the Gospel while making communities and local churches self-sufficient. They nurture human development, promote peace and justice, initiate educational programs for literacy and economic development, care for the sick (especially those with leprosy and tuberculosis), provide aid to children and the poor and promote understanding among different religions through dialogue.

CatholicView: Father Baumbusch, there is a verse from Mark 16:15 on your site that says "Go...and proclaim the good news". It seems to be a motivation that has taken you away from American soil to the Philippines. How do you feel about that after five years?

Father Steve Baumbusch: I received my mission assignment to the Philippines after 15 years of priesthood and service to the PIME community in the U.S. (mostly in the areas of education and administration). I've always believed that my missionary vocation is not dependent upon the specific place I find myself; rather, the call to "proclaim the good news" is constant, wherever I am and in whatever ministry I am asked to perform. Thus, in no way do I regret or begrudge those 15 years in my home

country, as I discovered and experienced God's action among so many wonderful people.

Yet, for a missionary, there's something special about that word, "Go." As much as we recognize the need for service and ministry in our homeland, as much as we appreciate the wonders that God works among His people in every place, as much as we love our family and friends, there's a yearning inside of us to go... to go to far-off places... to go to the "ends of the earth"... to go and experience the myriad ways in which God continues to act in our world... to go and witness to the overwhelming love of the Lord.

How do I feel about that after 5 years? Let me explain in this way: Just before leaving for the Philippines, I was talking to a friend of mine about how lucky I considered myself. At an age when many of my contemporaries were beginning to question their career choice, I was just starting to do what I'd dreamed about all my life.

"**You're** right," he said, "You are lucky. But what if you finally get there and then find out that this isn't it for you?"

That was a scary thought, but only for a moment, since I was fully caught up in the enthusiasm of finally going to the missions. Now, the answer to the question is clear: this IS it for me. I thank God every day that He has called me to this place and to this service.

CatholicView: How long did it take before you became comfortable in your new mission?

Father Steve: When I first arrived at the parish in Columbio, Sultan Kudarat, I had a lot of doubts and apprehensions about my ability to do this ministry. I had studied Tagalog, the national language, for only 3 months and then discovered that the majority of the people here don't even speak Tagalog as a first language, but rather converse in their own tongue, of which there are four major ones in this area. I had never worked in a parish setting before, since my entire priesthood was spent in education and administration duties. The priest whose place I was taking left for his new assignment only 4 days after my arrival, so I had no guidance.

To be honest, each night as I drifted off to sleep, I said to myself: "I can't do this. It's just not going to work. I'll hang in here for a couple of months, until the next meeting of the PIME Regional Council, and then I'll simply tell the superiors that I need to be reassigned."

Those nighttime thoughts went on for about a week, and then a strange thing happened. As I was drifting off to sleep, I found myself saying, "I love this place! What a great fit this is for me! It feels so right for me to be here." I didn't know the language any better than I had a week before. I didn't have any more pastoral experience than previously. Yet, I really felt that this was my place, the place God wants me to be. I consider that to be pure grace, a gift from God that continues to sustain me as I face the everyday challenges of the mission.



CatholicView: How long did it take you to speak the Tagalog language fluently enough to be understood?

Father Steve: The language challenge continues. I have no problem saying the Mass and preaching. For Sunday Masses, I still write out my homily and have a member of the parish team check it over for mistakes. On weekdays, the short reflection I give is more spontaneous. As I mentioned before, there are actual several languages in this area. Among the villages under my care, 4 are predominantly Ilonggo and 2 are Cebuano. I am able to celebrate the Mass in those languages, but I always preach in Tagalog.

The biggest challenge in understanding actually comes in casual conversation. This is not only because of my limitations in the language, but because Filipinos are by nature rather indirect in their communication. A lot is left unsaid. There are nuances of tone and body language that I have not yet become fully adept at interpreting. So, sometimes I might understand every "word" that is spoken, but I remain completely in the dark as to what the person is actually communicating. My own cultural directness in speech is often surprising to them.

On the lighter side, let me tell you just one language gaffe from my first year here in Columbio. My PIME Superior was coming to visit, and I wanted to be sure that he had a mattress to sleep on (the people here normally just sleep on a kind of raised platform). I was told that there was an extra one at the Tribal Training Center next to the rectory. I went over to ask the woman in charge (Angie) if I could borrow it. I didn't know the Tagalog word for mattress, but I was sure that I had heard people using the English word, so was confident that she would understand. In fact, she seemed to know what I was talking about, but wasn't sure just where the extra mattress was. She said she would ask the students who lived there, and let me know later.

About a half hour later, a student came over and said, "Father, Angie wants to know what you mean by 'mattress'." Still not knowing the Tagalog word, I tried to describe it, then finally went to my room and pointed at the mattress on my bed. "Oh, Ok Father," came the response, and later someone brought the mattress over. At dinner that night, I found that the story had spread to the students who live with me, and they told me the source of the confusion. When I asked Angie for an extra "mattress", the closest Tagalog word she could come up with was "matris", which means uterus! In the typical Filipino way, she didn't want to embarrass me, so she

acted like she knew what I was talking about, but she was quite sure that she didn't have an extra one!

But this language stuff goes both ways. Quite a few English expressions are used, but with a distinctly Filipino accent. So, for example, at a parish team meeting, one of the members suggested that we start planning for the "Parish Youth Days," using the English words. The first few times I heard it, I could have sworn she was saying "Parachute Days", and I couldn't figure out why skydivers would be coming to Columbio. Once I deciphered what she really meant, I had my own little private joke as I asked, "Tell me what goes on during Parachute Days," and they answered as if it were the most natural question in the world, telling me all about the ballgames and other activities of the Parish Youth Days.



CatholicView: Is the Mass celebrated in the Philippines the same way as in the United States?

Father Steve: The structure and flow of the Mass are the same: Penitential Rite, Readings, Gospel, Homily, Creed, Offertory, Consecration, Communion, Blessing. I would say that the participation of the people is a bit more active here. The Filipino people love to sing, so it's no struggle to get them to join in on the hymns. For bigger celebrations, there are often creative expressions in the liturgy, such as dance or drama.

CatholicView: What percentage of the people in the Philippines is Catholic?

Father Steve: As a result of 400 years of Spanish colonial rule, the Philippines is the only Christian country in Asia, and Catholics make up well over 90% of the population. The Catholic faith is thus deeply rooted, in one sense. Yet, as is the case for people everywhere, there remains a need for deeper understanding and commitment. The major expressions of the faith continue to be the "popular devotions" to which the people are very attached: statues, processions, fiestas, etc.

More recently, within the past 20-25 years, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has been committed to the Basic Ecclesial Community model (BEC). In each village, groups of families make up a BEC. 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. Essentially, the BEC is the way of "being church" in the Philippines. As opposed to a large parish experience which can be virtually anonymous, the BEC 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 BEC 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.

CatholicView: There are many changes that have happened for the betterment of your parish community such as the building of your new church. How were you able to orchestrate and accomplish this with limited resources?

Father Steve: In regard to the new church, which has been a true blessing for the people, we have to thank the Lord for His goodness, and for inspiring the generosity of many, many folks. In particular, the people at St. Andrew parish in Columbus, Ohio (where I grew up and where my parents are still members) have been so helpful and supportive. We joke about my place of origin and my present assignment: from Columbus to Columbio! But beyond the coincidence of names, it's inspiring to me to see this connection and support from the people of my home parish for the people of my new parish. A missionary, after all, should act as "bridge" between local churches, linking the people of God to brothers and sisters that they have never met. The church construction also received funding from the PIME community in Italy and the U.S., which means from benefactors who continually support mission projects around the world.

In terms of local resources, it is correct to say that they are quite limited. The people of the Columbio parish engaged in fundraisers, but as one can imagine, the amount raised is rather minimal in view of large project like the new church. However, here in the Philippines, there is the custom of "bayanihan" or working together for a common cause. Thus, for any kind of project, many volunteers contribute their time and work.

CatholicView: Father Baumbusch, on your website you have stated "Our missionaries dedicate their lives to serving God's people throughout the world, especially the poor and forgotten. In doing so, they give up the comfort and convenience of home to travel to countries where they face danger, violence, poverty and illness on a day-to-day basis. To date, there are 18 PIME martyrs." You have had first hand knowledge facing danger from the Muslims and were advised to keep a low profile during a pressured time. What happened and are you still under threat?

Father Steve: To make a long story short(er): In October of 2000, I went to the Bishop's House in Kidapawan, about 65 km away, for the regular monthly clergy meeting. In order to reach Kidapawan from Columbio, you pass through several predominately Muslim areas. This is no problem, and I have done so many, many times. This time, I received a call on the radio from my parish council president, who told me not to return to Columbio right away, because he had received reports that there were people waiting along the road to kidnap me. In fact, he was relieved to know that I had reached Kidapawan safely, because according to his sources the kidnapers had already been in place the day before. By luck (or more likely by Providence) I must have passed right by them.

In talking with the Bishop and my fellow missionaries, we decided that the prudent

course would be to stay in Kidapawan until the danger passed. All of us acknowledged that there will always be a general kind of danger, which would not deter us from our work. But when there is a specific, targeted threat against us, we should take steps to remain as safe as possible. As it turns out, I was able to return to Columbio after a couple of months, when it became clear that the group planning the kidnapping had moved out of the area. Since that time, more than two years ago, we are in an almost constant state of “alert,” but there has not been any specific threat or danger causing me to stay out of Columbio.

I want to make one thing clear in regard to that experience. While it is true that the group planning the kidnapping happened to be Muslims, I never saw the situation as a “Muslim threat.” In fact, it was our Muslim neighbors who first warned my Parish Council president about the danger, and it was the Muslim leaders who finally succeeded in convincing this group to move on, away from the Columbio area, and then informed us that it was safe to return. Simply put, the kidnapers were thugs, out to make a buck from ransom demands, not terrorists or religious zealots of any kind. As I mentioned above, I do not feel any personal or specific threat directed toward me by the Muslims of this area. If danger exists, it comes from these roving groups of outlaws who are motivated not by religion or politics but by the lure of easy money to be made from hold-ups and kidnappings.

CatholicView: In one of your letters in your journal you spoke of a massacre that took place destroying an entire family and believed to be perpetrated by members of the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front), a Muslim rebel group. Does this kind of incident happen often and why?

Father Steve: Here is what happened in the village of Lasak. On November 12, 2000, armed men awoke the family of Mr. and Mrs. Geronimo Eleccion at 4:00 AM and asked for coffee. After drinking their coffee, the armed group commanded the Eleccions to go outside the house, where they were all shot. Geronimo (50 yrs. old) survived to tell the horror. Killed on the spot were his wife Luzviminda (35), his son (16) Richard, his daughter (18) Gemma, Gemma’s boyfriend Allan Seroco (34), and Luzviminda’s nephew Benjie Sujede (5).

Geronimo feigned death while he observed the movements of the group. He saw that there were over 30 armed men surrounding them. Some of them began looting the house of clothes and cash. The armed men also gathered and set fire to pillows and blankets in the center of the house, intending to burn down the entire structure. When Geronimo saw that the group had left, he struggled to go upstairs, even though seriously wounded in his arms and stomach (his intestines were exposed). In several trips, he managed to fetch about 4 gallons of water and stop the burning. Then he fell under a table, since he could no longer bear the pain of his wounds, which would eventually prove fatal.

The perpetrators, who were speaking a mixture of languages (Tribal, Muslim, Ilonggo and Cebuano), have not been identified. The family cannot trace the motives; according to them, they do not have enemies in the community. They are all innocent civilians. As active leaders and members of their local Basic Ecclesial Community, they performed their responsibilities well. The first inclination of the military is

always to suspect the MILF, but there is no clear evidence that rebel forces were behind this massacre.

You ask if this kind of incident happens often. Thanks be to God, such atrocities as this massacre are rather rare. However, other criminal incidents are common: hold-ups, rustling of cattle and carabao (the water buffalo used in farmwork), etc. Our situation here could well be compared to the Old West in the United States: there has been an influx of settlers from other parts of the country, with resulting land claims and disputes; roving bands of outlaws act with general impunity, escaping into mountain hideouts and other remote areas; as a result, almost everyone is armed, and any conflict can quickly turn deadly.

CatholicView: How do you give comfort to surviving members after a terrific travesty of human life?

Father Steve: Comfort comes, I think, from active presence and from the close-knit community of the BEC. At the same time, these happenings provide a great challenge to all of us in terms of how we will respond to evil. Let me use the same massacre as an example. Two funeral Masses were celebrated for the victims. The first was shortly after the event itself, and was presided by the Bishop of Kidapawan, Most Reverend Romulo G. Valles. I presided at the second Mass, which took place just before the burial of the victims. (If you noticed the dates, you will realize that this was one of the first things I did after returning from Columbo from my "exile" during the kidnap threat against me.) During the homily, I said to the people:

"**Last** week, Bishop Valles mentioned that at times like this, some people, in a search for consolation, cling to the idea that it is all to be accepted as the "will of God." The Bishop asserted that in this case, we can state clearly that the massacre of these innocent victims is absolutely NOT the will of God. And Bishop Valles was correct. The death of your loved ones was an evil act, and we know that there is no room for evil in the will of God.

"**But** this presents each one of us with an important question. As Christians, how do we confront evil? What is our reaction as we stand face to face with evil actions? Just as the death of your loved ones is not in the will of God, neither can it be God's will that our reaction is one of hatred or seeking revenge. Yesterday, we celebrated the Feast of Christ the King, and we know that the Kingdom of God, which is the expression of His will, is a Kingdom of peace, of mercy, of forgiveness and reconciliation.

"**Jesus**, our King, is also our model. He too was a victim of evil. As he hung upon the cross, he had the power to respond in anger and revenge upon the perpetrators of evil. Instead, he chose to pray for them: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' This is the challenge for each one of us: to face evil with a heart full of goodness and mercy.

"**It's not easy.** After all, we're only human beings, and we're filled with many emotions at this time. Let us seek the help and the strength of the Lord, to overcome whatever anger and bitterness we feel. Let us be sure that the Lord is with us in our

trials, providing us with the grace we need to be true disciples, true witnesses to His Kingdom of love."

CatholicView: Do you feel that the simplicity and courage of the people add great strength to their faith in God?

Father Steve: Definitely. Earlier, I mentioned that the task of a missionary is to act as a "bridge" between local churches, each offering to the other something of their experience, their richness, their gifts, for the upbuilding of the Universal Church and witness to the presence of the Kingdom. I believe that what the church in the Philippines has to offer is an example of deep faith and perseverance in the face of daily trials and struggles for survival that many people can't even imagine. You can sense this in common sayings of the people: "God is good...all the time!" "Carry on!" "No retreat, no surrender!" These are not mere slogans nor feel-good platitudes, but real expressions of their belief in the constant presence and care of the Lord, ever in the midst of great difficulties, and their conviction that it is worthwhile to continue working together in faith.

I don't want to idealize anyone, so I'm not saying that this attitude is 100% consistent among 100% of the people. Like all people, the Filipino is subject to doubt, discouragement, selfishness, pride and all the other weaknesses of human nature. But there is also an underlying strength among many, strength that comes from a firm trust and confidence in the love of God for them, come what may. That continues to be a great lesson and inspiration for me in my own faith relationship with the Lord.

CatholicView: Would you consider coming back home to bring your knowledge and expertise to us?

Father Steve: Every three years, we PIME Missionaries have a three-month vacation in our homeland. My first vacation was in 2001, and I was very happy to share my experiences in a number of different groups and venues: parishes, high schools and elementary schools, youth groups, etc. I imagine that the same will take place during my next vacation in 2004.

CatholicView: Thank you Father Baumbusch, for giving CatholicView this insightful look at how the faithful are worshipping our heavenly Father in the face of strong opposition and under sometimes primitive conditions. It is a testament to people like you who persevere and inspire others to continue to trust and follow God's plan. We can all benefit from your unselfish gifts. May God send a legion of angels to protect you as you continue in your special missionary service for Him.

Father Steve: Many thanks to you and all of your readers for your interest and concern, and most especially for your constant prayers, upon which my people and I will continue to rely. Let's remain united in our commitment to work together for the fulfillment of the Kingdom. God bless you always!