

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Rev. Miguel Anselmo A. Bernad, S.J.
1917–2009

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Philippine Studies vol. 57 no. 3 (2009): 443–446

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Obituary



Rev. Miguel Anselmo A. Bernad, S.J. 1917–2009

When Fr. Miguel A. Bernad, S.J., was my teacher in Shakespeare's Tragedies more than thirty-five years ago, he was already an old man. It wasn't just a question of age (he was only in his late fifties); it was the breadth of his experience and the depth of his wisdom that made him seem old. The man had seen so much, read so much, lived through so much—and had thought even more about it. He made us read, hear, and *feel* Shakespeare—not only Shakespeare the man or poet or dramaturge, but Shakespeare the world. For Father Bernad, Shakespeare was more than an author; he was a moral and poetic universe where students in twentieth-century Philippines still reeling from the First Quarter Storm of history could learn to dwell profitably.

Readers of *Philippine Studies* may want to recall that he was editor-in-chief of the journal in 1956–1959. His articles in the early 1950s dealt with questions of literature in general, but already in the very first issue in 1953 he was discussing Philippine literature in English with penetration and insight. An essay on “The Ignatian Way in Education” in 1956 deserves to be rediscovered; it is not only a concise and reflective résumé of the Jesuit *ratio studiorum*, but also a summary of the pedagogy that Father Bernad

effectively practiced as a teacher of language and literature, of history and culture, for more than sixty years.

Father Bernad was also the founding editor of *Kinaadman*, the journal of ideas and culture of Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro, for a quarter of a century from 1979 to 2005. In the inaugural editorial, he writes with his usual candor and modesty: "Upon being invited to edit this journal, I was given no other instruction except a vague hint as to its nature: it was to be a 'scholarly' publication. Nothing else was specified. There were of course certain built-in constraints: notably, the meager funding and the almost total lack of staff. Apart from these endemic constraints (common to many Philippine scholarly publications), I was to have a free hand in everything else." That free hand was employed at establishing one of the liveliest scholarly journals on Philippine society and culture.

Father Bernad once wrote a book entitled *History Against the Landscape* (1968). The title aptly describes his exercises in historiography. History unfolds not only against the landscape of Nature but also against the landscape of human freedom and, ultimately, for those who have the eyes of faith, against the landscape of Divine Providence. The monumental *Religious Revolution in the Philippines* in four volumes (1960–1972), together with *Aguinaldo and the Revolution of 1896* (1972), both coauthored with Pedro S. Achutegui, S.J., demonstrates that the objectivity proper to the science of history is not incompatible with the human meanings that the art of history seeks to elaborate. *The Great Island: Studies in the Exploration and Evangelization of Mindanao* (2004) unabashedly bears the mark of a great love for the places and the people talked about. But it is in *The Christianization of the Philippines: Problems and Perspectives* (Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild 1972, xv) that Father Bernad explicates what can be said to be his historical method:

The history of the Christianization of the Philippines is a twice-told tale, but it is a tale worth retelling. Here it is told with a view to emphasizing certain problems and perspectives. And, needless to say, an attempt has been made to retell the story from the original sources.

In retelling this story, it has been the author's aim to give the general reader a threefold service. First, to present the facts and to discuss them in some detail so as to visualize the situation. Second, to

see those facts in perspective, against a background of the Philippine experience. And third, to see them as human facts, and therefore to call attention to, and to invite reflection upon, their human implications. In so doing, the author hopes that, not only the individual facts and situations, but the total Philippine picture can be better understood.

It is this historical method that Father Bernad scrupulously puts into practice in his journalistic essays, *Adventure in Viet Nam: The Story of Operation Brotherhood 1954–1957* (1974) and *Filipinos in Laos* (1974); in his lectures on *The Colegio de San Jose: 1601–2001* (2001) and *The Jesuits in Mindanao 1596–2007* (2007); and in his studies on José Rizal, *Rizal and Spain: An Essay in Biographical Context* (1986) and *His Native Sky* (2004). The same method informs his biographical sketches of Oscar Ledesma (1998), Eduardo Romuladez (1999), Benigno Dagani (2007), and other Jesuit confreres (2006). This way of writing history may no longer be in fashion in academe, but who will say that it is not a good way?

Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree (1961) was a pioneering work in Philippine literary criticism in English. Its lacunae are now obvious (notably, the absence of any interest in or attention to literatures and literary traditions in the vernacular), but it did manage to raise pertinent questions concerning, for example, the rootedness of Philippine literature in the Western humanist tradition and the importance of a theological dimension in literature. All throughout his life, Father Bernad labored to make Philippine literature—above all, that Filipino literature written in English, but conceding a place for Philippine literature in Spanish and in the vernaculars—read and appreciated. His more than a hundred book reviews in *Philippine Studies* and in *Kinaadman* attest to this. This nationalist literary passion did not prevent him



Father Bernad, Feb. 2009

from keeping his heart wide open to Western literature—from Shakespeare and Dante to Hemingway and T. S. Eliot. Among his last published writings was a collection of studies on Shakespeare (*The Golden World and the Darkness*, 2003) and another had Hemingway and Eliot rubbing elbows, so to speak, with Rizal and the poets of the Philippine Revolution (*The Waiter and the Fisherman*, 2008). Father Bernad's literary judgments may sometimes strike one as too Olympian for comfort, but he does

not hesitate to nuance or even retract them when the tide of evidence turns. For example, an essay written in 1957 raised many an eyebrow: “Philippine Literature: Perpetually Inchoate.” In a 2006 postscript to that same essay, he writes: “In the 1950’s Philippine literature seemed perpetually in an inchoate stage. It is no longer inchoate now.”

Father Bernad would not have liked to dwell on Mount Olympus. His scrupulous scholarship and sublime attitudes were at the service of a humble humanism reaching far and wide. The collections of his newspaper columns and travel reflections (*The Lights of Broadway and Other Essays*, 1980; *The February Revolution and Other Reflections*, 1986; *The Inverted Pyramid and Other “Political” Reflections*, 1991; *Journey to the Andes and Other Places in Latin America*, 2008; *A Night on the Lake and Other Musings*, 2008) both instruct and delight the reader in the mystery of everyday things and truths. The title of his little-known collection of sermons in Cebuano makes clear the foci of this humanism: *Dios ug Tawo* (God and the People, 1977).

His last public lecture on a literary topic, given in 2006 at the Ateneo de Manila, the Ateneo de Davao, the Ateneo de Zamboanga, and Xavier University, was not on Shakespeare or on Rizal; it was on Dante, that quintessential figure of Western humanism.

The tombstone that marks Fr. Miguel Bernad’s final resting place in Cagayan de Oro City carries the three dates that matter in a Jesuit’s life: *Natus*: May 8, 1917; *Ingressus*: June 7, 1932; *Obit*: March 15, 2009. One may wish to add other dates like 24 March 1946 (ordination to the priesthood at Fordham University Chapel) or 1951 (Ph.D. from Yale University). A long life and a life lived to the full to the very end, and yet—

Brief as the lightning in a collied night
That in a spleen unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath power to say ‘Behold!’
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.
(W. Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I, 1)

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Photos courtesy of the Archives and School of Humanities Dean’s Office, Ateneo de Manila University