

philippine studies

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

Three Centenaries

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Philippine Studies vol. 7, no. 4 (1959): 480–482

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Notes and Comment

Three Centenaries

The centenary of the restoration of the Society of Jesus to the Philippines, now drawing to a close, received added luster from an unexpected source last August, when the Ramón Magsaysay Foundation conferred one of its annual awards for public service on Father Joaquín Vilallonga.

Father Vilallonga is 91 years old—only nine years younger than than the Jesuit Mission and Province in whose history he plays so large a part. He came to the Philippines from his native Spain at the age of 24. As teacher, priest and missionary he devoted himself to the service of the Filipino people until he was 63. At an age when most men retire from active life he was sent to the Jesuit missions in India. After devoting what was in effect a second lifetime to this new assignment, he returned to the Philippines in 1949 at his own request, and at his own request was assigned to assist the Jesuit chaplain of the Culion Leper Colony.

The Magsaysay Award is conferred, of course, on Father Vilallonga as an individual, not as the representative of a group. Yet his long career of public service in the Philippines, while exceptional, is by no means unique. For nearly four centuries Spain has been sending to the Philippines missionaries inspired by the same ideals of service and self-sacrifice. And so there is a special fitness in the award being given at the present time to a Spaniard and a priest. It may serve to correct the impression that hatred of the foreigner and hatred of the Church are essential components of Filipino nationalism.

Such an impression is given, regrettably, by a recently founded association called the National Progress Movement, mentioned elsewhere in these pages. The "Manifesto" which the Movement published last May roundly affirms, without qualification, that the priests whom

Spain sent to the Philippines devoted themselves to the establishment and maintenance of a "clerico-fascist society" imposed by "coercion on the one hand and holy terror on the other", whereby the "avowed claim of 'christianizing' the pagans only veiled the true purpose of exploiting them in the name of a civilization which was denied them and a religion they did not understand", and whose total effect was to obliterate "the traditions, communities and identities of the native inhabitants." The long and distinguished record of Father Vilallonga tells us more eloquently than any elaborate refutation what is to be thought of such gratuitous assertions; and by giving that record the recognition it deserves, the Ramón Magsaysay Foundation has shown rather sharply that the National Progress Movement cannot claim to speak for Filipino nationalism.

Another centenary celebration this year is relevant to the question of nationalism—that of Friedrich Schiller, who was born in 1759. Schiller is rightly considered one of the founders of German nationalism; indeed, of nationalism as a general European movement. Certainly his *Wilhelm Tell* lacked nothing of the true nationalist fervor. Yet he had enough breadth of vision to realize that a nationalism based on xenophobia impoverished instead of enlarging the human spirit. Nationalism of this narrow sort he considered a sign of immaturity, and he disdained to place his pen at its service. As Benno von Wiese puts it: "Schiller knew that he was bound to his country and his time, but he emphasized that we should be citizens of the world as well as citizens of a country or husbands and fathers. The poet is the true citizen of the world, at home in all countries and all ages."

Because Schiller consistently placed the interests of mankind and the international community before those of any particular nation, including his own, Von Wiese concludes that he renounced all forms of nationalism. This is not quite true. "Nationalism or internationalism" is too facile a dichotomy to contain the whole of Schiller's thought. His idea was, rather, that nationalism is at its best and most constructive when it identifies itself with some basic human aspiration or need, such as freedom. This would seem to be the true meaning of his famous epigram, "In vain do you hope to make yourselves into a nation, Germans; try instead—it is easier—to make yourselves into freer men."

In other words, it is not by striving after some arbitrary ideal of nationality—usually contrived and imposed from above by some dictator or power elite, as the history of the past four decades bears witness—that a nation is formed. A nation is formed or, to speak more precisely, grows from the sustained effort of its members to create among themselves a community in which they can live fully and freely as human beings. They will do this, inevitably, in their

own fashion, using the resources bestowed on them by nature, climate and history, and thus by seeking those great ends of justice and charity, freedom and order, material and spiritual well being which are common to all humanity, they shall at the same time be cultivating their national identity and deepening their consciousness of it.

Indeed, those who set out simply to serve mankind regardless of race or nationality are very often found to have made in the long run much more valuable and enduring contributions to the welfare and honor of their respective nations than professed or professional patriots. Such a man, certainly, was Jean-Marie Vianney, known throughout the Catholic world as the Curé d'Ars, the centenary of whose death (1859) also falls this year.

"One cannot conceive of a plainer and quieter life," writes Daniel-Rops, "than that of Jean-Marie Vianney, the saintly parish priest of Ars. It is only a short distance between the village near Lyons where he was born (in 1786) and this other village he has made immortal; and this was practically the only journey he ever made. Yet it was in this most unlikely corner of the world that the glory of God sought him out; hither, drawn by a holiness so utterly humble, multitudes came to seek the dilapidated church and the great man who served it. This pilgrimage to Ars which began during the lifetime of the saint is one of the great religious facts of nineteenth-century French history. Other pilgrimages elsewhere take their origin from apparitions and miracles; at Ars these were not the important things. The supremely important thing was the personality itself of this priest who, sitting in the shadows of his confessional, attracted souls like a magnet. Year after year whole caravans of penitents travelled that ill kept road; the yearly average seems to have been 80,000...."

"He was a frail little man with pale, angular features and timid clumsy ways which bespoke his peasant origin; but there was an extraordinary radiance about him. The familiar portraits of him give us only the barest hint of this, but they do suggest the supernatural quality of his gaze and smile. He was scarcely dead (in 1859) when a great popular clamor arose for his canonization. Today his image may be seen in almost every church in France, touching in its very conventionality: an old priest with a surplice over his cassock. For it is thus that the Curé d'Ars *should* be imaged; as *sacerdos in aeternum*, a priest forever. He was a priest; nothing more."

A priest and nothing more; but if one is fully a priest, what more is needed? The heart of such a priest will be the heart of Christ. It will be the heart of a patriot, embracing all who share with him his land, his language, his cultural heritage; but it will also be the heart of a citizen of the world, in Schiller's sense—it will embrace all humanity.