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## A Marian Festival in Manila, 1619

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# A Marian Festival In Manila, 1619

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H. DE LA COSTA

The celebrations being held this year to commemorate the centenary of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception call to mind a similar manifestation of Marian devotion which took place in Manila over three hundred years ago. The historian Murillo Velarde informs us that the festivities were occasioned by the arrival in the Philippines in 1619 of "a Bull permitting the celebration of the feast of the Conception which was obtained through the tireless persistence of the Spanish nation."<sup>1</sup> This Bull was almost certainly the Constitution *Sanctissimus* of Pope Paul V, issued on September 12, 1617, at the instance of King Philip III of Spain.

The early years of the seventeenth century were marked in Spain by an extraordinary upsurge of popular devotion to the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. This movement unfortunately aroused a vigorous reaction among theologians who did not believe that the doctrine was part of the deposit of faith, and bitter controversies ensued. In order to put an end to the wordy battle and set consciences at peace, Philip III sent the superior general of the Spanish Benedictines, Dom Placido de Tosantes, as his personal envoy to Paul V, with the request that the Holy See settle the question once for all with a definitive declaration.

The Pope accordingly summoned a solemn congregation of the Holy Office to deliberate on the petition. The congregation met on August 31, 1617; among the cardinals present was Saint Robert Bellarmine. His *votum* on this occasion was that "the obligation of all the faithful to hold as pious and holy the belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary can be defined; in such wise that henceforward it will no longer be permissible to admit or assert the contrary without temerity, scandal or suspicion of heresy." He added that such a definition was not only opportune, but necessary in the circumstances: *Dico expedire definire, immo necessarium id nunc fieri.*<sup>2</sup>

The Pope, however, was not prepared to go as far as that. The Constitution mentioned above merely forbade the affirmation in sermons, lectures, disputations and similar acts that the Blessed Virgin was conceived in original sin. This prohibition was to remain in force until the Holy See ordained otherwise. At the same time, the contrary proposition, that the Blessed Virgin was not conceived in original sin, could be defended as a pious belief, as long as the opposite opinion was not reprobated.

Philip III gratefully received the Constitution (although he could not refrain from expressing his regret that it was not more definitive) and immediately gave it the royal *exequatur*. Its promulgation in Spain and the colonies was the occasion of great rejoicing, externalized in elaborate festivals such as that which took place in Manila in December 1619.

The annual Jesuit newsletter from the Philippines for the year 1620 gives a detailed account of the festival. The writer begins by saying that he will limit himself to its purely religious phase, although he lets drop the incidental intelligence that there were rejoicings of a more worldly sort, such as bullfights, masques, and cunningly contrived fireworks, "in which the Chinese, many of whom come to trade in these Islands, are eminent." He goes on to give an account of each day of the festival, which began on

December 8 and lasted the octave. We may cast his description in the form of modern program notes, as follows:

FESTIVAL IN HONOR OF THE IMMACULATE  
CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY  
DECEMBER 8-15, 1619

*Sunday, December 8—*

Under the auspices of the Cathedral Chapter of Manila.

MORNING

Solemn Mass with Sermon in the Cathedral Church.

AFTERNOON

Mystery Play: *Rachel*.

*Monday, December 9—*

Under the auspices of the Franciscan Fathers.

MORNING

1. *Procession*. Route: From the Franciscan Church to the Cathedral. Order of the Procession:

His Majesty's Armed Forces of the Manila Garrison. They will fire salvos of musketry at intervals along the line of march.

A Standard representing Our Lady with Duns Scotus at her feet, and the inscription: *Dignare me laudare te*.

Eight Groups of Native Dancers in symbolic costume, each group representing Canons, Cardinals, Shepherds, etc.

The Statue of the Immaculate Conception.

2. *Solemn Mass* in the Cathedral Church.

AFTERNOON

Pageant: *The Martyrs of Japan*.

*Tuesday, December 10—*

Under the auspices of the Augustinian Fathers.

## MORNING

1. *Procession.* Route: from the Augustinian Church to the Cathedral. The Order of the Procession will be similar to that of the preceding day.
2. *Solemn Mass* in the Cathedral Church.

## AFTERNOON

Program of Native Dances.

## EVENING

Fireworks at the Church of the Society of Jesus. The Tower of the Church will be illuminated. Rockets and Bombs. Band Concert.

*Wednesday, December 11—*

Under the auspices of the Jesuit Fathers.

## MORNING

Solemn Mass with Sermon.

## AFTERNOON

Miracle Play: *The Immaculate Conception.*

*Thursday, December 12—*

Under the auspices of the Cathedral Chapter.

## MORNING

Solemn Mass with Sermon.

## AFTERNOON

Mystery Play: *Joseph and His Brethren.*

*Friday, December 13—*

Under the auspices of the Recollect Fathers.

## MORNING

1. *Procession.* Route: from the Church of the Recollects to the Cathedral. The Order of the Procession will be as on previous days, but the regular troops of the Garrison will be joined by the Volunteer Companies of the City. The Master of Camp, His Excellency Don Gerónimo de Silva, will command in person, mounted.
2. *Solemn Mass* in the Cathedral.

**AFTERNOON**

Comedy: *The Prince of Transylvania.*

**EVENING**

1. *Fireworks.*

2. *Parade.* This Parade is sponsored by the College of San José. Route: along the principal streets of the Walled City. Order of the Parade:

Float with Flute-Players.

Float with Choir.

Float with Orchestra.

Standard of the Immaculate Conception. Standard Bearer: Don Luís Fajardo. Honor Guard: Don Gerónimo de Silva, Master of Camp, and Don Fernando Centeno, Admiral of the Galleys.

The City Corporation and Other Gentlemen, mounted.

The Scholars of the College, in column of two, mounted. Formal academic gowns to be worn. Each Scholar to be preceded by six or eight liveried pages with lighted wax candles, and accompanied by his Patrons. The Scholars will carry bannerets with appropriate symbols and inscriptions, and the last in line will display on a lance the formula of the Oath to defend the Immaculate Conception which they will take on the following day.

The Statue of the Immaculate Conception, on a triumphal car drawn by footmen in the costume of Savages. The triumphal car will be preceded by a band of flageolets and followed by a Boys' Choir dressed as angels and singing motets. A Devil representing Original Sin will be chained to the Car.

*Saturday, December 14—*

Under the joint sponsorship of the Franciscan and Jesuit Fathers. Solemn Mass will be celebrated in the Cathedral and the Jesuit Church.

*Sunday, December 15—*

Octave Day of the Feast. Today begins an octave of

Masses in the Franciscan Church of Manila and the Parish Church of Cavite.

The native dancers who took part in the Monday procession probably came from the Franciscan parishes around Laguna de Bay. They accompanied their dances with songs in honor of the Virgin, the refrain of one of which ran:

Ya podemos hablar recio  
 Y sin miedo,  
 Y dar todo el mundo voces  
 Sin recelo.<sup>4</sup>

The newsletter gives the generic name *comedias* to the afternoon dramatic presentations, but their titles permit us to distinguish between mystery and miracle plays, pageants and comedies. It is unfortunate that the texts of these plays have not survived, or at least have not yet been discovered.

The parade or *paseo* of the students of the Jesuit College in the evening of the 13th must have been a colorful one. The full academic costume of a San José scholar, at least on this occasion, consisted of a gown of purple silk and a scarlet hood fastened with gold chains and gold buttons encrusted with precious stones. His cap was bejewelled in the same manner, so that he must have sparkled and flashed as he moved through the torchlight in the wake of his liveried pages, as though he carried on his person, as Murillo Velarde says, all the riches of the Orient.

Manilans were obviously as passionately fond of fancy dress three centuries ago as they are now. The Virgin's car had to be drawn by no ordinary footmen, but by footmen costumed as Savages, while the symbolism of a triumphal chariot was completed by chaining Original Sin to the chariot wheels. Of the poor fellow who represented Original Sin, the writer of the newsletter says that "he had much to suffer in the way of cuffs and pinches" from those

of the crowd who entered somewhat too fully into the spirit of the pageant.

These details justify the same writer's claim that "Manila has not lagged behind other regions of Europe and America in the magnificence of the celebration" with which Our Lady's unique privilege was honored on that occasion.

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<sup>1</sup> *Historia de la provincia de Filipinas de la Compañia de Jesús* (Manila, 1749), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> X. Le Bachelet, "Immaculée Conception," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, VII, 1172-1173.

<sup>3</sup> "Estado, i successo de las cosas de Iapon, China, i Filipinas," in *Archivo del bibliófilo filipino*, W. E. Retana, ed., II (Madrid, 1896), 98-102. This document was originally published in Seville, 1621.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99. I have modernized the spelling. "Now may we speak our faith aloud / And without fear; / Let all creation join our song, / That all may hear" would be a reasonably faithful translation into English doggerel.

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