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## **The Abandonment of Talacogon Mission in Upper Agusan**

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## Texts and Documents

### The Abandonment of Talacogon Mission in Upper Agusan

JOSE S. ARCILLA, S.J.

The Bonifacio uprising in August 1896 did not immediately affect Mindanao. In fact, several units from Mindanao volunteered to fight the insurgents. But when Dewey destroyed the decrepit Spanish navy off Cavite two years later, the Filipinos regrouped and began to claim jurisdiction over the entire country. Aguinaldo sent emissaries to Mindanao, with orders to imprison the Spaniards and take over the churches.

The Gonzalez brothers of Surigao, exiled by the Spanish government because of their known masonic affiliation, were appointed by Aguinaldo to take over the political and military government of Mindanao. Their first act was to apprehend the Jesuits and the Benedictines, who had just taken over a few Jesuit missions in Surigao. They also confiscated the church funds and forbade the missionaries from exercising their priestly duties.

Because of the uncertain political situation, Fr. Pio Pi, Philippine Jesuit Mission Superior in Manila, recalled all the Jesuits in Mindanao. He had no assurance the new government would guarantee their safety, or what their future role would be under the new dispensation.

The following is a translation of part of a report sent by Fr. Miguel Alaix, missionary in Talacogon in upper Agusan (today Agusan del Sur). He was born on 19 February 1836 in Falset, Tarragona, Spain, entered the Society of Jesus on 27 October 1857, and came to the Philippines in 1884. After a year in Manila, he was assigned first to Surigao and then to Butuan, where the Philippine

revolution caught him. He went back to Spain in 1899, but sailed back and was reassigned to Mindanao when peace returned. He died at sea off Davao, on 26 November 1912. The document is self-explanatory. It contains a few interesting points seldom found in the usual history books. Also worth noting is the emphasis on certain basic spiritual truths a Jesuit missionary would insist on in his sermons. Hopeful he would still be able to return, though uncertain when, he was concerned lest, in his absence, the faithful would forsake God. One cannot help but notice the unalloyed love of the Jesuit for his people.

The letter was dated at Valencia, Spain 10 October 1899, after he had arrived from the Philippines. The original was published in the last volume of missionary letters, *Cartas edificantes de los Misioneros de la Compania de Jesus* (Barcelona, 1903), 49-57. But the present translation is only of pages 48-53.

#### LETTER OF FR. MIGUEL ALAIX

Now recovered from the exhausting trip from Mindanao, I shall describe the exile and imprisonment I suffered. From this Your Reverence will realize how deeply rooted the faith is in the *indio's* heart, his love for the missionaries, and that only the masonic persecution brought to Mindanao by a fistful of revolutionaries from Luzon has alone ruined our missions.

On 25 January this year [1899], at 8:00 o'clock in the evening, eight commissioners of the Luzon revolutionary government went to the Talacogon mission. They had a document signed by a certain individual, but not by the authorities. In it I was notified of the decree of imprisonment and the confiscation of the goods of the church and of the convento. I was allowed, as an exception, the free exercise of my priestly ministry in the town.

I protested against that document neither signed nor stamped by competent authority, and against the violation of my sacred rights. I obeyed against my will because they threatened me with the revolver and the Remington. With Bro. Ferrerons, my companion, I remained under the custody of eight soldiers. Since the commission arrived at night, neither the people knew anything, nor were they welcomed. But they commanded three soldiers from the town guarding the hall to shout "Long live the Philippine Republic! Down with the foreigners!" but who did so half-heartedly out of fear. The next day, the independence flag appeared waving above the independence hall. The local president was then elected and, then, the government commissioners, accompanied by the president, came to take possession of everything. Not everything, for they left us what we needed for the journey, although certainly very little. I cannot pass over in silence the reaction of the new president and the principalia to the command to con-

fiscate the things of the church. Everyone took it badly, but only because they were threatened with death were they present during the take-over, unwilling witnesses and without taking any active role. Not only that, in order to see such a brigandage, they kept a certain distance from the commissioners, with their backs turned and shedding tears. This, certainly in truth, was the most solemn protest and condemnation of that act. It must be noted that, while the commission took the funds, I addressed myself to one of the principals and told him, "Tell your sick father that those men are also taking away the twenty gold pesos he had given me as a donation for a chalice." But the thirst for gold had muddled their minds which could not understand such truths.

Four days I stayed imprisoned in Talacogon, my cell being the convento itself. Never was it so crowded, nor has the missionary received as many proofs of love from by his flock as in those moments. The continuing groups of men and women from the town who, with tears in their eyes, begged the emissaries of the revolution to leave their priest alone until the arrival of a native priest (who would never arrive), were the reason why I remained four days there, and why the delegates treated me with some deference and respect. But they excused themselves before the people, saying they could not agree to their demand since they had to fulfill, under pain of death, whatever they had been ordered. I should not omit here, Reverend Father, a detail which reflects the affection the *indios* have for us and which still moves me when recalling it. They wanted to kiss my hand repeatedly and be the first to show me this sign of love and respect. And those who had already done so—what they so resolutely wanted to do—joined the later arrivals and came back to visit a second time and kiss my hand again. That turned out to be a continual wrenching of my heart and cutting it into a thousand pieces.

Despite the prohibition to enter the convento, neither the commissioners nor their bayonets succeeded in holding back that manifestation of love the entire town felt for its missionary. Your Reverence, thus, can understand that isolating me was impossible. Indeed, not only through the door, but also the orchard, and from all sides, they came inside and, not knowing how, I found myself constantly surrounded by my flock. They could not properly express their feelings for their affliction tied their tongues; neither did I know how to send them away, for they refused to leave me. I asked them to please stop coming further, since they made me suffer. I loved them very much, and seeing them, the pain of having to separate from them increased. But I could not stop them. They approached on their knees at all hours in the corridors, and taking my hand, they kept saying, "Father, give us your last blessing. Alas, what will happen? We do not want to suffer, we have nothing to do with this at all. And who will save our souls, Father, if you go? Who will help us at death's hour?" Reverend Father, not only the children were saying this, but the president himself and the principales.

To avoid such heart-rending scenes, I thought of hiding in the confessional and there, night and day, I heard the confession of all I could. . . .

Even the soldiers themselves came up to ask my pardon, alleging they had been forced to do what they were doing on orders of their chiefs, and they feared a terrible punishment from heaven for the manner they were treating me.

The last day of my stay, a Sunday, I addressed the people, but trying in the sermon not to stir the emotions lest they be even more excited. "Three things." I told them, "you have to do until my return:

1. Do not buy or accept anything belonging to the church or the convento, even if they give it as a gift. You would be guilty of a serious sacrilege and God would punish you.
2. Do not accept a faith other than what I have taught you, neither for a prize nor for threats they may scare you with.
3. If unfortunately you fall into grave sin, follow it with an act of contrition, and do not go to sleep in the state of sin, but say in your heart, 'I am sorry, Lord, for having sinned against You, who are the supreme goodness.' This simple act will serve as your confession as long as you have no priest. With this you will save your souls."

The hour to go finally struck. People piled up on the street, by the gate, the door and the corridors of the convento, that no one could go through. I asked the president, as a last favor, to arrange that everybody should leave. "Impossible, Father," he said, "they will not listen to me." Then forcing myself into the middle of the crowd, pushing ahead those who were crying, they fell on one another to kiss my hand. Making sure I did not extend it to anyone, and saying nothing to anybody, I managed to open a path for myself, and rushed to my banca. Following me were Bros. Luis Ferrerons and Pedro Simon, the latter assigned, not to the Talacogon mission but to Jativa and apprehended at the landing place of Talacogon when he was coming down to Butuan for the traditional renovation of vows. The people came running down behind us. Seeing them, and once we were at the landing place, I held up the crucifix in my left hand, and, imposing silence with my right, I left them these final words: "Do not ever forget this Jesus crucified for us, and whose faith and teaching I explained to you. He will come on the last day of the world to judge all of us, good and bad." I next added, "You know the innocence of the missionary priests, expelled so shamefully from their beloved missions, in the sight of their dearly loved people. You will also witness the terrible sin of those who wrench us from you. If you follow the Lord's law, and observe His commandments, you will all go up to heaven forever. Let not even one from you be absent from there. May no one, no, not one of those I have taught be lost. But, woe to those who, despising my lessons, would join the bad people. With the latter, before your eyes, they will be cast into hell fire!" At the end, adding not one more word, I went down into my canoe, and immediately we sailed away.

We sailed down the river, witnessing similar no less painful scenes as we went by the ranches, settlements of the new Christians, newly baptized,

who had cost Ours so much sweat, illnesses, and deaths. They had been living happily, but now, at our sight, they seemed to dissipate like smoke. Here and there, along those banks and rivers, the indios appeared before us, at a loss because of what they were witnessing, asked us openly, "What shall we now do, Father? What will happen to us?" I kept advising them, "Go now back to your farms and do there what I have taught you to do always."

Father Provincial, how hard and cruel seeing them so sad and pained, burdened with their possessions, consisting solely of one miserable mat of palm leaves, a hen under the armpits, a cooking pot in one hand, as they turned to the mountains. How rigorously and strictly they will answer, they who with such unjust blows, will perhaps be the cause of the loss of so many souls!