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The Depth of Christianization in Early Seventeenth-Century Philippines

JOHN N. SCHUMACHER, S.J.

Sociological and anthropological research in recent years has called attention to the predominant role played in the lives of many barrio people of a folk-Catholicism, permeated with an abiding consciousness of a spirit-world in need of propitiation, and abounding in superstitious beliefs quite in contradiction with orthodox Catholicism, however much they may have appropriated its form and ritual. Of course, the fact has not been unknown to parish priests and others even in the past, but these efforts at scientific anthropological research have highlighted the widespread existence of the phenomenon, and the pervasiveness of such a folk-Catholicism in much of barrio life. Evidence of a somewhat different, but similarly unorthodox, type of folk-Catholicism in an urban society may be found in such mass-devotions as the cult of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo and others.

A common, but as I will suggest, oversimplified, explanation of the existence of such phenomena in 20th-century Philippine Catholicism has been that the Spanish missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth century never achieved more than a superficial Christianization of Philippine society, that Christianity more often remained only a veneer over the persistent pre-Hispanic animistic religion, or at best achieved a kind of syncretistic Christianity, retaining under Christian forms much of the ancient spirit-beliefs and other superstitions. It can scarcely be denied, of course, that this was sometimes, perhaps often, the case. This writer has tried to show elsewhere¹

¹ John N. Schumacher, S.J., "Some Historical Considerations on the Evangelization of the Philippines," *Contemporary Studies*, 2 (December 1965), 222-237.

that to whatever extent this may have been true, still it ought to be viewed within the context of the entire history of the Church. That is to say, an initial superficiality of Christianization would not be at all surprising, for in medieval Europe no less than the Philippines the process of deepening and purifying Christianity was a gradual one. Nonetheless the reason for the failure to achieve this deepening and purifying of Philippine Catholicism would seem to lie much more in the early 19th-century decline of the religious orders and the lack of a Filipino clergy than in a supposed superficiality of the early evangelization. For even from the earliest days of the evangelization there are clear evidences of neophytes who had grasped the essence of Christianity and committed themselves to it in a personal way. The accounts presented here, though not totally unknown, have seemed worth presenting in an English translation, as examples of such evidence.

The young Tagalog girl who stood calmly ready to lay down her life on behalf of her faith needs no apologist to prove the depth of her commitment to Christianity, nor does the Leyteña who similarly stood fast in her Christian faith and virtue. The Pampango soldier who so treasured the Christian faith into which he, or at best his father, had undoubtedly been only recently baptized, that he was anxious to bring others, total strangers to him, to the same gift of God, even at his own cost, surely had understood and embraced a pure Christianity, whatever may have been the breadth of his theological knowledge. It would, of course, be rash to generalize too far from these isolated incidents, but they should likewise prevent too hasty generalizations about the lack of depth of first and second generation Christianity.

The incidents are narrated by the seventeenth-century Jesuit chronicler, Father Francisco Colín,² in his account of the experiences of his fellow-Jesuits, Fathers Melchor Hurtado and Pascual de Acuña. Father Hurtado was taken prisoner in 1603 in a Maguindanao raid on Dulag, Leyte, and remained almost three years a captive of the Maguindanao leader Bwisan, though with considerable freedom to move about among the Christian captives of the Maguindanaos in the area around the mouth of the Great River (the Pulangui river in the province of Cotabato).³ Father de Acuña, on the other hand,

² Francisco Colín, S.J. *Labor evangélica*, 2nd ed. by Pablo Pastells, S.J. (3 vols.; Barcelona: Henrich, 1900-1902). The account of Father Hurtado's experiences is from vol. II, p. 507. That of Father de Acuña's is from vol. III, pp. 175-176.

³ For an account of Father Hurtado's captivity, see H. de la Costa, S.J., *The Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581-1768*, pp. 293-310. Hurtado was born in Toledo, Spain in 1571, came to the Philippines in 1599, and died in Oton, Panay in 1607.

accompanied an expedition in 1607 of Spanish and Filipino soldiers against the Muslims of Maguindanao and Jolo. While the expedition was delayed three months at Dapitan, waiting for ambassadors of peace to come from Jolo, Father de Acuña exercised his apostolate not only among the soldiers, but also among the pagans of the region, in which there were as yet only a few Christian families.⁴

I

To one of those towns [in which Father Hurtado was staying during his captivity], came a good-looking young Tagalog girl, about fifteen years of age. Her hair had recently been cut off and when she was asked the reason, one of her relatives who was with her, likewise a Christian and a captive, replied that the chief of that River had intended to take her to be his wife, on condition that she renounce her faith. (For their sect [Islam] does not permit that they take as wives those of another religion.) He kept after her for quite some time to accede to his intent, and finally, after other threats, he told her that if she would not renounce her faith and yield to his desire, he would have her hair cut off. She in her turn, being one who esteemed more the purity of her soul than the beauty of her body, took a pair of scissors and cut off her own hair in the sight of her master. She then told him that she likewise offered her throat to be cut in defense of her faith, because she had rather live with Christ even as a captive and with her hair cut off, than to be ruler of that town. At this her pursuer left her in peace for then, being filled with admiration at that glorious deed of hers. Father Hurtado, after giving thanks to God, heard her confession and consoled her, giving her the direction that seemed most helpful that she might persevere in her fervor and constancy.

II

Before his [Father de Acuña] departure, Our Lord blessed his apostolic labors with the consolation of the baptism

⁴ Father de Acuña's activities around Dapitan are mentioned, *ibid.*, p. 310. Acuña was later a captive for a time among the Maguindanaos like Hurtado. He was born in Portuguese Madeira in 1573, arrived in the Philippines in 1603, and died in Manila in 1643.

of a pagan, *in articulo mortis*. Since the story redounds to the credit of the Christian community of these Islands, and especially that of the Pampango nation, it deserves to be recorded here that its memory be forever preserved. A certain pagan lived on a beach some distance from the town of Dapitan. In his house he had a number of slaves, one of them very close to death. By pure chance a Pampango soldier passed by, and taking thought of the eternal loss of that soul if he should pass out of this life without being washed in the sacred waters of Baptism, he spoke to the master, asking that since that slave was going to die and would therefore be of no further profit to his master, he let him bring him to the Father, so that the latter might baptize him. The pagan, perhaps moved by his neighbors, the Moro Mindanaos, and by hatred of a different religion, replied that he did not want to send the slave nor permit anyone else to take him, and did not want him to die a Christian, since none of his own people had been such. The Christian Pampango replied: "Then sell him to me." The pagan then consented, won over by the thought of profit, which is the principal motive which governs all other actions among the Indios (and would to God that this were true only of them!). And since there was so little hope that the slave would recover, the master quickly came to an agreement with the Pampango on the price. The latter paid him immediately with some pieces of linen which he happened to have with him, and full of joy, brought the slave to the presence of the Father, so that he might give him the liberty of a son of God, and with this right, the man might enter into Heaven. The Father ordered that a jar of water be brought immediately, and meanwhile disposed the dying man to his satisfaction. Then, before moving from the spot in which so rich a prize had come to him, he made him a Christian and helped him to die, thus insuring his happiness and the joy of the Christian Pampango, who considered it a great good fortune to have bought with his own money the gift of Heaven for that soul. Surely this is a magnificent proof of the zeal with which the Indios of this nation receive and profess our holy Faith, and no little source of shame to many Spaniards and other

European Christians, to whom the Christian Religion is not indebted for any such pious deeds.

Another consolation of no less magnitude which the Father received, was the miraculous escape of an Indio woman belonging to a family of *principales* of Leyte. Having escaped from the captivity in which she had been, she arrived during those days at the river of Dapitan after overcoming with the special favor of Heaven the dangers of the rough country and the distance of the journey through a land full of enemies. While living among the Moros she had behaved very much as a Christian, and on various occasions found herself with a knife-blade at her throat for not consenting to the impure temptations of her master, constantly consecrating to God the life of her body in order not to stain her soul. And when she heard that there was an armada of Christians at the river of Dapitan, she undertook the journey without her master's knowledge with courage worthy of a man. And God rewarded her fervor, guiding her safely to where our men were, who received her with much affection and joy because of the esteem in which they held her Christian bravery. . . .