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The Return of the Jesuits to Mindanao

JOSE S. ARCILLA

Following its naval victory and subsequent peace treaty with the Sulu sultanate in the spring of 1851, the Spanish government decided to take steps to occupy the island of Mindanao, the Muslim homeland in southern Philippines. Oyanguren's conquest of Davao two years before had already given the Spaniards control of a southeastern port in the island, and with the establishment of a military and naval base in Pollok, a natural harbor north of Cotabato, the Spaniards controlled, in the middle of the nineteenth century, three points in southern Mindanao: Zamboanga in the west, Davao in the east, and Pollok somewhere in the middle.¹

About four years later, in 1854-1855, a special exploratory commission sailed up the Pulangui river to gather firsthand information about the land of the Muslims.² Shortly after, in 1860, a royal decree established a politico-military government in Mindanao, naming a brigadier as its first governor. Before sailing for his new post, however, the new governor obtained permission to bring along some Jesuit missionaries to Cotabato, the seat of his government. The latter had just arrived in the Philippines, and

1. Literature on this subject is abundant. Cf. among others: Vicente Barrantes y Moreno, *Guerras piráticas de Filipinas contra mindanaos y joloanos* (Manila, 1878); Emilio Bernáldez y Fernández de Folgueras, *Reseña histórica de la guerra al sur de Filipinas, sostenida por las armas españolas contra los piratas de aquel archipiélago, desde la conquista hasta nuestros días* (Madrid, 1857); Patricio de la Escosura, *Memoria sobre Filipinas y Joló redactada en 1863 y 1864* (Madrid, 1882); Benito Francia y Ponce de León and Julián González Parrado, *Las Islas Filipinas. Mindanao*. 2 tomos (Havana, 1898); José García de Arboleya, *Historia del archipiélago y sultanía de Joló, y noticia de la expedición española que a las órdenes del Marqués de la Solana, acaba de destruir a los piratas joloanos* (Habana, 1851); Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines* (Quezon City, 1973); José Montero y Vidal, *Historia general de Filipinas*, 3 tomos (Madrid, 1895); *Historia de la piratería malayo-mahometana en Mindanao, Joló y Borneo*. 2 tomos (Madrid, 1888).

2. This commission was made up of five members, all of whom submitted reports to the government. These reports are preserved in manuscript form, still unedited, in the Newberry

they were not planning to open a mission immediately in southern Mindanao; but at the behest of the colonial government, they changed their mind. It was thus that, shortly after their return to the Philippines in 1859, the Jesuits opened their first mission in Tamontaka in the heart of Muslim territory, and not in north or northeastern Mindanao as they had intended.³

I

Much of the extant literature on Mindanao is almost exclusively about the military and naval confrontations between the Spanish government forces and the Muslims. One inevitably gets the impression that relations between them were nothing but unmitigated hostility and a series of inconclusive battles, with neither side gaining a decisive victory over the other. Unnoticed by historians was the special exploratory commission that sailed up the Pulangui river in 1854-1855, which seems to have been an important factor in the modern development of Mindanao.⁴ The exploration gathered firsthand information about the land that for the last 300 years had remained closed and eluded conquest by the Spaniards. From the explorers' reports, the Spaniards realized that the Muslims against whom they had been sending their battle machinery in their crusade for Cross and Crown were largely the product of their imagination. Contrary to their belief, the Muslims in southern Mindanao did not form a single sultanate. The sultan of Cotabato was not the absolute ruler of a unified and homogeneous Muslim

Library (Chicago), each with its own title: "El gran río de Mindanao (Pollok, 30 de agosto de 1854)"; "Sobre el río grande de Mindanao (Isabela, 28 de Abril de 1855)"; "Sobre el primer establecimiento militar del río grande de Mindanao (Manila, 21 de junio de 1855)," all of these by Fernando Fernández de Córdova; "Exploración del río grande de Mindanao en los meses de febrero y marzo de 1855 de orden del Superior Gobierno (Manila, 31 de junio de 1855)," by Claudio Montero; "Relación al Gobierno general (Manila, 21 de junio de 1855)," by Ramón Mascaro; "Río grande de Mindanao (Manila, 31 de junio de 1855)," by Romualdo Crespo y Guerra; "Primer Reconocimiento del Gran Río de Mindanao. . . (Manila, 7 de julio de 1855)," by José Oyanguren de la Cruz. These reports are bound in one volume entitled *Exploración del río grande de Mindanao*: Newberry Library, Ayer Collection, Philippine Manuscript Section, 1303.

3. José Fernández Cuevas, S. J., "Relación de un viaje de exploración a Mindanao, 1860," *Cartas de los PP. de la Compañía de Jesús de la Misión de Filipinas* (Manila, 1889), 8: 2 ff. .

4. The modern development of Mindanao begins with the return of the Jesuits in 1861. Missionary work had been confined to the north and northeastern provinces of Mindanao, and Zamboanga. Until the Jesuits opened missions in what is now Cotabato and Davao provinces, the whole southern half of the island was forbidden territory to the Spaniards.

state. There had been at least 13 separate sultanates along the Pulangui river, besides an uncounted number of Muslim settlements or communities, each with its own sultan, datu, or chief who, although vaguely admitting some superior dignity or higher authority of the sultan of Cotabato, neither paid him tribute or obeyed him whenever it suited their convenience to ignore him. The sultan of Mindanao enjoyed real power only in his own limited territory around the delta at the mouth of the Pulangui river, not over all the Muslims of southern Mindanao. For their part, the other sultans and datos were independent and self-sufficient rulers in their specific areas, except when on certain special occasions they federated for their common advantage. Not infrequently, they even posed a real threat to the sultan of Mindanao.⁵

The Spaniards never understood the fragmented nature of Muslim society, and of course, from their viewpoint, the Muslims did not have "clear ideas nor stood by the accepted principles" of political organization. What especially upset their notions was the fact that any individual Muslim, subject or leader, provided he had a reputation for daring and might have led a group of fighting men, or owned some lantacas or a few captives, had a legitimate right to proclaim himself sultan of his people.⁶

On the other hand, their perennial rivalries and chronic intertribal wars made the individual sultanates relatively easy for the Spaniards to conquer. For this reason, the members of the exploratory commission urged in their reports to the government that the time was ripe to occupy southern Mindanao. Mindanao was of primary importance, they argued, and the presence of the Spaniards there was necessary at least for the sake of

the other tribes who groan in barbarism and slavery. . . The government is obliged to emancipate them from the yoke of the Muslims. . . since they are brothers of these very Indios whom the government has committed itself to civilize and defend, and bring into the bosom of the Church.⁷

To effect this, the commission recommended the establishment of a central government for Mindanao, headed by a governor who would exercise supreme jurisdiction in the whole island, with sufficient discretionary powers to carry out his mission of "reduc-

5. Claudio Montero, "Exploración del río grande," ff. 39-39v.

6. Ibid.

7. Montero, "Exploración," ff. 49-55.

ing and settling the native tribes," as well as the Muslims. This central government would be the base from which to consolidate the Spanish military advance, at the same time that it would fill the "power-vacuum" necessarily existing because of the fragmentary nature of the Muslim states. As a first step, the commission agreed that the delta and the lower Pulangui should be occupied, by force if necessary. With Pollok and Davao at both extremes of the river already controlled by the government forces, the rest of the valley would be relatively easy to conquer, and Spanish influence could be extended as far as Sarangani in the south, and Lanao and Misamis in the north. With tact and prudence, it would be a matter of time before the inhabitants would be won over, and once roads were opened, the rest of the island would have easy access to the capital of Mindanao.

In the optimistic view of the explorers, such a plan would considerably weaken the power and influence of the Muslims over the mountain tribes, unless, urged on by what they themselves would observe of the developments the Spaniards would introduce in the areas under their control, they should by themselves freely opt to cast their lot with the Spaniards. This would preclude the use of force against the Muslims, which, in any case, the commission agreed was counterproductive. A military campaign, they pointed out, required the full complement of troops, weapons and ammunition, the occupation of strategic spots whence to transport their equipment and supplies, not to speak of the inevitable budgetary allocation necessary to finance the war. Furthermore, the use of military weapons and the presence of soldiers would only drive farther inland the very people whom they were seeking to conciliate. Instead, therefore, of a military campaign, peaceful means should be employed. For example, they suggested, commerce along the Pulangui river should be encouraged, and an agricultural colony established somewhere in the area, as an incentive to develop the untilled but fertile plain on both sides of the river. Likewise, they suggested that missions should be supported by the government and missionaries encouraged to live among the native tribes in order to "reduce them to live in towns. . . and put an end to the slave trade."⁸

II

While all this planning was going on, the not unrelated question of the return of the Jesuits to the Philippines was being resolved in the high government circles. The bishop of Cebu, fresh from his annual pastoral visit to the provinces of Misamis and Surigao in northern Mindanao, had written to the king of Spain urging him to send the Jesuits back to the Philippines:

I call on Your Majesty and I earnestly beg you, command many missionaries to come to the Philippines, if possible, Jesuits, and in a few years you will see that the state will be able to count on at least six million faithful vassals, peace-loving and loyal Christians in these islands.⁹

Mindanao, the second largest island of the Philippine archipelago, was part of the extensive diocese of Cebu, and the bishop was most concerned about its continued state of neglect for lack of missionaries and priests. After the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Philippines in 1768, the other missionary orders in the Philippines had never been able to muster enough priests to fill the vacancies left by the expelled missionaries. How serious this shortage of priests in the Philippines was we can gather from the following communication of the Dominican Prior Provincial in the Philippines to the Master General of the Dominican Order in Rome:

There is also a lack of lecturers [for the College of Santo Tomas in Manila], some of whom are very weak, when we need the most robust, especially since, after the expulsion and suppression of the Society of Jesus, the whole responsibility of public education has fallen on them [the Dominicans].¹⁰

The Dominican missions, the letter continues, were facing grave problems and they had negotiated to return some of them to the Augustinians, but no decision had been made. In Manila, most of the friars residing in the convent of Santo Domingo were quite useless because of their "mental or physical incapacity," and the few who could be of some use were busy, having "imbibed the

9. Cited in Pablo Pastells, S.J., *Misión de la Compañía de Jesús en Filipinas en el siglo XIX* (Barcelona, 1916), 1:13. See also the same bishop's letter to the Apostolic Nuncio in Madrid, from Cebu, 22 May 1865: Archivo Segreto Vaticano, *Nunziatura de Madrid*, 447.

10. Letter of the Prior Provincial to the Master General, undated, but probably 1785: Archivo de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario (Quezon City), manuscript section, "Documentos de Provinciales," 2, 21, 4v.

Holy Spirit in bodies greatly weakened and exhausted by age and years.”¹¹

This letter is just one which we can quote among the many that crossed the oceans in an effort to have more priests sent to the missions in the Philippines. As soon, therefore, as the Society of Jesus was restored in the nineteenth century in Spain, voices were raised urging the king to send Jesuits back to the Philippines.

An Italian missionary passing through Manila on his way to China wrote to the Jesuit rector of the college of Turin in 1834, describing how people talked about the Jesuits “with real affection and I would say enthusiasm.” At the same time, he pointed out that Manila was “one of the worst and most corrupt cities, the missions were languishing—and further, the more beautiful sectors of the Islands are still in the hands of savages who do not know Jesus Christ.”¹²

Before returning to Spain after his tour of duty as *oidor* of the royal Audiencia of Manila, Don José Manuel de Aguirre Miramón emphasized in his official report on conditions in the Visayas and Mindanao the

convenience of [having] Jesuits in those distant and fertile lands for the purpose of starting those peoples on the road to civilization and containing the advance of criminality, and to promote a salutary reaction among the members of the other religious institutions.¹³

King Ferdinand VII of Spain (1808-1833) was not deaf to these overtures. In 1824 and 1825, he had already requested the Provincial Superior of the Jesuits in Spain to send missionaries to South America. But the order having been restored only ten years before, there were not yet enough Jesuit priests to send to the overseas colonies. In 1832, the third time the royal request was made, the Provincial was able to assign some Jesuits for the Philippines; but the political upheavals in Spain frustrated all these plans. Then in 1851, after the Concordat between the Holy See and the Spanish government was ratified, the plans were reactivated. On 19 October 1852, the Queen Regent signed the royal cedula assigning the Jesuits to the Philippines to “promote the

11. Ibid.

12. L. Besi to Fr. Giovanni Antonio Grosso, S.J., Manila, 6 January 1834: Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu (ARSI), *Philippinae*, 1001-I, 1.

13. Archivo de la provincia tarraconense de la Compañía de Jesús, San Cugat del Vallés, Barcelona (ATA), *Cartas inéditas*, E-II-a-26.

prompt settlement of the pagans that live in those Islands”.¹⁴ But seven years more had to pass before all the legal blocks were smoothed away and the first group of ten Jesuits—six priests and four coadjutor brothers—were finally able to sail for Manila. On 4 February 1859 they sailed out of Cadiz, headed for the mission from which, 91 years previously, they had been expelled abruptly by the Spanish Crown.¹⁵

Four months later, on 13 June, they rounded the hook off Cavite, and a little after 9:00 P.M. they dropped anchor in Manila bay. Next morning, the high dignitaries of the colony and of the city went on board to welcome them, and escorted them to the church of the Augustinian Fathers for a solemn act of thanksgiving for the safe voyage. The rest of the day the Jesuits spent carrying out the duties of social etiquette and protocol, visiting dignitaries and church officials around the city of Manila.

III

Social amenities and obligations duly done with, Father Cuevas sat down with the governor-general, Don Fernando Norzagaray, to discuss the task of the Jesuits in the Philippines. For the Jesuit, the point of departure for any discussions was that, as missionaries, their aim was to promote the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls wherever they might be assigned in the Philippines. But if the authorities in the colony should ask them to stay in the city and open a school, he had been instructed to point out that since the Society of Jesus had been reestablished in the Philippines principally for the Mindanao missions, it seemed “quite natural” that this should be the principal objective to consider, especially since there were not yet enough Jesuits in the country to attend to both simultaneously. Nonetheless, if the governor-general insisted, the Jesuits had no choice but to obey, provided everything were put in writing and he assumed exclusive responsibility for everything.

14. Article 14 of the royal decree, dated 30 July 1860, assigning the Mindanao missions to the exclusive administration of the Jesuits.

15. This mission was composed of: Fathers José Fernández Cuevas (Superior); Juan Bautista Vidal, José Ignacio Guerrico, Ignacio Serra, Pascual Barrado, Ramón Barúa; Brothers Pedro Celestino Inunciaga, José Ignacio Larrañaga, Venancio Belzunce, and Joaquín Coma. Father Cuevas died in Manila in 1864; Father Serra fell sick and had to return to Spain after two years in the Philippines; and Father Barrado, also sick, returned after nine years.

The immediate need of the Jesuits was a decent residence which could serve also as a central mission house.¹⁶

As anticipated, the governor-general asked Father Cuevas to open a school and administer the almost defunct *Escuela Pía* of Manila. Earlier the Manila residents who still remembered the old Jesuit colleges and universities, had formulated a petition before the governor-general requesting the returning Jesuits to administer the Escuela. The Jesuits were not surprised at this request. As a matter of fact, they expected it. Father Manuel Gil, the Spanish Assistant to the Jesuit General in Rome, had already suggested some years earlier that a house should be established in Manila, since it was "not impossible that. . . we would have to offer some kind of education for the youth." And on their arrival, the Fathers themselves were immediately aware that, as Father Vidal wrote, religious instruction, and the education of the youth is practically nil. Nowhere in any of these islands is there a single Daughter of Charity, nor a teaching Sister. . . so that parents are forced to send their children to Calcutta or Singapore, or to Europe, if they want to give them a normal schooling.¹⁷

On 9 September, Father Cuevas sent his negative reply to the governor's office. But not so easily were the people of Manila thwarted from their plan for they repeated their request before the governor-general, who, for the second time, forwarded the request. For a second time too the Jesuit Superior refused to accede to the popular demand, alleging that he could not go beyond his own superior's instructions. But, he added, if the governor-general was willing to accept full and exclusive responsibility and put everything in writing, he would abide by the decision of the local authorities.

On 1 October 1859, a Superior Decree was issued in Manila transferring the administration of the Escuela Pía into the hands of the Jesuits. Less than three months later, on 10 December, the first classes were held, with only ten pupils attending. But in two weeks' time, by the time Christmas vacations were started, their number had multiplied to more than 100.

However, the Madrid government disapproved Norzagaray's

16. Letter of Father Cuevas to the Superior General of the Jesuits in Rome, Manila, 25 June 1859: ARSI, *Phil.*, 1001-I, 3; Pastells, *Misión*, 1:12-13.

17. Fr. Juan Vidal to his brother, Manila, 6 November 1859: ATa, E-II-a-1.

decree and the royal negative reached Manila in January 1860. Still undaunted, the parents of the new Jesuit students lost no time making the necessary representations, until the royal government relented and confirmed the Jesuits as teachers of the school, which was renamed *Ateneo Municipal de Manila*.¹⁸

IV

All during this interlude, Mindanao had been foremost in the minds of the Jesuits. A residence and central mission house had already been purchased for them in Manila, but some questions had to be resolved before they could establish their first Mindanao mission. With some of the priests engaged in the Ateneo, who should be assigned to Mindanao? Where should the first mission be? And, what guarantee was there that the promised funds from the government would be available when the Jesuit missionaries needed them?

Not content with reading and asking information about Mindanao, the Jesuit Superior decided to take a trip to the island. He left Manila on 7 February 1860, accompanied by the governor of Mindanao, who also acted as his guide. He stayed two weeks in Zamboanga—enough time to see that the population, which had grown from 4,018 in 1829 to 10,732 in 1860, was materially and spiritually famished. From there, he sailed to Isabela in Basilan Island, Davao, and Cotabato, all of them places crying for priests. In Davao, he learned that just before he landed, the single Recollect missionary had passed away, all alone, away from his religious brethren, bereft of the sacramental consolation of the Church which he had died serving—all because of lack of the means of communication. In Basilan, he was not altogether surprised that in six months ministering to the naval station, the chaplain had not baptized a single child of legitimate birth. And Pollok, he found out, was the home of a mere 600 Christians ministered to by a Recollect friar, as well as of the sailors and soldiers stationed there, plus 50 or 60 Chinese merchants, and “women of evil life, despite the local governor’s efforts to improve the town.”¹⁹

Cotabato was the last place he visited, where he had the oppor-

18. “*Diario de la Misión*, I, 1859-1879”: ATa, E-II-a-5; Letter of Fr. J. Vidal to his brother, Manila, 22 December 1859: ATa, E-II-a-1.

19. Cuevas, “*Relación de un viaje*,” *Cartas*, 8:30.

tunity to interview the sultan and his heir, young Uto, at the time supervisor of the riverine commerce in the Pulangui. Cotabato was located on a beautiful "plain surrounded by lovely waterways," but quite beyond the pale of Spanish rule. Taken individually, he noted, the Muslims did not impress him as being as powerful as he had expected them to be. The reason, he observed, lay in the fact that Manila, "the heart and head of the Philippine Archipelago, did not have as vigorous a life to share with its members as far away as Formosa, Cambodia, Ternate, Jolo, and Mindanao."²⁰

Back in Manila by the first week of April, Father Cuevas prepared a report to his General Superior in Rome. What decisions he wanted to make could be deduced from a lengthy letter, dated 13 July 1860, in which he wrote that he had found no place suitable for a mission in southern Mindanao. Both Pollok and Isabela (Basilan) he ruled out because, surrounded by Muslims, the missionaries would be in constant danger for their lives. Furthermore, he saw very little possibility for expansion because of their geographical limitations: one was an isolated harbor, the other was a small island. Neither did he favor Zamboanga. Despite its extensive lands outside the city, the area was practically Christian, and there was no immediate need for a new mission there. Davao in the southeast was not much more convenient. Located in an unhealthy, humid sector, it was isolated from the rest of the Philippines, with only one boat visiting it once a year. Land routes were risky, because they passed through exclusively Muslim settlements.

Another difficulty of a juridical nature was indicated which, although it had not yet surfaced, Father Cuevas considered serious enough to call to the attention of Rome. The word *mission* did not mean the same thing in Europe as in the Philippines, where the missionary, more or less like a parish priest, had a fixed residence, usually attached to a parish church where the Christians came together for mass and the administration of the other sacraments. But in the Philippines, the church was the property of the diocese. Without the bishop's permission, no church building could be erected, and once erected, it fell under the jurisdiction of the local ordinary, who had exclusive rights of supervision and provision. This was true of the parishes in Mindanao, and the bishop of Cebu

20. Ibid., p. 53.

had the duty and right to visit the missions and parishes administered by the Recollects in Misamis and Surigao. Besides, Philippine law dictated that every mission that counted 500 full tributes was raised to the category of an independent parish to be assigned with the canonical right of irremovability of its pastor, even if the latter was a member of a religious order. This, concluded Father Cuevas, would force the Jesuits, who were forbidden by their religious institute to accept parishes with the canonical title of irremovability, to cede their missions, just when they began to flourish and the new Christians were still fresh from their catechumenate, to the care of other priests.²¹

A reply from the Jesuit general in Rome was immediately despatched on receipt of the letter from the Philippines. Aside from the unqualified trust in Father Cuevas implicit in his answer, the Jesuit General stressed two things. First, the local superior must carefully weigh the local needs and circumstances and, with the advice of his council, make the proper decisions, as, in the present case, the choice of the most suitable location for the first Jesuit mission in Mindanao. The place should be healthy and safe from any possibility of attack from the enemy. Once the mission was established, experience and prudence would dictate how and when to undertake further mission trips into the interior.

The second point concerned the juridical difficulties foreseen by Father Cuevas. The General simply said that since the difficulty was nonexistent, there was no need at the moment to bother oneself about it. If problems should occur in the future, it was to be hoped that the Spanish royal government would, as it had done so several times before, take into account the particular nature of the Jesuit constitutions and act accordingly. If this did not help, the Jesuits should resign themselves to giving up their missions for other priests to administer.²²

Meantime, events in Cotabato had forced the Spanish colonial government not to delay much longer the occupation of southern Mindanao. Their military victories over the Sulu sultanate and the adjacent islands, the establishment of their military and naval base in Pollok, the inauguration of the province of Nueva Vergara (as Oyanguren renamed Davao after he had conquered it) were only

21. Cuevas to the General, Manila, 13 June 1859: ARSI, *Phil.*, 1001-I, 5.

22. "Registrum epistolarum Generalis, Missiones a die 11 martii 1857 ad 19 octobris 1861," p. 438: ARSI, *Regist. epp. Gen.*

the first step. Then, on 30 April 1861, with the consent of Datu Amirol, father of the sultan of Cotabato, Spanish marines sailed the Pulangui river up to the Muslim *cota*, or fort, at Paiguan and raised the Spanish flag there. A little afterwards, the Spanish flag was also raised over the stone fort (*Cota bato*) near the mouth of Pulangui river. In a subsequent *bichara* or conference between the Spaniards and the friendly Muslim leaders, the boundaries of the Spanish military base at Cotabato were settled, while the Spaniards promised to respect the religion, practices, and customs of the Cotabato Muslims.²³

These developments raised the gravest concern among the other Muslim datus and sultans. The ink was not yet dry on the treaties signed when a sizable group of datus revolted against their nominal superior, the sultan of Cotabato. Many of them fled to the sultan of Tumbao and, under his leadership, erected defense works in preparation for the expected retaliation by the Spanish forces, in virtue of the recently signed treaty of friendship between Spain and Cotabato. At this juncture, the new politico-military governor of Mindanao had just been named, Don José García Ruiz, and before sailing for his new post, he asked to bring along some Jesuits with him. He believed that the presence of the Jesuits in Cotabato would greatly help to consolidate the Spanish advance.

V

As mentioned, the Jesuits had at first decided against opening a mission in southern Mindanao. But, like the earlier decision on the *Ateneo Municipal*, the colonial government officials did not consider the Jesuits' plans. And so despite his misgivings, Father Cuevas had to appoint the first band of missionaries for Mindanao, two priests and two coadjutor brothers, who left on the same boat as Governor García.²⁴

23. Besides the histories cited in note 1 above, see the letter Father Vidal wrote his brother on 21 May 1861: "El del actual tomó posesión del pueblo de Cotabato, donde residía el Sultán de Mindanao, el Señor Comandante General de Marina de este Apostadero, quedando allí el Gobernador de la isla y tres compañías de tropa a las que se juntarán otras si es menester. La conquista debería hacerse simultaneamente por nueve distritos en que se ha dividido la isla, habiendo un jefe militar con alguna fuerza en cada uno de ellos; pero como la isla es tan grande, es cosa muy larga y difícil, a pesar de la buena voluntad y actividad de este Señor Capitán General." (ATa, E-II-a-1).

24. The following composed that first band of missionaries for Mindanao: Fathers Juan

On 16 September 1860, they arrived in Pollok, and Father Vidal, the superior of the band, proceeded to Cotabato to prepare a residence for the new missionaries. Cotabato was not ready to receive the new arrivals, for not even for the military officers were there enough houses. The Jesuits then decided to while away their time in Pollok where they offered to help the chaplain of the base administer the sacraments to the community.

Meanwhile, the military operations launched earlier against the Muslim stronghold at Tumbao (or Pagalungan) proved to be no contest. The Spanish military machine was unstoppable and by November Tumbao fell. Moving upriver to the point where the Pulangui divided into two branches before flowing out into the sea, the Spaniards pitched camp at the vertex of the delta formed by the two branches of the Pulangui, where they hoped to control the river and the delta. Somewhere along the southern bank of the southern branch of the Pulangui, the Spanish troops pitched their tents on a flat plain which was called Tamontaca. Not too far away, there were low-lying hills where a timid, peace-loving tribe was living, the Tirurays. On learning about this shy, gentle mountain tribe, the Jesuits decided to settle at Tamontaca and begin their missionary work among them. Thus, almost as if it had been chosen for them, Tamontaca became the first modern Jesuit mission in Mindanao.

Except for the army tents of the soldiers, literally nothing could be found in Tamontaca when the Jesuits first arrived there. Two or three miserable grass huts could be seen in the distance, but their inhabitants had fled at the coming of the soldiers. And so, for their shelter the Jesuits were given canvas tents, which for two and a half months served as the mission-house, chapel, and Jesuit residence. It was in one of these tents that the first meeting between the Tirurays and the missionaries took place on the occasion of holy Mass. Father Vidal described the meeting:

The Manobos had already thrice visited the Spaniards when we arrived. . . On Sunday, the 12th of this month, seven of them came at 6:30 A.M. After checking the camp for Muslims, they went in. Practically naked, they were armed with a lance and poisoned arrows. They were bringing some gifts—chicken for the Captain, sugar cane, monogos (vegetables somewhat like our beans), squash, and camotes, which

are like the potato but sweeter and more nutritious. Although we barely understood one another, for their dialect is part Moro and part something else, still their entire behavior showed they had no inhibitions and were open with us and all the soldiers. But they had a terrible fear of the Muslims because the latter had threatened to chop off their heads if they joined us. They attended the Mass I said at 7:00, the first celebrated in this mission, and the later Mass Father Guerrico said for the troops, with deep devotion and respect. Asked if one of them wanted to stay here, they said no, but that in a few days they would be back and then perhaps someone might stay. We gave each one a piece of cotton cloth, some wire, and a few cigars. Finally, having attended the two Masses, partaken of chicken and rice broth with a little wine, having seen the effects (to them prodigious) of the revolver and the rifle, they walked away happily back to the hills, but ever fearful of the Muslims. They asked to please let them bring a can which had served as a target, all pierced and battered by the bullets, so that their people might see such marvels and how therefore the Muslims could be killed.²⁵

Helped by men assigned them from the military camp, and a few Muslims sent by the friendly Datu Amirol whom they paid a daily wage, the Jesuits soon built a bamboo and nipa house which they partitioned into three rooms, one of which served as the first chapel of the mission. A bell was tied by the door to serve as an alarm signal, for, as the mission chronicle reads, the missionaries had gained in comfort and salubriousness, but not in safety. The house was at some distance from the camp and this was perhaps risky, the chronicle continues, in case the Muslims attempted anything. The latter had never quite accepted their defeat at Tumbao where many of their relatives and friends had died, and many too of those who survived were still nursing their wounds. Strategically located at the apex of the delta, its loss to the Spaniards was not just a personal defeat, but a disaster of transcendent political significance.

The Jesuits moved into their new house on 14 March. It did not take long before some attempt was made against them. They had built a makeshift shelter nearby for the Tirurays to pass the night, for some of them did for the first few days. Later, however, the missionaries noted a change in their behavior, for none of them wanted any longer to stay overnight in the mission compound. The

25. Vidal to his brother, Tamontaca, 16 January 1862: ATa, E-II-a-1.

Tirurays finally admitted having seen some Muslims wandering about the area.

On the night between the twenty-seventh and the twenty-eighth of March, the Jesuits heard strange noises outside the house, like someone lifting large heavy earthen jars, or carrying away chickens and roosters. Soon they felt their window being pried loose. The alarm was sounded, they shouted for help, and the soldiers came down — but there was no one in sight. The officer-in-charge volunteered to stay behind with the sentinel, but the Jesuits declined the offer, thinking that the thieves would not return. But, to quote the mission chronicle again:

In less than two hours, two Muslims were back, one with a bundle of twigs in his hand, the other shouldering a *kampilan* to protect his companion. Either because of fright, or of some unexplained reason, twice the sentinel failed to fire his rifle. The Muslim was already half a yard away from the nipa wall, and was already blowing into the flame to set it afire, but in that one instant, one of the Fathers shouted, someone rang the bell, the sentinel fired but missed — all of which caused such an uproar that, instead of throwing his torch against the wall, the Muslim dropped it on the ground, and neither he nor his companion found an easy exit.²⁶

The first attempt to scare the Jesuits away had failed, but they knew that it would not be the last. More serious, however, than the hostility of the Muslims was the problem of their ignorance of the local idiom. While waiting to come down to Mindanao, they had studied Tagalog in Manila; but they were unprepared for the dialect spoken by the Tirurays or the Muslims in the area. They had therefore to employ signs and gestures in pantomime — much to the amusement of the gentle Tirurays — in order to elicit from the latter the most common words of daily conversation. Patiently they asked them to name an infinite number of items they pointed out, asking them to repeat the words over and over again as they put them in writing, until, having jotted down singly all the words they learned, the Jesuits were able to formulate an initial vocabulary list and a rudimentary grammar. It was in this way that, with incredible

26. 'Historia de la Misión del Río Grande de Mindanao': ATa, E-II-b-70. Fr. Cuevas later wrote that the Muslims of Tamontaca believed that the Jesuits had some kind of supernatural powers ("unos brujos") because they failed to set their bamboo and nipa house on fire through a simple shout of Fr. Vidal! See "Viaje a Zamboanga y al Río Grande de Mindanao en 1863," part I, in ATa, "Cartas inéditas," 1897, F-97.

perseverance and energy, these missionaries learned to communicate with their new friends and prospective converts.

We do not know how long those intrepid missionaries submitted themselves to this spartan discipline of learning a new language without teachers, dictionaries, or grammar books. The official interpreter from Cotabato helped a little by translating some Spanish grammatical exercises into the Maguindanao language which some Tirurays who knew the latter retranslated into their own dialect.

This method of learning a language, however, was advantageous in a way unforeseen by them. Since the personal assistance of the Tirurays was indispensable for them to learn the local idiom, this close contact with the people helped to win the latter's trust and affection at the same time that the missionaries came to understand them better.

After about a month more and more Tirurays were visiting the mission with greater frequency. They were a simple people well disposed to receive the Christian gospel. They believed in a god who lived in heaven, whom they begged to take them into his company. They acknowledged that they did not have clear ideas about heaven and

they are convinced we know what happens up there. They enjoy listening to us every time we talk to them about God. They respect the statues of Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Virgin, etc. The thing we need is for the Muslims to depart from this side of the hills and the Tirurays will one by one come and live with us.²⁷

To all appearances, then, the Tirurays presented no problem to the Jesuits in their specifically spiritual task of conversion. Already possessed of some forms of external worship and holding on to a rudimentary faith in a god, it was relatively easy (if we may believe the Jesuit correspondence at this time) to purify their concepts and teach them the basic truths of the Catholic faith. The Jesuits, for their part, spared no efforts to prepare their catechetical lessons, using methods that are still found valid in today's modern educational systems. It was not strange, then, that given the docility of the people, Father Guerrico and the Jesuits who followed him, could teach them so much in so short a time.

27. Letter of Fr. Guerrico to the Jesuit Superior in Manila, Tamontaca, April of 1862: ATa, "Cartas inéditas," Box F-97.

An extract from one of his letters shows how he used to catechize the Tirurays:

We decided to teach them in their *rancherías* and everyday except Sunday I used to go in the afternoon to their small huts and where they were working and staying, . . . walking over the tree trunks they had felled. I used to catechize them, seasoning the lessons with some religious songs which they learned and loved. After they had finished planting and improving their houses, I called them together, forming them now in one group, now in another group. To make learning much easier, I used to divide, e.g., the *Our Father* into several phrases, assigning each child, say, one petition, and making each one master his part. I always ranged them in order, the first one being the child who had "Our Father, who art in heaven"; next, the one who had "hallowed be thy name"; and so on with the rest; in such wise that in that order they could recite the prayer both when I was present and when I was absent. The others learned by hearing or repeating after them. Now, since they did not know Spanish, I tried to translate the most necessary prayers into their tongue, and the most essential questions and answers of the catechism. These I divided among the members of each family or household, adding another to a family if they were few, so that they might recite the entire thing. The old men and women also were included. I taught each one the same thing and asked him only what he was responsible for, and each one gave his answer. If the family or household was numerous, with more persons than parts of the lesson, those who questioned were doubled. In that same way, with each one knowing his eight or twelve (more or less) questions and answers, the principal part of the catechism was learned. . .²⁸

This idyllic picture, however, must be tempered by the reality of Mindanao. With time, the Tiruray learned to trust and love the missionaries. But from the first, we can note in Father Vidal's letters a shadow that was to stalk the Jesuit missions in southern Mindanao. Many of the Tirurays feared to come down to the mission in the plain because of the Maguindanaos who demanded tribute and all kinds of dues from them, appropriated their harvest at will, carried off their women and children. With the coming of the Jesuits, the Maguindanaos threatened to kill them if they dared to befriend the foreign priests. False rumors spread around, confusing the

28. Fr Guerrico to the Jesuit novices at Veruela (Spain), no date: ATa, "Cartas ineditas," Box F-97; also, Vidal to his brother, Tamontaca, 16 February 1862: ATa, E-II-a-1.

simple hill people even more about the purpose of the mission. Thus it was that although the Tirurays acknowledged that the missionaries had done them nothing but good, that the missionaries were their defense against the Maguindanaos, they still hesitated to come to the mission and live near the Jesuits.

The missionaries had all they could do to try to dispel these fears. They showed the Tirurays the work of construction going on in the mission, as proof that they would be staying permanently and not leave again as before. They assured them, to allay their fears for their women and children, that no soldiers would be allowed to come or settle in the mission compound. But, to no avail.

The Jesuits, then, waited. In their army tents, first; in their bamboo and nipa mission house, next, until the natives of their own free will decided to settle near the mission. This people, Father Vidal wrote, "savage they may be, do not act lightly." They asked all kinds of questions, proposed difficulties, consulted their chiefs and elders. "In the meantime, they received with delight the gifts we gave them. It is not easy to transfer an entire tribe from one place to another even if it improved their lot and condition."²⁹

Finally, on 19 June 1862, the *Bandarra*, or chief of a Tiruray tribe, came with his retinue to speak with the Jesuits and the governor of Mindanao. Unfortunately, the latter was away and the Fathers scheduled a second meeting. Ten days afterwards, with the governor present, the second meeting was held. It was agreed that the Tirurays would be given residential lots around the mission house. Trees were felled and the land was levelled, as work on the new Tiruray town began. It was early in July 1862.

All of a sudden, everything came to a standstill. The Tirurays disappeared. The work stopped. The Jesuits, puzzled and uncertain what to do, resigned themselves to another period of waiting, sadly accepting that their first efforts to settle and christianize the Tirurays had failed. Later, they came to know that the Maguindanaos had threatened to kill the *Bandarra* and wipe out his whole family and clan, if he persisted in building a house near the Jesuit mission. In July 1862, however, the missionaries were in the dark about all this. All they did then, was to continue visiting the

29. Vidal to his brother, Tamontaca, 25 March 1862: ATa, E-II-a-1.

Tirurays in their hill farms, distribute medicine and food — and wait.³⁰

After what seemed to them an eternity of waiting, a sister of the Bandarra with her husband and four children called on the missionaries. After almost a full year of frustrations when not a single person had been won for Christ, Father Guerrico could not contain himself for joy, and he volunteered to baptize the youngest child, six months old: "... we could baptize this child, lest by some mishap he die without baptism." The parents answered that for the time being they would rather not, but they promised that within a few days they would return to stay definitively near the mission. Then, not only the baby, but all of his brothers and parents would be baptized.³¹

As they promised, the family came back. They were assigned a residential lot fronting the missionhouse, and the Jesuits helped them to start life anew. They then received instruction in the rudiments of the Christian faith. Satisfied that the entire family had the necessary disposition and knowledge for Christian baptism, the missionaries set 2 February 1863 for their reception into the Catholic Church. With the governor of Mindanao acting as their sponsor, the family was baptized and received the family name Tenorio, in a solemn ceremony which the Fathers prepared with all the splendor possible in that incipient mission. After almost two years of apparent failure, the first roots of the Christian church had finally struck deep in the heart of Maguindanao territory.³²

31. Ibid.

32. The family were baptized: Pedro (father), Ignacia (mother), and the children, Francisco Javier, José, María, Luis. José afterwards went to the *Escuela Normal* in Manila to study and become a teacher of his people. Later, he wrote a brief history of the Tirurays in his own Tiruray language, and a Jesuit priest translated it into Spanish: *Costumbres de los indios tirurayes escritas por José Tenorio (a) Sigayan* (Manila, 1892). Stuart A. Schlegel published an English version of this document in *Philippine Studies* 18 (1970): 364-428. Father Vidal wrote his brother on 26 February 1863, describing the solemn baptism of the Tenorio family: "... A las 9, 1/2 salía de su habitación acompañada del Capitán y los cuatro oficiales del destacamento, que habían de ser los padrinos, de la música, de gran número de soldados, y de muchos tirurayes que habían venido y estaban como fuera de sí oyendo la música por primera vez, y viendo a los otros bien vestidos, de modo que ignoraban lo que les pasaba, llegando hasta derramar lágrimas de ternura. Llegados a nuestra casa donde está la capilla provisional, se administró el sacramento de bautismo. . . en seguida el marido y la mujer recibieron el sacramento del matrimonio. . . Se les sirvió una buena comida, y se les está haciendo una casa." (ATA, E-II-a-1).