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Two Jesuit Letters from Mindanao

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The Unfinished Davao Mission

We shall never have an answer, but one might ask what would have become of the Mindanao church had the Jesuits not been recalled from their missions in 1899. As the nineteenth century was coming to a close, Fr. Juanmarti was writing from Tamontaka that in the southwestern coast unbaptized thousands were "waiting" for the missionary to resettle and Christianize them.

Southeastern Mindanao, as the following letter indicates, was in a not unsimilar situation. The Moros, like their co-religionists in the southwest, were desperately trying to hold on to their waning power. Without discounting the power of supernatural grace, one of the more potent incentives for the mountain tribes to accept Christian baptism was the protection promised them from the Moros.

We do not need to introduce the author of the letter, Fr. Saturnino Urios, the "apostle of Agusan." The first half of his missionary career was spent in the Agusan missions. After a short interim in the Bukidnon plateau, he was sent to the Davao mission. Here the Bonifacio uprising caught him. It was providential, for his presence prevented a bloody confrontation between the factions that wanted to take over when the Spanish authorities in Davao yielded their place to the Filipinos. The following is one of the letters written a few years before the Jesuits left Mindanao. It is dated 25 January 1895 at Oran, a new settlement not far from Cape San Agustin on the eastern coast of Davao gulf. The letter needs no further comments.

Text

Everything is in God's hands. We are not without pains and disappointments confirming our faith that our work is His, since the true seal of evangelical deeds is suffering. Our task here in these regions of the eastern rim is hard. If you do not think so, I refer to our problems.

Today is exactly the third day since, leaving Davao, we sailed up the river basins of Taomo and its tributaries, Tagapan and Katalonan, headed towards the mountains. Along these river banks we have the Guiangas, whose untamed and uncivilized traditions I have more than once already described to Your Reverence. These valiant heroes form the settlements of Oran, Garollano, and Guernica, the last the same one we established by the strong Davao river. They are coming en masse to our camp of Jerusalem, leaving the confusion of Babylon and the chaos of the pagan fields, attracted by our Christian teachings.

But, how puny our accomplishments! How limited what we can do! While we are on friendly terms with some, the others whom we have not yet reached at these hours wage war against us.

The Ata-as who, as the name signifies, live in the uplands, are the only pagans we have not yet contacted. And these who should not have opened their mouths lest they reveal their whereabouts are now making themselves known lest, doubtless, we condemn them into oblivion.

After we baptized them, the Samals were led away from us to the mountains of Tuganay. Their elevated peaks towards the north of the gulf form long ranges of very thick foliage. They were brought, I say, to the chief datu of Baybay, today called Alcira, situated at the mouth of the stretch which Samal, with the mainland on the north forming a wide and calm canal, opens for the boats along the shore of the mainland, or vessels selling their catch up the rivers Tagum and Iho. They took it badly that Mamayo had become a Christian, only because he had a second wife of an Ata-as family, herself, of course, an Ata-as.

God help me! What a scare we had the moment Mamayo escaped. Not knowing his reasons, his manner surprised us, of course. We were thinking he might have the power and the means to stir up that entire island of Samal which so peacefully and charmingly the district governor had helped us win over for the Church and for the State. It had cost me much labor, me, who in cold blood had resigned myself to it, as an explanation for the inconstancy of these people and which, furthermore in regards to the Ata-as, could have contributed to such an unexpected decision.

Well, the Ata-as received Mamayo in their forest dwellings. He had taken along with him more than 100 persons, injecting in those small brains that they had been conquered to bring them to resettle distant lands I know not where, as some evil-minded persons had made him to understand.

Blessed be the Lord Who tests us by bringing to us these scenes made up exquisitely with a dose of ignorance and a great amount of malicious scheming by the plotters of such exploits.

On the one hand, we were greatly pained. But, on the other, strongly encouraged that we would be pleasing God our Lord through our apostolic tasks, provided that in them the Cross befell us. I did not want to recount to Your Reverence anything in detail. We were not fortunate in our hope

we would all change the impressions which I noticed in the others so different from mine, such as what causes in one facing something for the first time, something always distinct from what the object produces in the other who has seen or experienced it various times.

Now that the escapees are returning, or better, have returned, I write Your Reverence to remove the bad effect the bad news might have caused you. I also have to report something more of the afflictions which have been remedied, God our Lord granting this governor, Mr. Tomasetti y Belmonte, such a success as his zeal and activity deserve and . . . by his subordinates, this gentleman distinguishing himself in most useful plans in the interests of our Mission for the good of the unfortunate newly resettled Ata-as.

One day in October, these Ata-as and some escaped Moros from Lasang and Matiao presented themselves to Unyanguren a year ago. With lances slung across their chest, they were led to the forests. The surprise it caused left the latter no defense and, like weak sheep, the newly baptized and peaceful inhabitants followed the vicious. Luck made them turn back in the middle of their trail, and they are back. They have been till now living peacefully and contentedly.

Others went to the jail and tried to instigate a riot . . . "At this time, we are fine, the missionaries consolidating daily life through frequent visits to the new Christian settlements and assigning them teachers whom we choose among the better ones we find among the veteran Christians.

Your Reverence will ask who the Ata-as are who cause so much anxiety. Fr. Superior, the Ata-as are pagans in the last and most degraded rung and condition of those who retreat into the back of the thick forest of Mindanao—people cut off from all social contact, all of them forming small ranches of their closest kinsfolk; people whom resettled pagans deceive in their own way, fooling them with a thousand lies and exaggerations that they may never come down to the lowlands and be within our range; people suspicious and ill affected like the hyena guarding its cubs, because of the senseless or unequal skirmishes with resettled pagans, the poor Ata-as ending up by losing the children kidnapped by the former who dastardly attack them, or, worse, are killed in defense of their unfortunate children. Where does Your Reverence think the Moros supply themselves for their commerce in human goods in these wide land, these ranges and long rivers . . . except from the Ata-as family?

Well, we extended our missions till we reached the Ata-as, who eagerly await us. Fr. Superior of my heart, the pagan's simplicity is a guarantee of the ease with which we can win him over to the good. Experience acquired from twenty full years in the missions has allowed me to see everything concerning the attitude, temperament, and manners with which the unbaptized in our land of Mindanao confronts us to bring about his own good. I do say to you in my age that the simplicity, the openness, the sincerity of the unschooled pagan is the best thing a missionary can hope for. When

their hearts are filled with affections and their heads no less filled with ideas, affections born of their contact with bad people, and concepts either carried out in deeds, or falsely picked up from inanities and myths recounted by them; they become vicious despots and tyrants. On my word, they affirm seeing stars at midday rather than lay aside the idea, or remove from their heart the evil thought they nourish there.

Here in Davao where so much is done with full planning in the midst of Moros, Guiangas, and Bagobos, we walk the bitter path in order to sow the good seed. But in our dealings with them, the simple Tagacaolo, the open-hearted Calagan, the kindly Bilaan, and the rustic Manobo provide us with moments of joy just from the simple task we accepted to go see and meet them. They are almost inclined towards us.

All the pagans are aware of the goodness of the spirit of the gospel teaching. We find them all enchanted and totally in admiration as they listen to the story of paradise, of God's goodness in saving us from original sin through the passion of Jesus Christ who wins for us a heaven where nothing takes place except to contemplate in joy the divine essence. But the vicious pagan who has to abandon his concubines, leave off killing, and becoming drunk once he declares himself our friend, apologizes for a tale he willingly tells us lest he accept something or do something of the things we have told him.

The simple, those who are just ignorant—once this is remedied, they become attached to us, follow us up to the vestibule of the church, and even accept with joy the lesson of the Cross, signing themselves with it.

Now then, how does one understand what the Ata-as' disposition as I mentioned before, and color those other things pink which form pagans like the Ata-as? "Well, just as in the old world, it is known and understood that an ignorant people is stuff which takes all shapes imposed on them, like it or not, if one knows how to deceive. The wiles the Ata-as usually perpetrate originate from other shrewd individuals who cast the stone with a hidden hand.

The crafty Guiangas and Bagobos incite the Ata-as among themselves or against others in order to gather the booty and kill them at the end. The Moros embroil Mandayas and Mansakas with the Ata-as, the former getting the spoils, slaves they will kidnap in inhuman raids to sell later to the old Christians who buy them with their flour bags, and raise the alarm the day of the raid to our scandal.

Does Your Reverence see how sad and pitiful this ethnographic situation is? You must know I am writing you this so that Your Reverence may make it known to all of Ours. I am sure that this knowledge would have to serve as norm and guide in the actuations of the missionary of these lands. If not, consider, Your Reverence, what is now happening to us in Iho and Salug rivers, the two major sectors we have here among so much good land there is.

Resting peacefully from evening to daylight, continuing the grand enterprise of converting such beautiful and extensive valleys as we tried to resettle the banks of Iho with settlements of Mandayas; Mandayas, too, the Tagum and Salug rivers—the whole world went back to the mountains at dawn of the following day, burning fields, devastating plains, Moros mixing it up with Mandayas, Mandayas with Ata-as, these with everyone else—war with Spain.

Later we shall find out the motives and we shall bring light into the darkness . . .

Know that while still pagans because before baptizing them we made them establish a settlement after frequent visits for two years by the missionary.

But I have been too prolix. . . .

The Return of the Jesuits to Balingasag

When Aguinaldo's emissaries arrived in northern Mindanao after the fall of the Spanish navy in Cavite, one of their first acts was to concentrate the Jesuit and Benedictine missionaries and confiscate the funds in the churches. Fr. Heras, local superior in the Tagoloan mission, was imprisoned in Cagayan de Oro, but he was released shortly before the Americans landed. As soon as peace came, he was ordered back to his mission. This letter is his first report from Balingasag to the Provincial in Spain.

Text

Balingasag, 13 April 1901

As I was saying in my last letter to Your Reverence, Fr. Superior told me to come back and reopen the Tagoloan Mission. We thus took the boat in Surigao, Fr. Jose Espana, Bro. Beamonte, and myself, at the beginning of this year. By orders of whoever was in command of the boat, we went ashore at Cagayan.

Here we found out we could exercise the ministry in only three towns, Tagoloan, Jasaan, and Balingasag. The rest of this wide mission was still in the hands of the insurgents. A small boat of the Americans brought us to the shore of Tagoloan.

What a pleasant reception was given by the people here, my dear Father! Indeed, the more spontaneous and unplanned, the more beautiful it was! When we landed, some children and women were at the beach. They

approached us out of curiosity. Hardly had they seen me than they exclaim, "Fr. Heras!" Instantly, fully excited, they leave, call the others, run to the town, and shouting, announce at all corners, "The Fathers are here, the Fathers have returned!" Shortly afterwards, the principales come out to meet us, leading spirited horses for us. We refused such a gallant gesture; rather, on foot, together in orderly procession, which by the minute grew longer, we headed for the town.

On reaching there, we were surprised to find the Americans staying in the *convento* and the church. Thereupon I asked the commanding officer for these buildings. But, despite my requests and the recommendation we had with us from the commander of Manila, Mr. MacArthur, and of Mindanao, Mr. Kolbe, the officer refused to give up the idea of occupying them. We therefore told the Tagoloans we were proceeding elsewhere. Alarmed at such an unexpected decision, the Tagoloanons turned to the Colonel who, to quiet them, offered to abandon the church if they looked for lodging for the troops.

Meantime, we stayed in a private house which they offered to us, and, three days later, not one soldier remained in the church. When we had cleaned and refurbished it, we reconsecrated it solemnly on Quinquagesima Sunday. So many came to the town on learning of our arrival that the Americans were pleasantly surprised at the influence we had over the people. The Colonel lost no time offering us half of the convento. After a few days, he returned the other half to us, and left.

We then started the Lenten missions. Fr. Espana left for the town of Agusan where he was very well received, and I went to Santa Ana. I found there only six men in town, besides those who made up the American detachment. But as soon as word went around of my coming, they began to emerge from their hide-aways, full of trust. In three days hardly anyone was away from the town.

I began performing my ministry, a veritable blessing of God! there were many children's baptisms, some sufficiently grown up; many weddings of the unmarried or the badly married; and reception of the sacraments of confession and communion was very frequent and noteworthy. I was attacked by a fit of fevers finally and had to return to Tagoloan, where I celebrated the feast of the Glorious Patriarch, St. Joseph.

On being cured, I left for Villanueva, Bubuntugan, and Jasaan. In all places I was welcomed with the same demonstrations of love and trust. I shall only say that they offer so many nice gifts that we have an oversupply of everything. They are requesting so many Masses from us, we alone cannot celebrate them all.

We have not taken the share of the church dues pertaining to us, and yet, God gives us more than we need. We are free from any temporal worry. We lead a totally apostolic life, like our old fathers in Japan: without parishes, we are concerned only about spiritual ministries, preaching, and the

administration of the holy sacraments wherever we go. All the towns would want us to stay, but this is impossible, for we are only two. We are, therefore, forced to move from town to town, without remaining in any place for a long time.

The people from the mountains are now asking when we will go to visit them. Poor Bukidnons! The revolution was for them a destructive typhoon. How it will cost to rebuild!

Now we can visit all the towns of the Mission, since no insurgent has remained who has not presented himself. What stories the peaceful people recount of those days when the new conquerors advanced. As these advanced, so the towns became deserted. The insurgents fled to the mountain, forcing the civilians to do the same. Mothers carrying infants on their shoulders, the men, loaded with a few provisions, running from one site to another, fearful of the Americans, passing days and nights under the sun and the sky, suffering incredibly. In some settlements, more than 2,000 of these unfortunate refugees came together. But, finally, almost in despair, they decided to go to Jasaan, and there, for their own good, they were one night surprised by the Americans who treated them humanely, and sent them to their towns.

This was the situation, Reverend Father, when we arrived, as these people say, like angels descending from heaven, "Thank God," one of the more educated and sufficiently wealthy here exclaimed, "thank God that we shall no longer die like dogs, for the Fathers are coming back to us!"

Those who apprehended and caused so much suffering to us have received harsh retribution from God, as everyone sees and admits. The principal plotters of the imprisonment of the Fathers in northern Mindanao died at the assassins' hands. He who was mainly responsible for the imprisonment of those of us in Misamis District, and was our jail keeper, has marched before my eyes a prisoner of the Americans. A frightful epidemic has consumed the cattle and the carabaos of the chief enemies of these people and of us, and there is no one who does not consider it as God's punishment for the imprisonment of the priests. An insurgent leader had urged the people of Tagoloan to expel us, but, wounded by the Americans, he does not hope to live. Some individuals here still remain who look on us with hostility. But, what else to expect? What unity can there be between the children of darkness and those of the light?

I am constantly asking St. Joseph to send many to the novitiate, especially priests that they may come to help us as soon as possible.