

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Licenciado Don Balthazar Banta

Luciano P.R. Santiago

Philippine Studies vol. 38, no. 3 (1990): 384–387

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Licenciado Don Balthazar Banta

LUCIANO P. R. SANTIAGO

Banta or Vanta was born of a humble family of Pampanga, most probably on the feast of Three Kings, 6 January 1702.¹ It is noteworthy that he was named after the dark-skinned King Balthazar with whom Indios probably tended to identify themselves. His surname means "threat" in the vernacular, whereas in Malay and Bahasa Indonesia, it signifies "protest" or "dispute."² If his forbears were threatening or disputatious as suggested by their patronymic, Banta's long life proves the antithesis of these attributes.

It is not known where he earned his baccalaureate and licentiate degrees in arts, but he evidently worked as a *capista* or domestic in exchange for his higher education. He was first granted the first tonsure and minor orders by Bishop Sebastián Foronda, OSA of Cebu on 22 May 1724 in Manila, which was then a vacant see.³ His elevation to the priesthood, however, was apparently delayed by the cathedral chapter because of his poverty until he could present a priestly means of income. On the other hand, he could have been ordained with the title of worker like the other native priests. Be that as it may, he had been in the minor orders for three years when by a providential turn of events, a chaplaincy became available to him. It was, interestingly enough, the very first *capellania de misas* to be founded by Indios for an Indio cleric.⁴

On 4 November 1721, two days after All Soul's Day, the three Cutngán sisters (their surname means "to request") of Apalit, Pam-

1. Archivo General de Indias (AFI), "Clerecía del Abpdo. de Manila" (1760) *Fil. leg.* 304; Archives of the Archdiocese of Manila (AAM). *Catalogos del Clero Secular* (1762).

2. Paraluman S. Aspillera, *A Common Vocabulary for Malay-Pilipino-Bahasa Indonesia* (Quezon City: UP Institute of Asian Studies, 1964), p. 49.

3. AAM, *Libro de Gobierno Eclesiastico* (LGE)(1737-42) doc. 56.

4. AAM, "Año de 1727. Capellania de Missas fundada a favor de Licenciado Don Balthazar Vanta," *Capellarias de Missas* (CM) (1700-1913) B.

panga had offered one hundred *cabalitas* of their hereditary lands, including fishponds in the plains and hills of a site called *Pancayari*, to form a capellanía. Doña Maria Cutngán and Doña María Guadalupe, both widows, and Doña Augustina, a spinster, had chosen Don Francisco Valerio of Mexico, Pampanga as its chaplain-to-be, because of the "many good deeds" he had done for them. One of the witnesses of this foundation was Don Bernardo Garzia Baluyot who was probably a brother of B.D. Alfonso Baluyot y Garzia, the first Indio chaplain. A student seminarian of the University of Sto. Tomás, Valerio had petitioned for the erection of the capellanía on 19 April 1723 so that he could eventually be ordained with its title. The land claims of the foundation were scrutinized for more than a year and a half up to December 1724. However, Valerio apparently failed to follow up the process from this point on. As it had turned out, he had been wavering in his vocation, until finally on 23 July 1727, he gave up the capellanía because "God Our Lord was pleased to call me in another way," that is, through the sacrament of matrimony. He eventually married a *prinzipala* of Bacolor. It is a tribute to Valerio's sense of justice, however, that he took care to recommend the needy but worthy Banta to replace him in this capellanía. With unfailing generosity, Doña Maria Guadalupe and Doña Maria Cutngan (Doña Augustina had died in the meantime) assented to this new arrangement on 29 July together with their heirs, Don Juan Manutos, Doña Maria Guadalupe's bachelor son who left for New Spain, and Doña Cathalina Cutngán and Don Andrés Mariano de los Santos, children of Doña Maria Cutngán.⁵

Banta, who was now a licentiate, asked the governor-general as vice royal patron to approve the transfer on 20 September 1727 so that he could be ordained to the priesthood with the title of *capellan*. The chief executive gave his approval on 15 November and the following day in Manila, the Cutngán sisters founded their capellania anew in favor of Banta. One of their witnesses this time was B.D. Matheo Gaña, a Pampango subdeacon. The foundresses named the cathedral chapter, also called the ecclesiastical *cabildo*, as the capellanía's patron *in perpetuum*, and charged Banta with the obligation to offer twelve Masses annually for the blessed souls in Purgatory. They further stipulated that after Banta's death, first preference for succession should be given to their nearest male relative who would be interested in the Holy Orders. But if none were available, the foundation should pass to the closest eligible relative of Banta himself. If still none of them was interested, it should be granted to any Pampango seminarian

5. Ibid.

who was closest to ordination to the priesthood. But whether relatives or not of the foundresses or of Banta, the future chaplains should preferably be the poor, virtuous and competent aspirants—apparently referring to the qualities of first chaplain himself.⁶

Banta submitted the documents to the cathedral chapter for approval on 22 November 1727 expressing the hope that he would be granted the title as well as the canonical collation with it. Noting Banta's poverty, the ecclesiastical fiscal, B.D. Antonio Gil Adriano, recommended a careful assessment of the total value of its lands to ensure that it could adequately support the applicant. However, a year passed without the chapter acting on this recommendation. In the meantime the new Archbishop Bermudes arrived in July 1728 and scheduled ordinations for the December Ember Days. On 5 November 1728, Banta repeated his previous request. He was then serving at the Manila Cathedral, so that the chapter could better observe and evaluate his worthiness and competence. A reexamination of the dimensions of the estate in question was now ordered. In the same month, a handsome map was drawn of it and it was found to be even bigger than the area stated in the documents. Nevertheless, the chaplaincy was not yet approved and Banta missed the ordinations of the following month.

Perhaps the officials were dragging their feet because this was the first time that a brown man from the masses was determined to pursue his vocation to the Holy Orders. More than a year after Banta's second request, the process had not been concluded. After the mourning period over the archbishop's death, the patient Banta firmly reiterated his petition to the chapter for the third time on 15 February 1730 to become a chaplain so that he could be promoted to the priesthood. He had languished in minor orders for almost six years! At last, the chapter, through its Dean, Doctor Don Manuel Antonio de Ocio y Ocampo (who was soon to be nominated bishop of Cebu), formally erected his capellanía and granted him its title on 19 April 1730. He was notified of this long overdue decision the following day and he received the collation as chaplain from Dr. Don Juan de la Fuente Yepes, Chantre of the cathedral.⁷ Most probably, he was ordained by Bishop Herrera of Nueva Segovia in Vigan later in the same year.

It appears that his first and last assignment was the coadjutorship of San Roque, Cavite. For more than fifty years, it was his humble place in the sun for the rest of his long life. In 1738, he was joined there by the second Indio plebeian priest, B.D. Antonio de la As-

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

sumpcion, as the priest-sacristan. They served under their Spanish contemporary D.D. Vizente Mauleon y Peralta (1705-82) who became the proprietary parish priest of San Roque in 1753.⁸

On 22 January 1740, Archbishop Juan Angel Rodríguez, O.S.T. renewed Banta's license to celebrate Masses for a year. Eleven years later, however, there was no longer any doubt about the worthiness and competence of the first Filipino plebeian priest. On 16 November 1751, Archbishop Pedro Martines de Arizala, O.F.M. granted him the privileges to hear confessions and say Masses in the parishes of Cavite for the duration of his coadjutorship in San Roque. He maintained these privileges for the rest of his priestly life. They were successively reaffirmed by Archbishop Manuel Antonio Rojo on 19 March 1761 and by Archbishop Basilio Sancho de Santos Justa y Rufina, CCSP on 1 October 1772. The Archbishop further extended it to the whole archdiocese "for a period of time at the will of His Grace." In the clergy lists of 1760 and 1762, Banta was properly classified as an *Indio Pampango legitimo*, not a *prinzipal* like most of the others.

He was, of course, noted to be fluent in both Tagalog and Pampango. In the more detailed list of 1776, he was described in awe as "of venerable age, of virtuous life and conduct and of well-known competence" (*de edad madura, de aprobada vida y costumbres y de conocida suficiencia*).⁹

He celebrated his golden jubilee as a priest quietly in 1780. By this time, he had witnessed the various civil and ecclesiastical crises in the colony including the British Occupation (1762-64) and the secularization of the parishes by Archbishop Sancho starting in 1768. He appears as the most venerable member of the Manila clergy in its extant roster of 1782. His age then was approximated as 82. In this document, the previous description of his long life was glowingly repeated as "virtuous and of well known competence" (*probada vida y conocida suficiencia*).¹⁰ This was a moving encomium for the first Filipino priest from the masses. He was called to his eternal rest between 1784-87 (the official book of Archbishop Sancho is missing for these years).

Banta was probably the godfather or uncle of the second B.D. Balthazar Banta (born in 1757), a long-time coadjutor of Sta. Cruz, Manila who founded a valuable capellanía in the early nineteenth century.¹¹

8. AAM. LGE (1737-42) docs. 6 to 12; (1753-55) f. 93v.

9. Ibid. (1737-42) doc. 349; (1751-52) doc. 159; (1759-64) f. 98; (1772-83) f. 41; CCS (1762); AGI. "Clerecía (1760)."

10. Salvador Escoto & John Schumacher, "Filipino Priests of the Archdiocese of Manila, 1782." *Philippine Studies* 24 (1976): 330-43.

11. Ibid.; AAM, "Capellanía fundada por el Presbitero Don Balthazar Banta," CM (1853-54) A.