

philippine studies

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

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Philippine Studies vol. 35, no. 3 (1987) 348–356

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Text and Documents

Demythologizing the Papal Bull "Inter Caetera"

WILLIAM HENRY SCOTT

In the Philippine school system, Spanish *conquistadores* are usually introduced onto the stage of Philippine history following a curtain-raiser called "*Inter Caetera*." This is presented as a papal bull in which Alexander VI divides the world into two open hunting grounds for the conquest of non-Christian peoples by two competing Iberian monarchies – or, as professional historians are aware, two papal bulls, or perhaps two versions of the same bull, one dated 3 May 1493 and the other 4 May. The prominent place given the bull in standard history texts presupposes that it played some significant part in history, that it was obeyed by monarchs and therefore affected the course of events. This presumption, in turn, is part of a larger one – namely, the concept that European monarchs were truthful, law-abiding members of a civilized Christendom who respected international treaties, held legal systems inviolable, and valued allegiance to popes more highly than national interests.

In fact, no such international scruples or papal hegemony existed. Holy Roman Emperor Charles V sent an expedition to the Philippines two years after he had sold all claim to the islands to the Portuguese crown, and when his son Philip actually occupied the archipelago, he did so not because any pope gave him permission but because the Portuguese could not prevent it. The two

bulls themselves carry deliberately falsified dates, and one of them isn't really a bull at all but a secret apostolic brief. These errors would be the sort of trivia which interest nobody but historians were they not found in the very cradle of Filipino historical consciousness. There, they inevitably distort the student's developing view of the world by projecting images which are sheer illusions. The raw facts might better prepare him to understand his people's involvement in the true events and real forces of world history – past, present and future.

The facts have been available since 1944 when Manuel Giménez Fernández published a meticulous study, "Nuevas consideraciones sobre la historia y sentido de las letras alejandrinas de 1493 referentes a las Indias" in the Seville *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*.¹ The new considerations were based on a careful collation of the correspondence which passed between Rome and the Spanish court in connection with the bull, much of it previously unknown or ignored, in remote archives and Vatican registers. The habit of Vatican clerks of jotting down the dates when they entered authenticated documents, for example, or the fact that secretarial signatures changed every trimester, establishes the true dates of the *Inter Caetera*. Details like the length of time it took royal mail to be delivered were also essential for reconstructing the story – twelve days between Barcelona and Seville, for instance, or ten days by special delivery costing thirty ducats, and five days to Rome if some Mediterranean corsair happened to be available. To review the full display of this correspondence in chronological sequence reveals a diplomatic drama playacted by two machiavellian protagonists pursuing personal interests. If good theater calls for romance, suspense and character flaws in high places, *Inter Caetera* was high drama indeed.

THE HISTORY OF THE BULL

The story really begins with an earlier *Inter Caetera* which had been granted Portugal in 1456 by Alexander VI's uncle, Pope Calixto III, the latest of a series of bulls which gave papal blessing

1. Manuel Giménez Fernández, "Las Bulas alejandrinas de 1493 referentes a las Indias," *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* Vol. 1 (Sevilla, 1944), pp. 171-430

to the simple political fact that Portugal was preeminent in navigational progress. It sanctified Portuguese exploration and occupation of islands and ports down the African coast "as far as the Indies" (*usque ad Indos*) — that is, Asia — and threatened any challengers with excommunication. Similarly, after the 1479 Treaty of Alcobas ended Spain's unsuccessful attempt to do so, Sixto IV's *Aeterni Regis* of 1481 granted what had already been decided by naval artillery — Portuguese occupation of Atlantic islands like the Azores, Madeiras and Cape Verdes — and sanctioned all future such discoveries "in the Ocean Seas" (*in mari oceano*), the waters believed to surround the Eurasian land mass. The question of eastern and western sea routes had not yet become an issue. European cosmographers, unaware of the existence of the American continents, did not doubt that the same waters washed the eastern shores of Asia and the west coast of Europe. Thus when Ferdinand V sent Columbus into those waters to reach the Indies, he was breaking the oath he had sworn at Alcocobas and defying papal excommunication.

On 17 April 1492, Christopher Columbus signed a commercial contract with *los Reyes Católicos* Ferdinand and Isabel, driving a hard bargain. He demanded the title of Admiral in the lands and waters to be discovered, together with the privileges traditionally reserved to the Enríquez family of Castile (Ferdinand's maternal kin), and the office of viceroy for himself and his heirs; 10 percent of the profits to be realized off any pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices or other goods acquired; and the right to invest one-eighth the initial capital with a corresponding portion of the interest accruing. Nothing was said about any missionary motives nor did the expedition carry a chaplain, though six of the ten "Indian" youths brought back were baptized in Spain. Columbus also brought back the businesslike suggestion that, in the disappointing absence of any new gold mines, a slave trade might be instituted. The pious Queen Isabel sent the boys back to their homeland, however, and on her deathbed added a codicil to her will disallowing any such traffic to her heirs.

Columbus returned from what he thought until his dying day were the offshore islands of Japan and the Khanate of Cathay on 4 March 1493, and anchored in the Tagus River off Lisbon. He announced his presence to Portuguese King John II, who told him that his discoveries obviously belonged to Portugal by virtue

of the Treaty of Alcocobas and the bull *Aeterni Regis*, which Columbus reported to Ferdinand in Barcelona by sea mail from Palos. Then he proceeded up the Guadalquivir River to Seville to await instructions from Ferdinand, which soon arrived telling him to come as quickly as possible but to start preparations for the return voyage before he left. Ferdinand then instructed his procurators in Rome, Bishops Bernardino López de Carvajal and Juan Ruiz de Medina, to start working for papal favors to remove the threat of excommunication posed by *Aeterni Regis* and recognize Spain's rights to the new discoveries, whatever and wherever they might be. The procurators responded with a request for more details, but of course Ferdinand didn't know what to tell them until he talked to Columbus. So he instructed them to keep the proceedings secret and by all means forestall the departure of the congratulatory embassy the Pope proposed.

As it happened, the Pope was just at that moment in need of favors himself. Born a Spaniard – Rodrigo Lanzol y Borja (Borgia) – he was already beholden to the Spanish crown for his sixteen-year-old son Cesare's appointment as Archbishop of Valencia. Now he was trying to carve out an Italian fief for his eldest son Giovanni, Duke of Gandia, and had just annulled his daughter Lucrezia's marriage to her Spanish husband to make a better match with Milanese Giovanni de Pesaro of the Sforza family. His main opponent was Ferrante of Naples, Ferdinand's cousin and brother-in-law. In hopes of obtaining Ferdinand's neutrality, he had proposed Giovanni's marriage to his half-brother Pier Luigi's widow, Ferdinand's cousin Marfa Enríquez. But in March, Ferrante kept writing Ferdinand about Alexander's pretensions in harsh terms, so on the 28th Juan López of the papal cabinet wrote a defense of the Pope to his uncle Enrique Enríquez, elder brother of Ferdinand's mother. López was also a Spaniard, a close confidant of the Pope, and the Vatican *Datarío*, or "dispatcher" who officially signed and dated all papal privileges. His letter included the request that, "since His Holiness has decided on the departure of the Illustrious Duke of Gandia, your son (son-in-law), your lordship try to have him received, treated and benefitted by their Highnesses as he who sends him is expecting and as he merits; and I am your lordship's to order and command." And he closed, "Whatever your lordship orders will be done."²

2. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

Juan López's letter must have reached Barcelona in the middle of April, and so did Columbus, for Ferdinand's formal petition for papal favor was dated on the 18th. Alexander's response was the document whose opening two words were *Inter caetera* dated 3 May, but actually already copied into the archival Regesta Vaticana before the end of April. It was produced by first papal secretary Ludovicus Podocatharus, chief of the papal cabinet (*Camera Apostolica*), and was an apostolic letter, not a papal bull, and so did not pass through the public chancery (*Cancellaria Apostolica*). It was referred to as one of three letters (*tertium breve*) when it was sent to Ambassador Francisco de Spratz in Barcelona on 18 May for delivery to the King. It was also top secret. Nobody handled it but members of the Pope's private staff, and a reason is not hard to surmise. The most powerful cardinal in the chancery was Portuguese Jorge da Costa, King John's personal agent and the *papabile* whom Rodrigo Borgia outbid during the simoniacal election of August 1492. It was dispatched a few days after license arrived in Rome for the corsair Bernardo de Villamarín to fetch bridegroom Giovanni, surely no coincidence. But Bernardo himself did not appear. "The noble Duke of Gandia, our beloved son," the Pope told Spratz, "is constantly waiting for him." And the wedding did not actually take place until August, a delay perhaps reflecting royal displeasure with the first version of the *Inter Caetera*.

This original *Inter Caetera* had still not reached Barcelona when Portuguese ambassador Ruy de Sande arrived in the middle of May with claims to the Indies which Ferdinand could not refute. When another week passed with no word from Rome, he decided he could wait no longer. Accordingly, on 23 May he signed a dozen dispatches to prepare a second expedition, "both to rule and possess the said islands and continent which are in the Ocean Sea in the region of the Indies, of which possession has been taken in our name, and to discover others."³ Five days later he reconfirmed Columbus' titles with definition of where they were to hold force. "We have drawn a boundary which passes from the islands of the Azores to those of Cape Verde, north to south from pole to pole, such that everything which is found

3. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

to the west of the said line is ours and belongs to us."⁴ Then, lest there by any doubt about his authority, he had canonist Rodrigo Maldonado add a preamble which expounded his Divine Rights:

Naturally, wise men have said that kings are the head of the realm . . . and so great is the said power of kings that they hold all laws and rights of their own authority, because they receive this not from men but from God, whose place they take in temporal affairs.⁵

Armed with these heady documents, Columbus left for Seville on 28 May. But that night a royal courier overtook him, probably in Lérida, with an urgent letter from the King. The long-awaited document had arrived after Columbus' departure, and the king was enclosing a translation. The pope says he has learned that the Spanish monarchs, out of personal zeal to extend the Catholic faith to remote lands, sent Christopher Columbus sailing into the Ocean Sea "through western waters towards the Indies," where he discovered certain unknown lands and islands. Therefore, to encourage an enterprise "so pleasing to immortal God," the pope is hereby granting them those lands and ordering them to send missionaries out to convert their inhabitants. The pertinent passage reads as follows:

In order that with greater readiness and heartiness you enter upon an undertaking of so lofty a character as has been entrusted to you by the graciousness of our apostolic favor, we, moved thereunto by our own accord, not at your instance nor the request of anyone else in your regard, but of our own sole largess and certain knowledge as well as in the fullness of our apostolic power, by the authority of almighty God conferred upon us in blessed Peter and of the vicarship of Jesus Christ which we hold on earth, do by tenor of these presents give, grant, and assign forever to you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, all and singular the aforesaid countries and islands thus unknown and hitherto discovered by your envoys and to be discovered hereafter, providing however they at no time have been in the actual temporal possession of any Christian owner, together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places, and towns as well as all rights, jurisdictions, and appurtenances of the same wherever they may be found. Moreover we invest you and your aforementioned heirs and successors with them, and make, appoint, and

4. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

depute you owners of them with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of very kind, with this proviso, however, that by this gift, grant, assignment, and investiture of ours no right conferred on any Christian prince is hereby to be understood as withdrawn or to be withdrawn. Moreover we command you in virtue of holy obedience, that, employing all due diligence in the premises, as you promise – nor do we doubt your compliance therewith to the best of your loyalty and royal greatness of spirit – you send to the aforesaid countries and islands worthy, God-fearing, learned, skilled, and experienced men in order to instruct the aforesaid inhabitants and dwellers therein in the Catholic faith, and train them in good morals.⁶

The document as received was unacceptable to Ferdinand for two reasons. In the first place, it was a private communication, not a public proclamation; and in the second, it neither defined the territory to which he could lay claim with papal sanction nor delimited Portugal's. He had already made his own solution to this latter problem by drawing that dividing line down the middle of the Ocean Sea, though drawing it through the Azores was a bit of a blunder. King John was claiming that the new discoveries actually lay in the far western Azores, and Columbus had stubbornly refused to divulge the true distance, even to Ferdinand. Moreover, Portugal had fought for those islands in 1479 and might be prepared to do so again. Columbus realized all this and therefore, studying the *Inter Caetera* carefully that night, he drew up a new line 100 leagues to the west of the Azores, and sent it back to Ferdinand the next day. Meanwhile, that masterful hyperbole about Ferdinand's missionary zeal suggested a new course of action, and the king "obeyed" immediately. That same day he chose one of his faithful agents, Fray Bernal Boil, to organize a mission.

On 2 June he sent special ambassador Diego López de Haro to Rome with a letter announcing the mission, and on 8 June he ordered the Benedictines of Monserrat to provide a replacement for Fray Bernal as vicar of the religious of San Francisco de Paul in Barcelona. On the same date he dispatched the Latin outline of what would become the papal bull *Piis Fidelium* of 25 June.

6. Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898*, Vol. 1 (Cleveland, 1903), pp. 100-1.

which licensed the missioners and authorized Ferdinand to select them. López de Haro arrived on the 12th just in time for Lucrezia Borgia's wedding with Giovanni Sforza, following which he had a private interview with the pope and brusquely announced Ferdinand's solidarity with his cousin Ferrante. (Alexander immediately began negotiations for a match between his son Giuffre and Ferrante's granddaughter Sancha de Aragon.) On the 19th, Procurator Carvajal delivered a pompous Latin discourse at a public reception in the Vatican, giving equal praise to the private and public virtues of the Pope and the loyalty, submission and devotion of the Spanish monarchs whose Christian zeal had led to the discovery of new lands which would soon believe in Christ, "thanks to the royal envoys who are just on the point of departing for them."⁷ The *Inter Caetera* was revised in accordance with Spanish requirements the next week, signed and sealed as a papal bull on the 28th, and dated "May 4." But it did not reach Barcelona until 3 August, when it was delivered together with other wedding gifts befitting a Renaissance prince by Giovanni Borgia, Duke of Gandia.

The original *Inter Caetera* disappeared into the Archives of the Indies in Simancas, where it remained unknown until Guillermo Berchet published a copy from the Regesta Vaticana in his 1892 *Raccolta dei Fonti italiane de la Scoperta del Nuovo Mundo* (*Collection of Italian Sources on the Discovery of the New World*). But it is repeated verbatim in the revised version with three changes. One of these is the insertion (presumably by Columbus himself) of a reference to him as "a man assuredly worthy and of the highest recommendations," and another is the removal (probably by jurist Rodrigo Maldonado) of the feudal-sounding expression, "We *invest* you and your aforementioned heirs." The significant change, of course, is the addition of the so-called Papal Line of Demarcation, not once but twice, the second time in the following provocative passage:

Under penalty of excommunication *late sententie* to be incurred *ipso facto*, should any one thus contravene, we strictly forbid all persons of whatsoever ranks, even imperial and royal, or of whatsoever estate, degree, order, or condition, to dare, without your special permit or that

7. Fernández. "Las Bulas alejandrinas," p. 96.

of your aforesaid heirs and successors, to go, as charged, for the purpose of trade or any other reason to the islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered, towards the west and south, by drawing and establishing a line from the Arctic pole to the Antarctic pole, no matter whether the mainlands and islands found and to be found lie in the direction of India or towards any other quarter whatsoever, the said line to the west and south to be distant one hundred leagues from any of the islands commonly known as the Azores and Cabo Verde, the apostolic constitutions and ordinances and other decrees whatsoever to the contrary notwithstanding.⁸

CONCLUSION

This, then, is the document which is the object of the myth which appears in Philippine history texts that the papal bull *Inter Caetera* was promulgated by a disinterested Christian arbiter to prevent war between Spain and Portugal. The fact is that, far from preventing war, *Inter Caetera* abrogated a treaty which had already ended one. That another war was avoided after Columbus left on his second voyage was due to pragmatic compromise between the two states involved, not by arbitration by any third party. The treaty of Tordesillas signed on 7 June 1494 moved Columbus' line of demarcation 270 leagues farther west, thus preserving to Spain her new discoveries while guaranteeing to Portugal control of the Atlantic islands flanking her sea route to India. And the treaty contained a specific clause rejecting any appeal to Rome — namely, that after swearing the oath, neither party would seek “absolution or relaxation of it from our very holy Father, or from any other Legate or Prelate who could give it, nor to make use of it if they give it of their own volition.”⁹

8. Blair and Robertson, *Philippine Islands*, p. 110.

9. Fernández, “Las Bulas alejandrinas,” p. 294.