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Peñafrancia Revisited

Vitaliano R. Gorospe, S.J.



One of the ongoing and growing interests and concerns for a Filipino Christian is *Filipino popular religiosity*, manifested in different popular Filipino religious devotions to Hesus Nazareno or Santo Niño or Mahal na Birhen and found in varying cultural and regional contexts like the *Pasyon* or *Sinakulo*, *Sinulog* or *Ati-Atihan*, *Nuestra Señora de Antipolo* or *Peñafrancia*. There are the recent so-called “miraculous” events of the “dancing sun” at the Carmel Church of Mary Mediatrix of All Grace in Lipa or the “tears of blood” shed by Our Lady’s statue and her apparitions in Barangay San Antonio, Agoo, La Union which attracted millions of Filipinos. One of the most popular Filipino devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary which has withstood the test of almost three centuries is *Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia*. The first part of this article concerns the history and devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia, its Spanish and Bicol origins. The second part contains the reflections of one pilgrim about the cultural, religious and pastoral aspects of the Peñafrancia devotion from a Filipino Christian perspective. Why do Bicolanos who have migrated to Manila or elsewhere return once a year by land, air, and sea to celebrate Peñafrancia? What is the meaning of Peñafrancia and what is the history of this devotion? Why venerate “the black face” image of the Blessed Virgin Mary whom the Bicolanos fondly called “Ina”? How popular and lasting is the centuries-old Filipino devotion to Mary? Is the drinking spree of the male devotees and *boyadores* a necessary ritual of the religious fluvial procession and why are Church authorities helpless to “evangelize” this drinking aspect before the fluvial procession? In view of the Lipa and Agoo apparitions, what is the official Church teaching and stand on private visions and apparitions and in particular the “miraculous” Virgin of Naga and Bicolandia?

Pilgrims have often wondered about the origin of the dark complexion of Our Lady of Peñafrancia. When the chapel was finished, Fr. Miguel wanted a wooden statuette of the Virgin carved by a

native artisan. At that time the early Bicolns had a pigment mix for painting icons of their patron saints on plain wooden slabs. The process required the use of animal blood. And so a dog was sacrificed and its blood used for the preparation of the pigment which darkened the face of the carved replica of the Virgin of Peñafrancia. When the dog was about to be thrown into the river, Fr. Miguel exclaimed, "Would that the Virgin restore life to the poor dog who had been sacrificed for her." The first reported miracle of life was performed by the Virgin. The dead dog upon hitting the waters of the river started to swim across the other bank. The miracle spread like wildfire and in the first chapel Our Lady of Peñafrancia was solemnly installed as Queen and Patroness of Bicolandia. Since then and for the last 283 years, the Bicol's devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia has become one of the principal Marian devotions of national prominence.

History of Peñafrancia

The main reference used here for the historical highlights of the Bicol Peñafrancia devotion to Mary is "Historia de la Admirable Invenzion Y Milagros de la Thaumaturga Imagen y Milagros de Nuestra Señora de la Peña de Francia por M.R.P. Domingo Cavallero, O.P. 1728, Salamanca, España, Imprenta de la Viuda de Gregorio Otran." The original which is the only extant copy in the Philippines is owned by R.P. Jose O. Ofrasio, a Bicol diocesan priest. Other historical documented sources on Our Lady of Peña de Francia are found in the convent of San Esteban in Salamanca, Spain. They were published by Frs. Andres Tetilla (1544; 1567); Gil de Godoy (1685); Domingo Caballero (1728); Mateo Vasco Parra (1781); Dr. D. Tomas Baeza Gonzales (1865); Frs. Jose Gomez (1869) and Alberto Colunga (1944). The more recent historical sources are Fr. Felipe Ma. Castro, O.P., *Nuestra Señora de la Peña de Francia*, Salamanca, 1948 and Fernando Soria Heredia, *El Santuario de Nuestra de la Peña de Francia*, Convento de San Esteban, Salamanca, 1982. Both are in Spanish and contain pictures in black and white and in color of the 1800 meter barren rocky mountain called Peña de Francia and of the present-day Sanctuary (church and hostel for pilgrims). A primer in English on the history and devotion is *Our Lady of Peñafrancia* by Fr. Jose Delgado, C.M. (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1962) which also contains the novena prayers in the Bicol vernacular. The novena in

honor of Our Lady of Peñafrancia in both English and Bicol written by Msgr. Florencio C. Yllana, ex-chaplain of the Shrine, gives a brief popularized version of the history and devotion to Peñafrancia which is translated from the Spanish.

Spanish Roots of Peñafrancia

The primitive image of the Virgin of Peña de Francia was found on the slopes of Sierra de Francia, a mountain of rock situated between Spain's two famous provinces: Salamanca and Caceres. It is a noteworthy coincidence that while the primitive image was found near Caceres, in Spain, its replica has come to stay in Nueva Caceres (Naga City) in the Philippines.

It was a Frenchman, Simon Rolan (1384-1438) who, under the guidance of a heavenly voice, discovered the image of the Virgin hidden atop the 1723-meter high barren rocky mountain called Peña de Francia. Simon whom Juana (1424), the lady of Sequeros, prophesied as the "man of good morals" became a Franciscan brother. His surname Vela was added to him because the gentle prodding voice said: "Simon, vela y no duermas. Partiras a la Peña de Francia, que se encuentra en tierras de accidente, y buscaras en ella una imagen semejante a mi; la encontraras en una gruta, y alla se te dira lo que has de hacer." (Simon, keep vigil and do not sleep. Go to Peña de Francia located in the lands to the West and look for an image similar to me; you will find it in a grotto and there you will be told what to do.) The words "Peña de Francia" where the sun sets (*a la parte del poniente*) induced Simon to believe that the image was to be found in the western part of France.

Simon Vela made three long and weary attempts, the second one taking about five years, but found no such mountain in France. Then he joined the pilgrimage to the tomb of the apostle St. James (better known as Santiago de Compostela). Having heard of the famous University of Salamanca and hoping perhaps to get some information there, he went to Salamanca. On a market day, he heard two *carboneros* arguing on the quality of their charcoal for sale. The woman praised her charcoal as the best because it had been charred from the hard wood found only in Sierra de Francia. Simon followed the charcoal dealer to the village of San Martin de Castanar, a village at the foot of Peña de Francia. Simon scaled the rocky mountain top and spent two days and three nights searching for the im-

age of the Virgin. On the first night a storm dislodged a rock that caused a head injury to Simon. As he lay prostrate, the Virgin appeared and said, "Simon, no temas; mira la imagen que te mande buscar." (Simon, do not be afraid. Look at the image that I have sent you to find). On the third night Simon saw at the center of a big glaring light the image of the Virgin with the Child Jesus coddled in her arms. She pointed to Simon the rock where the hidden image was to be found. "Aqui cavaras, y lo que hallares has de sacarlo y ponerlo en lo mas alto del risco, donde contruiras una iglesia." (Here you will dig and what you will find you must take and place on the highest peak where you will build a Church).

Upon instructions from the apparition, Simon took five men from the village as witnesses—Antonio Fernandez, Juan Pascual, Pascual Sanchez, Juan Fernandez and Benito Sanchez, the "escribano" of the place—and on 19 May 1434 they found the hidden image of the Virgin. Right there and then, all of them received special graces from the Virgin. Simon Vela's wound in the head was instantly cured; Pascual Sanchez's defect in the eye disappeared; Juan Fernandez got rid of his ten-year-old stomach trouble; Antonio Fernandez who was deaf began to hear; and finally, Benito Sanchez's finger, which was defective from birth, recovered its normal state. Since then the mountain was called Monte de Peña de Francia and the newly-found image was thereafter venerated named "Nuestra Señora de Peña de Francia." In this mountain region between Spain and France, during the sixteenth century, excavations brought to light numerous images of the Virgin that had been buried in haste by Christian communities fleeing the invading Moors. The finding of the Peñafrancia icon was miraculous.

Bicol Origin of Peñafrancia

Fr. Domingo Caballero's *History of Peñafrancia* (1728) tells how Don Miguel Robles de Covarrubias, the seminarian son of a Spanish couple from San Martin de Castanar who settled in Cavite, had vowed to erect a stone chapel on the bank of the Pasig River in honor of the Virgin of Peñafrancia in gratitude for favors received. This historical event is recorded in a handwritten letter dated Nueva Caceres 1 May 1710 sent by Fr. Domingo de Sera with a golden necklace enclosed and preserved in the archives of the Sanctuary of Peña de Francia in Spain.

From the time he studied grammar at the University of Santo Tomas until his ordination to the priesthood, Miguel was the victim of frequent illnesses. Fortunately for him, he possessed a picture of the Virgin of Peñafrancia as found by Simon Vela in San Martin de Castanar. To this picture he had recourse in moments of great pain, anguish and adversity. Miguel received so many heavenly favors that he wrote: "So many are the miracles wrought on me by the Virgin of Peñafrancia, that I have no tongue to relate them, no paper where to write them nor numbers to count them. All I could say is that I am the miracle of her miracles." In gratitude, Miguel vowed to construct a small chapel of lime and stone by the Pasig river. But the bishop of Nueva Caceres, Mons. Andres de Gonzales, O.P. called him to Nueva Caceres. During his sea voyage he was almost shipwrecked but due to the help of the Virgin of Peñafrancia, he reached the place safe and sound.

Soon Bishop Gonzales ordained him to the priesthood and named Fray Miguel the parish priest of the cathedral Church and the Vicar General of the Diocese. Realizing that he would be in Bicol for a long time, he had his vow commuted to build the Pasig chapel in Bicol instead.

By a stroke of Divine Providence, the *cimarrones*, a Negrito tribe from Mt. Isarog, requested that a "visita" or chapel be built in the outskirts of the city. The *cimarrones*, also known as *remontados* or *monteses*, chose the freedom of the hills rather than be subject to Spanish rule and culture imposed by the Spanish colonizers on the Indios. Thus the first chapel for the Virgin of Peñafrancia was built to meet the spiritual needs of Isarog's mountain people. It was located near the bank of the meandering Bicol river, about two kilometers from the center of the pueblo, to make it accessible to the *cimarrones*. In those days, the chapel by the river was surrounded by a virtual jungle.

During the construction, the 1710 letter revealed that many women clothed in white would be seen with the recruited native laborers but the women were not known to be residents of the sitio where the chapel was being erected. Were they angelic beings? Thus the first chapel of bamboo and nipa was built more or less where the present Peñafrancia shrine now stands, two kilometers from the present Municipal Building and a kilometer and a half from the Episcopal Palace.

Two Images of Peñafrancia in Contrast

Very few realize that both the images of Peñafrancia in Salamanca and in Naga were stolen and that both the Bicol image and its canonical coronation are much older than the Spanish original Peñafrancia. The original Salamanca image found in 1434 was stolen in 1872 when it was 438 years old. It was stolen 17 August 1872 and found seventeen years and months later on 8 December 1889. It was most likely stolen by the communists and thrown by the wayside so that time and the elements corroded the image except for a fragment which was encased in today's Salamanca image made in 1890. Naga's Peñafrancia, carved in 1705, is 185 years older. Naga's Peñafrancia was crowned in September 1924 while Salamanca's Peñafrancia was crowned twenty-six years later in 1951. Naga's Peñafrancia was stolen on 18 August 1981 and returned after one year and twenty days on 5 September 1982. Stripped of all her ornaments, only the original but totally bare wooden carving of the Madonna was returned. No questions were asked. It was enough that the lost "Ina" was at last found and came home to her shrine in Naga. "The Day 'Ina' Came Home" beautifully written by Minerva R. Fajardo (*Times Journal*, 19 September 1982) is the touching story of the thousands of Bicolanos who awaited the "wet and deafening" return of Ina at night in the middle of a typhoon.

For those who have not seen Bicolandia's Madonna, a brief description might help. She stands about three feet tall on her base; four feet, including her crown. Her body is her gown at one and the same time. While she was unadorned at the time the sculptor created her, she later was dressed in silver overlay and given jewels to wear on her crown and cape. She has several of these jeweled capes today and wears them on special occasions. Perhaps because of these adornments, the Holy Child she carries is only half visible. Only her head protrudes from her side. But the salient characteristic of Peñafrancia Virgin is that she is "Ina" (mother) and one can never depict her without the child.

The Virgin of Peñafrancia in Paco

So much has been known or written about Bicolandia's Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia that very few realize that there is also a mira-

culous Virgin of Peñafrancia in Paco (the Manila district once called Dilao.) The one in Manila is an icon while the one in Naga is an image. One of the *capillas* of the Church of Our Lady of the Holy Sepulcher and of Our Lady of the Candle gave Calle Peñafrancia its name, because in the chapel on that street is enshrined a picture depicting the finding of the image of Peñafrancia. The oil painting shows Virgin and Child within a great ray of light and below them a mountain scene where diggers have come upon a buried image of the Virgin. It is reminiscent of Simon Vela and his five companions excavating Peña de Francia and miraculously finding the buried Virgin. The painting is obviously Spanish in origin and is reckoned to be 300 years old. It is borne in procession every May 19, (the day in 1424 Simon Vela discovered the icon) when the Peñafrancia neighborhood celebrates a religious cult that is said to date back to the earliest days of Paco. The belief is that from Paco, the Peñafrancia devotion went to Bicolandia.

For the past twelve years since 1980 the Peñafrancia Devotees Association of Metro Manila has celebrated the Feast Day of the Virgin of Peñafrancia here in Metro Manila simultaneous with that of Naga. In 1993 the Sta. Ana Church of Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados sponsored a fluvial procession organized by the Manila Peñafrancia devotees.

The Fluvial Procession: 1880

Beyond all expectation, the fluvial procession at present from the Tabuco bridge to the Basilica perfectly coincides with an eye-witness account published about a century ago in 1880 in the Madrid newspaper "La Civilization" (*La Virgen de la Peña Francia en Camarines Sur*, Cultura Social, Manila, Septiembre, 1924, pp. 503-5). The following original quotation has been quoted and abbreviated from Jose Calleja Reyes' *Bikol Maharlika* (Manila: JMC Press, 1992), Chapter 15 "Endearing Ina," pp. 178-79:

I have just witnessed a religious festival which would be difficult to erase from my memory and which has moved and impressed me much. In the first days of September, the sacred image is taken in procession to the Cathedral where a solemn novena is held with a big number of faithful in attendance.

In the afternoon of the Saturday that precedes the Sunday which is the feast of the most holy name of Mary, the sacred image is brought back (*traslacion*) from the Cathedral to her sanctuary by way of the river. To see it is to precisely form an unforgettable picture of what takes place during the solemn *traslacion*. Never have I seen a similar pompous, majestic and moving event or is there a similar one written in history.

The Church bells had been tolled twice announcing the start of the procession. I observed that it was raining. On the third toll of the bells the rain stopped. It is five o'clock in the afternoon when the procession begins to move out of the lateral door of the Cathedral which faces the magnificent Colegio de Santa Isabel, passing in front of the episcopal palace, to move towards Tabuco bridge. Upon reaching the mouth of the river the procession stops and the Holy Virgin is carried passing two files of the faithful accompanying her, amidst the singing of songs, the general tolling of bells, the vibrant sound of band music, the bursting of fire bombs and an infinitesimal array of sky-rockets criss-cross the sky from one bank of the river to the other. The sacred image is then placed in the center of a big and magnificent boat.

In the meanwhile numerous groups of *boyadores* dressed simply, neatly and notably elegant composed of the . . . devotees from the neighboring towns have distributed themselves in thirty or forty *barotos*, each *baroto* holding twenty-five or thirty persons. All of them wave a flag or a standard on which is written: "Viva la Virgen! Viva Nuestra Señora de Peña de Francia." In others—"Gloria a Nuestra Excelsa Protectora."

Upon a prearranged signal, martial music is played. It is difficult to describe this solemn moment. You have to see it to believe what is happening at this very instant. An immense crowd of people can be seen on both banks of the river as well as on the Tabuco bridge. Big ropes are attached to the bow of the vessel and these are stretched and pulled by those in the *baroto*. Slowly and suavely the boat moves skimming the surface of the water. At the moment the musical march is played, thousands of devotees with arms uplifted wade into the water encircling the boat that carries the Blessed Virgin. By past practice and experience these devotees know that by doing this act in honor of Mary Immaculate, they are immediately relieved of their fevers or other diseases that afflict them. The singing does not stop. The shouts of *Viva La Virgen* increase in crescendo. One can hear the beautiful refrains of music coming from the various *baroto*. The sun has set, but both banks of the river are illumined by innumerable lights. A great number of torches fired by abaca wickers light in a

gorgeous manner the thick foliage of the trees that stand majestically along the whole length of the river, such that the spectacle is one sublime, poetic, and *enchanted* portrait, difficult and almost impossible to describe.

The fluvial procession lasts for more than an hour. Upon nearing the sanctuary which stands beside the river, the most illustrious Vicar General, in fluvial cape vestment assisted by the clergy receives the sacred image. If there is a bishop, he is the one who performs this office and ceremony.

The procession is once again formed and the sacred Image is placed in her precious andas and upon thousands of interlocked arms and hands that hold her, she enters the Sanctuary which is brightly illuminated. The *Salve Regina* is sung with great solemnity and with this the procession ends.

The Blessed Virgin is once again in her precious temple. She has once more complied with the hopes of her faithful devotees. I can certify to the truth of what they have told me that there was no rain during the procession but after the sacred image had entered her Sanctuary, the rains fell. They have told me that in 1879 while the Blessed Virgin was in procession in the middle of the river, it was raining in the mouth of the river but not a single drop of rain fell on the boat where the Virgin was being carried. What I can affirm is that in the earthquake during the month of July of this year which has caused great damage and death in various provinces of the island of Luzon, here in Camarines, we have been saved from a similar disaster by the special protection of the Blessed Virgin. I have also seen that the natives of this diocese opened a big canal and constructed a magnificent embankment to safeguard the Sanctuary of their beloved protectress. To those who serve her in this sacred devotion she has blessed them a hundredfold with rich and abundant harvests.

The Fluvial Procession: Today

It is amazing how these devotional and colorful traditions have endured to the present. If we compare the above 1880 account with Fr. Ciriaco San Diego's "The Fluvial Procession" in the 1941 souvenir program of the restoration of the Shrine of Peñafrancia, nothing has substantially changed since 1853 when Bishop Grijalvo enacted an ecclesiastical decree to the effect that the images of the Virgin of Peñafrancia and the Holy Face (*Divino Rostro*) be carried together from the Metropolitan Cathedral to the old Peñafrancia shrine. The

only notable change in the Peñafrancia religious tradition and customs is that only a replica of the original image of the old Peñafrancia shrine is carried in the traslacion and fluvial procession to the new Basilica Minore.

Every year I have observed that on the day of the fluvial procession it inevitably rains but the rain always stops "almost miraculously" just before the procession. I also observed that unless it rained the Naga river would be too shallow for the pagoda barge carrying the Virgin of Peñafrancia to navigate. But rain or shine nothing stops the fluvial procession and millions of devotees. In 1941 Fr. San Diego wrote, "Among the crowd you see the 'pilgrims of the sea'—sturdy, sun-tanned fishermen and sea-faring boatmen from the salty waters of Pasacao and Cabusao—wearing handkerchief or towel tightly covering their heads, and carrying oars and long canes, for they come to render power and speed to the large pagoda of the Virgin in its half league cruise up the winding Bikol river." They row the Virgin to her new sanctuary in the modern Basilica Minore.

Peñafrancia festivities begin as early as 8 September. Included in the lengthy Peñafrancia celebration are the searches for Miss Naga and Bicolandia, the agro-industrial fair, the La Tondeña-sponsored regatta, the civic parades, band and concert contests participated in by the whole of Bicolandia, the awarding ceremonies for outstanding Bicolanos (*Weekend*, 12 October 1986, pp. 18–19; *Mr. & Ms.*, 8 September 1987, pp. 20–22; *The Philippines Journal*, 8 October 1989, p. 7). In one of my pilgrimages, I also witnessed army helicopters and giant multicolored balloons fly over the fluvial parade to add novelty to the festivity. At the last boat landing before the Virgin is carried to the Basilica Minore "unfurls the most impressive, soul-stirring religious outburst of the human heart that is difficult to forget. Everyone, as if then acting by one impulse, hails the Virgin for the last time with a long and deafening "Viva la Virgen!"

According to the 1986 "A Candle for Peñafrancia" souvenir program, Peñafrancia fluvial processions are only for the hardy and tough. They are always marked by the rowdiness of sweaty, barefoot *boyadores*, the men who carry the Virgin's *andas* or pagoda during the traslacion and fluvial procession. Coming from all levels of Bicol society, butcher, fishermen, pier hands and farmers vie with merchants, landlords and judges for the privilege of carrying her *andas*. By tradition, the *boyadores* go on a drinking spree before proceeding to the shrine, adding to the wild revelry of the occasion. This is now being discouraged, of course. Even so, there are brawls

or fistfights. Everything is done in the spirit of true devotion to the Virgin. Anyone with a weak heart or knees would never survive it. It is a chore for the tough and hardy. To the consternation and anger of Church authorities, one year the procession crowd became so unruly that the Virgin Image fell into the river and a priest had to dive to recover it. In 1992 I had a pass to go aboard the pagoda but, having a heart operation in 1986, the Jesuit Fathers of the Ateneo de Naga dissuaded me at the last minute from boarding the pagoda. A veteran boyador said: "Once you are under the andas, you are squeezed willy-nilly, pushed every which way as the swaying of the human tide pushes and pulls and no one is in control of his own movements. There is no fresh air to breathe on. All one sees and feels from underneath is the dark wet body of the man ahead. Resounding cries of *Viva la Virgen!* overwhelm the ears. But it's a great *energating* feeling. You come out refreshed, as if all your sins have been washed away." Although the *traslacion* and fluvial procession are strictly and exclusively *masculine* in participation, in 1993 on the eighth day of the novena the penitential procession at 3:30 A.M. was exclusively *feminine*.

The Miraculous Virgin and Mother

A word about the Filipino cultural roots and basis of the miraculous Virgin and Mother of Peñafrancia. The Filipino is family-oriented and undoubtedly the mother plays a central role in the Filipino family and in Philippine society. Whether virginity is a Filipino value before the advent of Christianity, and whether Philippine society is matriarchal are sociological questions. But certainly from a Filipino Christian perspective, the favorite Filipino image of Mary based on Filipino culture and the Christian gospel is that of Virgin and Mother. No wonder the Virgin of Peñafrancia has become Bicolandia's endearing "Ina" (Mother). Perhaps in no region in the Philippines had the devotion to Mary acquired a more endearing human expression than the Bicol's reference to Mary as "Ina" (pronounced ena). To the Bicol soul, under whatever title she is invoked—Immaculada Concepcion (Naga), Nuestra Señora de Soledad (Buhí), Nuestra Señora de Salvacion (Tiwi, Albay), Nuestra Señora de Sapao (Camarines Norte), Nuestra Señora de Lourdes (Iriga City)—Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia remains fondly Ina. The Hymn to the Virgin of Peñafrancia invokes Mary as Patrona de Bicol, Reina de Nuestra Region, but she is always Gran Madre de Dios. In

the people's novena prayers, whether expressed in poetic verses or sung in the old Bicol vernacular, Our Lady of Peñafrancia is always Ina. For example: *O malinigon na Ina* (Oh purest mother); *O mahal na gayon Ina* (Oh! specially beloved mother); *Inang orog caloldoc nin samong manga puso* (Mother most poignant in our hearts); *O mahamison na Ina* (Oh! sweetest mother), etc. In Catholic doctrine the Blessed Virgin Mary is Mother of Jesus, Mother of God, and our Mother. Furthermore, Mary in the Gospel is not only the perfect disciple but the Mother of all disciples and the Mother of the Church.

Since the first miracle of Peñafrancia, namely, the dead dog come to life again, there have been countless miracles reported both here in the Philippines and abroad. Msgr. Florencio C. Yllana in his novena booklet relates some miracles (pp. 17-18). Similarly in the 1989 souvenir program of the Inauguration and Rededication of the Restored Peñafrancia Shrine, Minerva R. Fajardo relates the miracles of Peñafrancia as "Little Stories of Faith" (pp. 16-19). Most of the reported miracles are compiled and kept in the Archdiocesan archives of the old Peñafrancia shrine. One of the "miraculous" stories is that of a student, Alfred So, who saw Our Lady of Peñafrancia as a little girl three times—at the shrine, on the Pagoda boat during the fluvial procession, and at the Heart Center. Every year without fail he and his family go on a pilgrimage to Naga in gratitude to Our Lady of Peñafrancia for "Alfred's Little Girl." The Catholic Church is very cautious and slow, and rightly so, in judging the authenticity of reported miracles. Only a fraction of the 60,000 alleged miraculous cures during the Lourdes apparitions have been declared of supernatural origin. Most extraordinary events or so-called miracles can be explained through natural causes in more ways than one.

Filipinos are very miracle prone. Perhaps in desperation when everything is going wrong in the Philippines, it is quite understandable that our last refuge and security blanket is to run to "miracles." It is said that when God does what we want, we Filipinos call it a miracle. The truth is that a real miracle is one when we do what God wants. Fr. Alfeo Nudas, S.J., wrote a very strong criticism of the Filipino penchant for "apparitions" and "miracles" (Letters to the Editor, "Anti-Christ in Agoo" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 19 March 1993). "The Anti-Christ keeps us seeing 'Our Lady' now on the coconut leaf, now on the guava tree, now shedding tears, now her tears are blood (type 'O'), we keep running to those 'apparitions of Our Lady.' And children that we are, we keep turning those 'apparitions' into fiesta celebrations."

The Filipino Popular Devotion to Mary

In the 1975 Pastoral Letter "Ang Mahal na Birhen" (MB), the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) points out Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Naga City—among Our Lady of Charity and Our Lady of Badoc in Ilocos, Our Lady of Piat in Cagayan Valley, Our Lady of Manaoag in Pangasinan, Our Lady of Salambao in Obando, Bulacan, Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage in Antipolo, Rizal, the Purification of Our Lady (or La Candelaria) in Mabatac, Laguna, Our Lady of Caysasay in Taal, Batangas, Nuestra Señora Virgen de Regla in Lapulapu City, Cebu, Our Lady of Pillar in Zamboanga, etc.—as one of the better shrines dedicated to Mary that have won nationwide popularity either as focal points of national pilgrimages or as well-known centers of devotion (MB, 7).

The CBCP states that "popular religiosity is manifested above all in a special sense of God. . . . of the special help and protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary" (MB, 70). . . . One particular aspect of the veneration of Mary intimately connected with forms of popular religiosity in our country is the holding of fiestas in her honor and pilgrimages to her shrines (MB, 74–76).

The religion of the great majority of Filipino Catholics is "popular religiosity." A distinction must be made between "official" and "popular" Christianity because the Christian religious faith of the Filipino is highly colored by Filipino culture and is strikingly manifested in popular religion. Official Christianity refers to the objective and universal Christian faith (creed, code, cult) which stresses global unity of doctrine, e.g. the Immaculate Conception, the Church, sacraments, theology, etc. Popular Christianity reflects the subjective, simple, inculturated faith of the Filipino or the "religion of the people" (i.e. the less educated majority) and emphasizes practical solutions to the problems of daily life. Hence, most Bicolanos and devotees of Peñafrancia are so because of a *panata* or vow or for the sake of material favors and protection from the Patroness of Bicolandia. Popular Catholicism—rural or urban—is characterized by trust in God, Church attendance and a year-round mixture of Filipino culture and religion, e.g. fluvial procession in honor of Our Lady of Peñafrancia, Sinulog or Ati-Atihan in honor of Nuestro Señor de Santo Niño. In the past, social scientists called popular religiosity "folk Catholicism" which implied a sociological bias and *ethnocentrism*. But since Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (# 48), we have rediscovered the "religion of the people" or "folk Catholicism" to be

conformed essentially to the Christian gospel and a genuine source of Christian faith, prayer and spirituality which is deeply rooted in Philippine culture. Filipino popular Christianity makes better Filipinos because it fosters Filipino values like family and community solidarity, and makes better Christians because the Christian gospel is indigenized and therefore more easily understood and accepted.

Citing *Evangelii Nuntiandi* on popular religiosity, PCP II exhorts us to "the critical and fervent use of popular religious practices. These practices are rich in values. They manifest a thirst for God and enable people to be generous and sacrificing in witnessing to their faith. These practices show a deep awareness of the attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. They engender attitudes of patience, the sense of the Cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion" (PCP II, 175).

What has been said positively about the centuries-old faith of the Filipino people in the Blessed Virgin Mary as manifested in the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia, the Mother and Patroness of Bicolandia, should in no way be taken to mean that we are denying or minimizing the aberrations, exaggerations, and excesses in practice or closing our eyes to the dangers mentioned by the CBCP and PCP II to which popular religiosity is always open. Mention has already been made of the drinking spree of the boyadores which has become a necessary annual ritual and which Church authorities every year try to eliminate or minimize but always in vain. From the viewpoint of the outsider, perhaps the religious frenzy and unruly behavior of the boyadores and large crowds at the traslacion and fluvial procession may seem excessive and fanatical, but the desire to fulfill a vow and the once-in-a-lifetime chance to touch the image of the Virgen speaks of a faith that surpasses all understanding. It is only with the eyes of faith and with the heart that one can make sense of an annual mystical experience as a special grace and blessing of "Ina."

Thus the CBCP's pastoral letter *Ang Mahal na Birhen* pedagogy of evangelization: "The valid elements of an authentic faith, which are present in the profound religiosity of our people, need and demand that they be purified, interiorized, and made more mature, and brought to bear on life (MB, 70). This demands that certain syncretistic and superstitious elements that might have entered into certain practices of devotion, at time a kind of folkloric ritual which is wholly out of keeping with the true Christian faith, must be eliminated and transformed" (MB, 71).

The pastoral guidelines of the PCP II are very instructive and helpful. "We look at our expressions of popular piety and the strong residues of pre-Spanish religion in them—superstitious they often are: sacramentals becoming *anting-anting*, saints taking over the place of anitos, the Supreme Deity approachable only through lesser intermediaries. Aberrations there are in plenty and they must be recognized as such, they must be corrected. But correcting does not mean we lose sight of what authentic religious meanings and values they hold" (PCP II, 12).

But we need to foster these popular religious practices in such a way that they do not become distortions of religion or remain on the level of superficial forms of worship, but become rather true expressions of faith." (PCP II, 172).

We must have the courage to correct what leads to fanaticism or maintains people infantile in their faith. We must not give members of other faiths reason for impugning the true faith. At the same time, seeing how many of our people cherish these religious practices, we must use them as vehicles of evangelization towards worship and truth." (PCP II, 175).

Appendix A

Historical Highlights

19 May 1434 Finding by Simon Vela and five companions of the Virgin hidden in Monte de Francia between Salamanca and Caceres, Spain.

15 August 1595 Foundation of Diocese of Nueva Caceres (Naga City)

1710 Fray Miguel Robles de Cavarrubias finally built a bamboo and nipa "visita" in honor of Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia as a vow offering for blessings he received in his youth. He built this first Church at the invitation of the cimarrones or Negrito tribe from Mt. Isarog, Camarines Sur more or less where the present Peñafrancia Shrine stands today.

1 May 1710 A golden necklace enclosed in a letter sent by Fr. Domingo de Sera and Bicol devotees to the original shrine of Peñafrancia in Salamanca, Spain records the Bicol origin of Peñafrancia.

1711 A seventeen-inch tall statuette of wood carved in the similitude of the Virgin of Peñafrancia and painted with a pigment mixed with dog's blood gave the Virgin's face a dark complexion.

1711, 1717, 1723 Letters of Fr. Miguel Robles de Cavarrubias about the miracles during his illness to the chaplain of Peñafrancia in San Martin de Castanar, Spain.

1750 Bishop Isidoro Arevalo built the present Peñafrancia Shrine in brick and stone.

1855 Bishop Grijalvo issued a decree to the effect that both images of the Virgin and the Holy Face be carried together in the *traslacion*.

1876-1879 Bishop Francisco Gainza, O.P. published the history of Peñafrancia, the novena to the Virgin, made substantial repairs in the Church, constructed the present facade, and named a permanent chaplain to take care of the shrine.

1882 In gratitude for having been spared from the cholera epidemic, the Hierarchy vowed to celebrate together the feast of the Divino Rostro and of Our Lady of Peñafrancia.

2 May 1920 Vatican canonical approval of the Virgin's coronation as Our Lady of Peñafrancia and the present shrine as her special sanctuary.

20 September 1924 Solemn Canonical Coronation of the Virgin of Peñafrancia as Queen of Bicolandia by an edict of Pope Benedict XV under the Pontificate of Pius XI by the Apostolic Delegate Rt. Rev. Msgr. Guillermo Piani.

A special crown studded with precious stones was specially ordered for the coronation. The 'aureolas' of the Virgin predate her crown, having been crafted some time in 1870. Better identified as *las estrellas*, the crown actually serves as the halo of the Virgin and has twelve stars representing the twelve Apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel. On each of the stars is embedded a precious stone, which makes the crown a priceless item valued at more than P50,000 at that time and today stored in the Archdiocesan vault when not in use. The crown and the precious stones on the 'aureolas' were donated by Aleja de Paz vda. de Cecillo.

The popular hymn to Our Lady of Peñafrancia "Resuene vibrante" for the coronation was composed and won in a contest by Fr. Maximo Juguera, Rector of the Seminary.

1941 Shrine annex was built and the historical marker installed acknowledging the contributions of Rev. Miguel Cavarrubias; Bishop Isidoro de Arevalo and Bishop Francisco Gainza.

Since World War II and the 1924 canonical coronation, the Virgin has worn her crown only three times:

1948 Marian Year celebrations

1949 Silver Jubilee of 1924 Coronation; visits of the image in Bicolandia; Peñafrancia proper office in the Breviary approved by Congregation of Rites in Rome.

1974 Golden Jubilee of Coronation

1953 Two commemorative medals of the crowning of Nuestra Señora de Peña de Francia in Spain sent as a gift by the Bishop of Salamanca to Bicolanos, one encrusted on the image of the Virgin in Peñafrancia shrine.

1954 Image of Peñafrancia visits Manila to commemorate centenary of the Immaculate Conception.

1972 The tragic collapse of Colgante bridge during the fluvial procession causing the death of about a hundred people.

18 April 1976 Laying and blessing of the cornerstone of the Basilica Minore by Church dignitaries led by Jaime Cardinal Sin.

18 August 1981 The 275-year-old image of "Ina," Our Lady of Peñafrancia was discovered missing from her altar in the old Peñafrancia Shrine.

5 September 1982 Image returned to former chaplain of the Peñafrancia Shrine, Msgr. Florencio C. Yllana in his CBCP office in Intramuros. The story of the five thieves who absconded with the image in Cebu for a year and 20 days is written in *Mr. & Ms.*, 8 September 1987.

1984 The new Peñafrancia Basilica Minore was completed.

Appendix B

Chaplains of the Santuario de Peñafrancia: 1865 to date

Vicente Garcia	1865 – 1878
Julian Isaac	Dec. 1878 – Feb. 1883
Zacarias Leza	Feb. 1883 – Aug. 1883
Tomas Cariño	Aug. 1883 – Nov. 1886
Francisco Borondia	Nov. 1886 – Mar. 1887
Gabriel Prieto	Mar. 1887 – Dec. 1889
Jose Najera	Dec. 1889 – Feb. 1892
Teotimo Ruiz	Feb. 1892 – Oct. 1892
Julian Ope	Oct. 1892 – June 1897
Enrique Balana	July 1897 – Sept. 1898
Damian Rabago	Sept. 1898 – Apr. 1912
Santiago Sancho	Apr. 1912 – June 1917
Canuto Acantalicio	June 1917 – Jan. 1919
Casimiro Lladoc	Jan. 1919 – June 1926
Canuto Acantalicio	June 1926 – Interino
Jose Ofrasio	July 1926 – Feb. 1931
Cecilio Penilla	Feb. 1931 – Apr. 1933
Feliciano Puertollano	Apr. 1933 – Sept. 1936
Catalino Reyes	Sept. 1936 – Nov. 1938
Florencio C. Yllana	Nov. 1938 – 1 Aug. 1945
Manuel del Rosario	15 July 1945 – 11 Oct. 1949
Alfredo C. Yllana	27 Nov. 1949 – 22 Apr. 1955
Salvador I. Naz	22 Sept. 1955 – 30 Oct. 1973
Rector & named as Papal Chamberlain	
Concordio Ma. Sarte	30 Oct. 1973 – 19 Jan. 1978
Sofio G. Balce	19 Jan. 1978 – 17 June 1988
Auxiliary Bishop of Caceres	
Juan Celzo	17 June 1988 – April 1993
Pablo V. Aquilar	29 April 1993 – present