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HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN THE PHILIPPINES

Chapter 25

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURE IN THE PHILIPPINES

Without setting aside its primary purpose of saving souls, the Catholic Church has not neglected to dedicate a surprising amount of its energies to the material welfare of the people of this choice corner of the Orient. This effort bore fruit, as time passed by, in works as varied as the erection of towns, the clearing of forests, the reclamation of malaria-infested swamps, the cultivation of wild and extensive drylands, the building of roads and sewage systems, the building of dikes and irrigation canals, etc. In this chapter, we shall limit ourselves to agricultural improvements. We shall discuss, first, agriculture in general; then, agricultural products; and finally, some of the improvements introduced or taught by the missionaries to the faithful as a means of fostering this important sphere of human activity.

I. AGRICULTURE IN GENERAL

During the years before the conquest and colonization, Philippine agriculture was rudimentary. Agricultural production was limited almost exclusively to rice and some tubers, as *camote*, *gabi* and *ubi*. This was due partly to the fertile soil which, with minimal effort from the planter, yielded in certain areas a harvest of 100 to 1. Partly, too, this was due to the limited needs of the people who, by natural habit, were content with what the land spontaneously yielded. Contributing to the slow progress of agriculture was the frequent fighting between the kinglets and tribes which produced a perpetual state of insecurity.

Work tools were likewise rudimentary. The plow, the shovel, the hoe, the rake, etc. were not in use until they were brought in by the missionaries. At the time, *caingin* farming was widespread in certain regions of the country, which was the system of burning a piece of forest land, digging a well and then sowing the seed. Besides introducing farm implements and work tools, the missionaries also tried, through the mediation of the elders and officials of the tribes, to parcel the land equitatively in order to benefit all. Likewise, they explained methods of clearing and weeding the soil, of levelling the crops so that water did not flow down the slope, the selection and preparation of seeds and seedlings and the use of the plow. It was in this way that in the course of the years were formed the extensive rice fields of the basic food for the country.¹

We could cite here a long list of missionaries who were tireless in their efforts to promote agriculture in the towns under their care, but we shall mention only two cases. The first was in Zambales during the last two decades of the seventeenth century, and the second in the island of Negros in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In order to teach the new Christians of Zambales how to break new ground and plant crops, the Dominicans brought old Christians from Pangasinan to train the former in the use of the plow. They gave them animals and work tools, brought across the mountains from the hacienda of Lolomboy.²

In 1848, the island of Negros hardly produced the few necessities of its 30,000 inhabitants. With the arrival of the Recollects that year, it began to change its condition, such that by the end of the century, the population rose to more than 300,000. This unexpected increase was due to the interest of the missionaries to improve agriculture, especially the cultivation of sugar cane. This greatly improved the standard of living in the island, attracted many colonists to it, and explained why its ports were daily visited by foreign traders. A missionary,

¹ Zamora, Eladio, O.S.A., *Las Corporaciones religiosas en Filipinas* (Valladolid, 1901), 279-281.

² Marin, O.P., Valentín, *Ensayo de una síntesis de los trabajos realizados por las corporaciones religiosas en Filipinas*, (Manila, 1901). Tomo II, 637.

like Father Fernando Cuenca, not content with giving answers to agricultural questions, succeeded after much planning and long sleepless nights, in installing a hydraulic press in the town of Minuluan in 1872, which facilitated the process of crushing the sugar cane and resulted in the extension of sugar cane fields.³

II. PRODUCTS CULTIVATED BY THE MISSIONARIES

1. *Abaca*. Perhaps, the missionary who contributed most to the planting and the development of abaca in the Philippines was Fray Francisco Espallargas, a Franciscan missionary in Bacon, Sorsogon. Around 1656, he conducted several experiments on the abaca fiber and, having obtained satisfactory results both in making ropes and weaving the abaca cloth, he taught the people how to raise the plant. He also fashioned the knife which, until recently, the abaca planters of the Philippines have used. Other Franciscans in the region helped by their encouragement of the people to adopt the same process. Unfortunately, enthusiasm did not last long and things returned to their former condition. The people were satisfied with exploiting the wild abaca that grew in the mountains or amid underbrush of the forests, for this way, they obtained enough to manufacture cordage for ships and textiles for clothing. They, obviously, had no interest in exporting.

This situation continued until 1835, when the Franciscan parish priests in Camarines and Albay began an active program of educating the people to plant and cultivate abaca in view of the immense profits awaiting them, for foreign boats were beginning to dock in those ports looking for such a useful product to industry. As a result, these provinces which till then had been some of the poorest in the archipelago, began to prosper such that the Iraya region alone which in 1835 had exported 3,000 piculs, at the end of the century, exported 300,000.

In Leyte, the parish priests of the same Franciscan Order, seeing that the soil was admirably suited for the raising of abaca, did not stop until, beginning with the year 1840, their faithful put into practice the method of Fray Espallargas to produce the textile. They took special care and watched the

³ Ruiz, Licinio, *Sinopsis histórica de la provincia de San Nicolás de Tolentino* (Manila, 1925), Tomo II, 134.

plantations lest the quality of the fiber deteriorate, and they thus brought it about that the abaca of Leyte had an easy market.⁴

Members of the other religious families emulated the zeal of the Franciscans to raise abaca where the terrain was good. We shall mention only the work of the Augustinian Fray Miguel Rosales in Tapas, Capiz.⁵

2. *Añil*. *Añil* or indigo grew wild in the Philippines, but naturalist Fray Matias Octavio, an Augustinian, noticed that the pocket hidden beneath its leaves contained a blue liquid. After several experiments, he succeeded in extracting the valuable dye which the mestizos of Tambobong immediately began to use to tint their cloth. This happened towards the year 1774. Its cultivation spread rapidly especially in Ilocos, where it became a rich source of income for the towns, adulterated by Chinese traders, it lost its value in the Foreign trade.⁶

3. *Cacao*. According to some, it was a Jesuit, Davila; according to others, a brother of the beneficed cleric Bartolomé Bravo, who introduced the *cacao plant* to the Philippines in 1663. However, it is certain that long after, there were cacao plantations in Carigara, Leyte, where the same Jesuit had conducted the first tests. Likewise, this plant grew well in Lipa, Batangas, thanks to the initiative of the Filipino Juan del Aguila.⁷ Ten years later, the Augustinian Fray Ignacio Mercado was distributing *cacao* seed in abundance to the people of Lipa. Later, the Augustinian worked tenaciously to develop cacao plantations in Batangas because it brought in handsome profits. Of these priests, we shall mention only Fray Román Sánchez and Fray Benito Vargas in San José; Fray Guillermo Diaz and Fray Domingo Ibáñez in Cuenca. The province of Nueva Vizcaya was grateful for its extensive cacao plantations to Fray Francisco Antolín, Fray Tomás Mallo, Fray Francisco Rocamora, Fray Ruperto Alarcón, Fray Juan F. Villaverde and Fray José Brugués, all Dominicans.⁸

⁴ Marín, *Op cit.*, II, 367-368. ⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶ Zamora, *Op. cit.*, 283-284; Cfr. Martínez de Zúñiga, O.S.A., Joaquín, *El estadismo de las Islas Filipinas*, Tomo I, 344, 404-405, 493-494.

⁷ Liqueste, Leoncio, G., *Repertorio histórico, biográfico y bibliográfico* (Manila, 1930), 212.

⁸ Antolín O.P., Francisco, *Camino de Ituy y Paniquí*, APSR:MSS, Tomo III, fols. 123v, 189; Tomo 118, fols. 136, 137.

4. *Coffee*. When the first missionaries arrived in the Philippines, they found coffee already growing here, although they soon saw that the natives did not know how to make use of it. Dedicated also to effect the material well-being of the people, they took special care to teach the people the uses of that small plant, which in its wild state produced, according to them, a few bitter grains. Fray Elias Lebrado, an Augustinian, promoted the cultivation of this product in Lipa in 1814 and Fray Varas ceaselessly encouraged it, such that the town came to be, by the end of the century, a rich emporium due to its busy trade in coffee.⁹

The Dominican fathers also engaged in this praiseworthy task of promoting the culture of coffee in the province of Nueva Vizcaya in 1874. But because of native indolence, the farms began to fail until they disappeared altogether. For a second time around 1892, the missionaries revived the industry because of the sudden increase in the price of coffee since 1887 which, by 1893 cost ₱32 a picul. Coffee farms spread so fast — a missionary wrote with obvious exaggeration there were millions and millions of them — that the province became one extensive coffee plantation. But it was necessary to convince the provincial leaders who were, at first, indifferent because they did not realize perhaps the riches promised by the industry.¹⁰

5. *Sugar Cane*. Father Eladio Zamora writes: “. . . the Filipinos knew five kinds of sugar cane: zambal, red, white, stripped and dark red. The first four are good only for chewing, by which they extract the sugary juice, because they are soft and watery. The fifth, i.e., the dark red, they used also in the same way, although it was harder and woody, until the missionaries taught them the use of primitive, rudimentary and rather defective crushers of wood and stone . . . but the sugar industry had not yet developed the iron cylinders nor did they have the means for better equipment at the time.”¹¹

To the Augustinians belongs the glory of having brought in from Mexico the first sugar presses, popularly known by the name of *trapiche*, which, helped to increase the cultivation of sugar cane. Of the Dominicans who fomented the raising of sugar cane, we could cite some of the missionaries in Nueva Vizcaya.

⁹ Marín, *Op. cit.*, II, 64, 65, 66.

¹⁰ *El Correo Sino-anamita* (Manila), XXVI (1893), 274-277.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, 284.

6. *Coconut*. Notable in this matter are efforts of Fray Aparicio, who planted 50,000 coconut trees in Lingayen and supervised their growth. Something similar, although in a minor scale, was done by Fray Manuel de Rivas in Santa Cruz de Malabon in Cavite province.¹²

7. *Corn*. Because rice harvest in the Philippines were not always sure due to drought, the scourge of locusts or other accidents, the missionaries found it necessary to look for a substitute that could remove the people from the spectre of hunger. Nothing of those they sought succeeded so well as corn. Brought in from Mexico, it ripened in 40 days and could be raised in abundance. It is still the best substitute for rice in some poor provinces, or in times of disaster when rice crops fail.

8. *Orange*. Although the Philippine orange can in no way compare in quality or quantity with the foreign species, orange is still grown in sufficient numbers to supply the markets of Manila and the nearby provinces. It is successfully raised in Batangas province, especially in Tanauan, where Fray Alvaro Calleja introduced it with such good results that its annual sales reached the amount of ₱50,000 to the good of the people.¹³

9. *Potatoes*. The potatoes that are raised and harvested in the Baguio area were probably introduced by the Igorrots there, to whom the Dominican Fray Miguel Vazquez had given them to plant in those mountains, when the price of imports to Manila became very dear. According to a document, "so excellent and plentiful were the fruits which the potatoes and the *judias* of beans produced that in a short time no priest or government official needed to buy them in Manila."¹⁴

10. *Tobacco*. Tobacco has been one of the products of the Philippines which, for its excellent quality, has always found an easy market abroad. But its cultivation has not been such as to come up to expectations, considering the time and effort expended by the tobacco raiser. Besides, many missionaries, aware of these difficulties and always seeking the spiritual

¹² Ocio, O.P., Hilario Maria, *Compendio de la reseña biográfica de los religiosos de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario de Filipinas* (Manila, 1895), 723.

¹³ Marin, *Op. cit.*, 67.

¹⁴ APSR, tomo 118, fol. 147.

well-being of the people, frequently appealed to the government to end the tobacco monopoly which caused so much dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Despite this, some missionaries encouraged its cultivation in some places where it proved to be beneficial. Among them we shall mention only the Augustinian Friars Román Sánchez in San José, Batangas and Mateo Pérez in Argao;¹⁵ some Franciscan missionaries in the towns of Jaro, Maripipi, Palo in Leyte province.¹⁶

11. *Wheat.* In 1583, the Franciscan Fray Tomás Miranda succeeded in the first attempts to plant wheat in the Philippines in the towns of Tanauan and Lipa, where generally enough was raised for sale to the buyers of wheat bread in Manila. In the nineteenth century, wheat ceased to be planted because of competition from foreign imports.¹⁷

12. *The Graperine.* The Recollect Fray Antonio Fuertes succeeded in obtaining from the stem of the grapevine which he had raised moscatel wine which, on analysis, turned out to be good for the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass. During the centenary celebration in Manila of the feast of Saint Therese of Jesus, Fray Fuertes presented some specimens of the wine he had extracted to the Jury, for which he was awarded a silver medal and a certificate.¹⁸

13. *Other Products.* The first missionaries to the Philippines also tried to bring in other products from America and Europe, like the squash, the cucumber, the onion, the tomato, pepper and watermelon. But these did not develop, for it was necessary to renew the seeding each year.¹⁹

III. OTHER SERVICES

One of such services which the religious parish priests performed to foster the agricultural development of the Philippines was to encourage the migration of families who scarcely

¹⁵ Marin, *Op. cit.*, 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁷ Zamora, *Op. cit.*, 282; Gómez Platero, O.F.M., Eusebio, *Catálogo biográfico de los religiosos franciscanos* (Manila, 1880), 42.

¹⁸ Marin, *Op. cit.*, 209.

¹⁹ Zamora, *Op. cit.*, 209.

had land enough in their residence to other areas still untilled. Notable were the efforts on this regard of the Recollect Fathers in Negros, where there was an increase in population due to the influx of families from Panay, and of the Dominican missionaries in Cagayan Valley. The latter through letters and memoranda to the authorities did not cease in their efforts to invite every now and then the Ilocanos to migrate and make use of their proverbial laboriousness in the agricultural development of the valley. Foremost in this was, above all, Fray Francisco A. Carrozal and Fray Juan F. Villaverde. Other missionaries were tireless in their efforts to obtain animals, ploughs and other work tools, in order to raise the agricultural concerns of those incipient Christian societies to a level beyond the rudimentary, like Fray Juan Ormaza and Fray Remegio R. del Alamo in Nueva Vizcaya.

As the crown of this chapter on the contribution of the Church to the development of Philippine agriculture, we ought to speak here of the dikes, irrigation canals and drainage systems, but we would rather leave that for another chapter.

There is a widespread feeling today that philosophical and theological education, and the faith itself, in the Philippines is too "foreign". Filipino priests must not only be contemporary but also culturally incarnate, if apostolate is to be effective. The priest as the bearer of the Good News, must formulate for himself and communicate to others the Christian message in a way that will not only answer the native aspirations of his own people, but also express their native wisdom and learning for the enrichment of the Christian world. (*Philippine Program of Priestly Formation*, no. 71)