

An Editorial

THESE CHURCH LANDS AGAIN!



Church lands!

Humph.

The tremendous amount of lands owned by the Catholic Church in the Philippines. The Friar Lands.

One of the supposedly vulnerable spots of the Catholic Church in the Philippines is the fabulous wealth of the Friars. Whenever enemies of the Church feel the itch of smearing her name, the target of attack almost always includes these vast land holdings of the Friars.

Recently the question of church lands came up for discussion at the three-day seminar sponsored by the local Federation of Christian (Evangelical) Churches and conducted by a Dr. John C. Bennett for one hundred pastors, church administrators and protestant laymen.

According to a report in the *Philippine Christian Advance*, Protestant monthly, 'The extent of the land holdings of the Roman Catholic Church came into the discussion at many points; the estimates varied from one third of the nation's land

to one tenth of one per cent. In the absence of reliable information the Seminar recommended to the Federation of Christian Churches that data concerning the extent of poverty, landlordism, and dissident elements be collected that an overall picture might be available for Christian workers.'

Sources of information on the land holdings of the Catholic Church in the Philippines are easily accessible to anyone who sincerely wants them. It is a perennial wonder why enemies of the Church do not approach them.

What is the truth about these Church lands?

The following facts and figures, taken from "LAND RESOURCES OF THE PHILIPPINES", a publication of the Department of Agriculture and Commerce in 1939, and from other sources (noted below), will show how utterly ridiculous are the disparaging talks about the fabulous church lands in the Philippines.

According to this publication (page 3):

"The TOTAL AREA of the Philippines is approximately 29, 629,600 hectares . . . it is estimated that 14,044.402 hectares, or 47.40 percent of the entire area of the Philippines, can be converted into productive agricultural farms."

On page 16 of this same publication, under the sub-title "FRIAR LANDS", we find:

"HISTORY.—During the Spanish regime, the religious orders in the Philippines were able to acquire vast tracts of land, aggregating over 400,000 acres."

As one hectare is equivalent to 2,471 acres, this would mean that, at the end of the Spanish Rule in the Philippines, the "Friar Lands" consisted of 161,877 hectares, (or a little over one half of one percent of the total area of the Philippines.) Were we to concede the most improbable supposition that all this land were part of the land convertible into farm land, then the "Friar Lands" would consist of a little over one and one tenth percent of the arable land.

The publication continues:

"Largely thru the efforts of Governor-General William H. Taft, who made a special trip to Rome in the year 1902 to negotiate the purchase of these vast landholdings from the Roman Catholic Church, the Government in December, 1903, succeeded in purchasing 153,330.4923 hectares of land . . . The tracts so purchased . . . were later on subdivided into lots . . . and sold to their occupants . . . pursuant to the Friar Lands Act (Act No. 1120)".

According to these figures the 'Friar Lands' in the beginning of 1904 would amount to about 7,559 hectares.

It must be noted here that the lands then acquired by the government are sometimes still called 'Friar Lands', though the possession of these lands has long since passed from the Catholic Church or any of its religious orders.

So much for the history of the 'Friar Lands'. On page 17 of this pamphlet we have a paragraph which is worth quoting:

"OTHER ESTATES MAY BE PURCHASED:—in order to further minimize agrarian problems, particularly in Central Luzon, the Government has already taken steps to expropriate the homesites in several estates (haciendas), and is studying the advisability of the purchase of the agricultural areas in these and other estates. Among the estates under consideration are the following: . . ."

The pamphlet here goes on to enumerate estates for a total of 28,307 hectares. (That is one fifth of one percent of the potential farm lands of the nation, if every hectare is actual farm land, which, of course, is not the case.)

Regarding the paragraph last quoted a few points must be noted

1. Of that 28,307 hectares at least 7,654 hectares were sold to the tenants and other Filipino farmers (preference, however, having always been given the tenants) before December 1941. This was the Lian Hacienda.

2. Regarding another of the Haciendas listed in the Dept. of Agriculture and Commerce Pamphlet, here are a few facts:

a. It consists of about 2,286 hectares.

b. Of these almost 1,000 hectares are of no practical value, and are unwanted even by those who advocate the confiscation of all such lands and their free distribution among the poor.

c. 600 hectares of the remainder have already been sold to the tenants or other Filipino farmers.

3. Regarding other Church lands. The following is a quotation from Gregorio Zaide's "PHILIPPINE HISTORY FOR CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS" (Modern Book Company, Manila Philippines, 1947) page 367. For a substantiation of the truth of its facts, we are referred to "THE EVENING NEWS", Manila, February 24, 1947.

"The Catholic Church, wishing to help the new-born Republic in improving the conditions of the tenants, offered for sale its landed estates. Accordingly, on February 23, 1947, President Roxas (representing the Republic) and Archbishop O'Doherty (representing the Church) signed the formal agreement for the acquisition by the government of eight estates owned by the Church for the nominal price of P5,630,000. Shortly after the purchase, the President announced that these estates would be sold in small lots at reasonable prices to the tenants."

4. The term "estates" varies in meaning in direct proportion to the

number of authors who use the term. Few, if any, of these authors bother to define the term. It may mean anything from a square acre or two to a huge hacienda.

5. Regarding still another of the listed Haciendas: (And this, according to the abovementioned government-printed pamphlet, consists of 14,082 hectares.) The following quotation, also taken from Mr. Zaide's History, is enlightening.

"Aside from purchasing the eight Church estates, the Republic tried its best to contest Brig. Gen. Ernest R. Burt's purchase of the Buenavista Estate, owned by the the Hospital of San Juan de Dios. Before the war, the Philippine Commonwealth had a contract of lease with the option to buy said estate, but shortly after liberation General Burt purchased it. The Republic filed suit in the Court of First Instance in Bulacan for cancellation of Burt's purchase. On March 18, 1947, the court handed its decision in favor of the Republic of the Philippines. The decision nullified Burt's purchase and ruled that the Republic of the Philippines, as successor of the Commonwealth, still retains the right to buy the estates..."

(underlining ours)

NB. This would mean that before December, 1941, at least 22,336 hectares of the 28,307 hectares listed in the Dept. Agriculture and Commerce Pamphlet, as major Church land holdings, were no longer under the management of the Church.

At present the Catholic Church and its Religious Orders hold only a negligible portion of the arable land in the entire country.