

CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE PHILIPPINES

THE OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE IN THE PHILIPPINES

The story of the missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the Philippines is one that tells of the Lord's loving kindness. It is a story of surprising growth and development after much sacrifice and suffering, a parallel of the phenomenal rise of the Congregation from its humble beginnings in the South of France.

When in 1816 the then Rev. Father Eugene de Mazenod, 29, newly ordained, gathered around him a few priests "to preach the Gospel to the poor," he never expected their number to grow to the 7,000—plus it is today. France at that time was in shambles where religion was concerned. A whole generation had grown up deprived of normal contact with the Faith — with the Mass and priests and the catechism. The situation in the provinces, Father de Mazenod realized, was even worse than in the cities. Evangelists were needed once more, men who would dedicate themselves to stirring up the Faith of the poor provincials.

The small group of priests was primarily a mission band. From their pauperlike house, a former monastery, where a board over two barrels served as their dining table and one lamp gave light to the rooms, the intrepid priests went out to the neighboring towns preaching missions and retreats and rekindling the Faith.

A few years later, in 1826, when their existence as a community was threatened and after their number had grown to a dozen priests and two clerics, they decided to apply for approval as a religious congregation. It was hard work. They had many enemies, among them many of the wealthy and cultured of Marseilles, the large port-city in the South. These people despised their apostolate to the poor and their preaching in the native patois, Provençal—instead of in French.

But after much trouble and many disappointments, the growing band was constituted as religious congregation in February 17, 1825. Pope Leo XIII himself expressed satisfaction with the Rule drawn up by Father de Mazenod.

Several years later the young Founder was made Bishop of Marseilles. Then in 1841 Bishop Bourget of Montreal, Canada asked him if he could send some of his Oblates to help. Father de Mazenod was reluctant. For their own work in France they had too few men. Bishop Bourget spoke to him of the desperate and the poor in his diocese, the Indians and the French settlers. De Mazenod was touched. After consultations with the Oblate Fathers nearby, four priests and two lay brothers were sent to Montreal to help the Bishop.

This sacrifice was to mark the beginning of the congregation's phenomenal growth. It was also to indicate two characteristics of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate: they put themselves at the disposal of the Bishop and people to whom they are sent and adapt to the needs of the situation by willing to sacrifice men they feel they need for a task at hand for another, should the need be greater in that other.

After Canada the Congregation sent men to Ceylon in 1847, the U.S. and Great Britain in 1849, South Africa in 1852, Germany in 1885, Spain in 1893, Australia in 1894, Belgium in 1901, Italy in 1902, Belgian Congo in 1931, Indo-China in 1934, and in 1939, THE PHILIPPINES.

In the summer of 1938 the Secretary of Apostolic Delegate to the Philippines negotiated with the Oblate Superior General the acceptance of a mission in the diocese of Zamboanga. In March, 1939 an official request was made by the Holy See for the Oblates to accept two mission territories: the civil province of Cotabato and the Sulu Archipelago. Both were under the jurisdiction of Msgr. Luis del Rosario, S.J., bishop of Zamboanga.

The first group of Oblate missionaries were from the Provinces of the United States: Rev. Fathers Emile Bolduc, George Dion, Egide Beaudoin, Joseph Boyd, Cuthberth Billman and Francis McSorley, headed by Rev. Father Gerard Mongeau.

When they arrived Cotabato numbered 80,000 Catholics, twice as many Moslems and half as many pagans. Sulu counted 25,000 Mohammedans and only five thousand Catholics.

Four of the seven pioneers stayed in Cotabato, three went to Sulu. Those in Cotabato travelled ceaselessly from their base in what is now Cotabato City to the towns along the coast and in the interior. This was what the three Jesuits they had replaced had done before them. The idea was to keep moving and try to pick up some of the more widely spoken dialects and hope for the day when more missionaries would come to settle the strategic points and work to bring the Lord's people closer to Him.

In Sulu the three Oblates replaced the lone Jesuit, who had been acting as parish priest of Jolo, the capital, where most of the Catholic population was concentrated. One priest took over his duties, the other two gave the pastor assistance needed and hopped from island to island in service of the Catholics and in an attempt to win the goodwill of the Moslems.

In the next few years, that is, till World War II broke out in December, 1941, nine other Fathers and one lay brother were received from the States. The increase in manpower allowed a bit more permanence to be established in the work in Cotabato. A number of parishes were erected, a few small churches and priests' residences built. A dormitory for boys was opened, but this was not to become a lasting foundation. Ground was broken for a small high school in Midsayap, one of the larger towns. In the years to follow the Fathers would often think back to this initial effort in education. Some of the Oblates think today that perhaps they can point to no greater achievement in their efforts in the Philippines than this first Notre Dame high school's establishment on the eve of the global war.

One other significant thing happened to the Oblates before the Japanese invaded the Philippines. They were asked to take care of the national newspaper of the hierarchy of the Philippines, *The Philippines Commonwealth*, which was published in Manila. One Father was assigned to this job, in spite of the severe demands of the new Oblates missions in the South.

Then the war came. The seventeen Oblates lost all they had — Churches and rectories and the school were burned to the ground. The men were separated from each other. They fled with the people to the mountains.

In June 1942 three Oblates attempted a daring escape to Australia, but they were captured and put to death in the town of Menado in the Celebes Sea. The fourteen others, enticed by Japanese promises of "Register and we won't harm you" or merely rounded up at gunpoint, were packed into concentration camps in Davao by the beginning of the year 1943. The stories of these Oblates from the outbreak of the war till their reunion in Davao would fill volumes, the early Fathers like to relate.

In retrospect, as Rev. Father Edward Gordon, Oblate Provincial in 1953, wrote to the General Chapter of that year, the war years "were one of the most valuable periods of the time spent in the Philippines. Today the work of the Oblate Fathers has gone so rapidly and with such obvious success that one often asks why this was so. Some of the answers can be found in the year 1942 when the Fathers lived with the people... shared their goods in common and even wore the clothes of their hosts... received extraordinary protection from the people and in a word cemented a bond that would be used when the battlefields were cleared and it came time again to establish the kingdom of Christ in Cotabato and Sulu."

Came Liberation in 1945 the fourteen Oblates were free to return to their work, but nine of them were in no condition to resume their hectic activities, so they were sent back to the U.S. to regain their strength. The five who stayed on aligned themselves with the Army for purposes of transportation and food and moved south with the forces of the liberation. The privileged five were led by the "little man of big dreams," Father Mongeau, and were to be granted tremendous blessings in the next few months. After helping set up burnt-down towns and cooperating with the civil authorities in helping organized town life, the Fathers started building once more. Churches and rectories went up, and so did the first Notre Dames.

It was about this time that a great change was to take place in the province of Cotabato. In 1939 there had been an effort on the

part of the government to entice people of the north to settle the vast areas in the Koronadal Valley. Unlike a previous attempt at settlement which was a fiasco, this effort was partially successful, but when war came the people fled to their hometowns in the north, most of them with the intention of never returning. They found, however, that the conditions in the north were worse than had ever been in Cotabato in the south. They and thousands of others came back after the war to settle in what they felt was a "land of promise." Towns were springing up, the need for priests became more and more pressing. In 1946 and 1947 alone it is estimated that two hundred thousand settlers made Cotabato their home. The early prejudice against and fear of the Moslems were beginning to break down, and the Moslems for their part were beginning to accept the Christian settlers and live and work with them in the towns.

The Notre Dame school system was an "accident". During the war the Fathers decided that it would be best to stick to parish work. One exception was to be made in reopening the school at Midsayap. The school at Midsayap could not reopen, however, due to the presence of Japanese stragglers in the area. A Notre Dame was set up in Cotabato instead. This proved to be an instant success. Enrollment went way beyond expectations. People in other towns started clamoring for schools. It was at *their* insistence and because the Oblate Fathers recognized the seriousness of their needs that the now famous N.D. chain of schools was established.

The arrival of the Marist Brothers in 1948 assured the educational system of permanence and professionalism. In the years that followed Dominican Sisters, Religious of the Virgin Mary and Maryknoll nuns were to take care of the 80-plus Notre Dame school units.

Through these schools, the Oblates felt, the Faith that was founded largely on custom could be given its proper solid foundation of reason. The adults were practically consigned to their old ways, the youth was the important element. Bring up a whole new generation in the Faith! — this was the plan. It did not succeed because there were not enough priests and religious to go around and because the influence of the home

had been badly misjudged. The schoolchildren took on the Catholic values at school but rejected them and accepted the values of their elders when they were away from school and at home.

The schools alone would not do. In 1947 the first issue of the *Mindanao Cross* rolled off the machines of the new Notre Dame Press. It was to be a community paper with a mild sprinkling of religious news. In 1957 radio station DXMS, the first in the province, was established. A few years later a second station, DXND, which is connected with the Notre Dame Colleges of Cotabato, was founded. There is talk in the air about a TV station but the when and the how and the where still have to be settled.

As the years rolled by more and more ideas for reaching the people more effectively and really being of service to them were turned into realities. A hospital run by Dominican nuns was set up, as were clinics in several towns. A housing project (properly called Notre Dame Village) relocated 400 families from the slums of Cotabato. A mission band was started, a retreat house built. And in the last few years, serious efforts have been made at helping the people set up credit unions and cooperatives, and once dry ricefields now have all the water they need because Bishop Mongeau and his priests had the foresight and generosity to buy pumps for the people, payable over a long term period whenever they enjoy good harvests.

The situation in Cotabato was changing for the Oblates. Every year a fresh batch of young priests would arrive, eager to help—and was there work to be done! In 1958, seven years after Father Mongeau had been elevated to the episcopacy, the Passionist Fathers came in and took over the whole of the southern portion of the province. A year before that the Bishop together with Father Dion founded the Oblates of Notre Dame, a new congregation for young women. Today they number over eighty and do indispensable work in the rural areas. And then also an increasing number of Filipinos were joining the Oblates and becoming priests. Filipino vocations were so plentiful that by 1967, of the 80-plus Oblates in the Philippines, 30 were native to the country. The first diocesan priests for Cotabato were ordained in December, 1967, and the Bishop's seminary at Nuling gives promise of many fruitful years to come vocation-wise.

Meanwhile in Sulu Father Francis McSorley had been appointed Vicar Apostolic of the newly erected Vicariate of Jolo. He was consecrated Bishop in 1958. Progress in the archipelago was not as phenomenal, but it was steady and telling. Schools and clinics were established, a weekly newspaper, the *Sulu Star*, was started, an amphibian plane was acquired to facilitate travel, radio apparatus were set wherever an Oblate Father was stationed to ward off the "evil spirits" of loneliness and assure speedy communications.

Sulu today can boast of the Medical Missionaries who take care of the physically sick in the islands and of the recently founded Carmelite Convent which is a continual source of aid to the people's Spiritual welfare.

In this 98% Moslem province conversions are few and vocations are much fewer—but the Lord has been good, and the son of a Moslem priest is today a priest of tremendous difficulties and his vocation to the Oblate priesthood is strictly best-seller material.

But the aim of the Oblate Fathers in Sulu is not, for the moment, centered on conversion. Much work has to be done by way of understanding the culture and appreciating Mohammedanism, of really getting into the skin of the Moslems, before serious attempts at conversion can be considered. Notre Dame of Jolo College has become a center for the study of Islamic culture and religion and men from abroad as well as from large universities in Manila come here for research. In the meantime the Oblates and the other generous religious in Sulu do all they can to be of service to the people by way of schools and clinics. They look on themselves principally as witnesses to Jesus Christ and His Church.

And already Moslem prejudice against Christians and outsiders is breaking down. Interestingly the Cathedral in Jolo, a truly beautiful building for prayer, was constructed with the help of the Moslems, and it is considered not just the pride of the Catholic Church but of Jolo.

Besides their missions in Cotabato and Sulu the Oblates have under their care a parish and a school in Grace Park, Caloocan City; a mission band with bases in the scholasticate at Quezon City, Bacolod City and Cotabato; and a high school in Hongkong.

Our Lady of Grace Parish was confided to their direction shortly after the war. They thought of the parish as a base in Manila, sort of an essential house in as much as all the goods sent from abroad and intended for the missions had to pass customs in Manila. There were only 15 parishioners then and Caloocan was largely a vast ricefield, but now the area has been divided into four parishes, so crowded has it become with people, and even then the Oblate Fathers have more than 30,000 people at our Lady of Grace. The school at Grace Park includes secondary and elementary grades. Oblate priests act as administrators and serve also as counsellors.

The mission band is an ever-on-the-go group. The seven priests preach retreats almost as often as they are invited. This keeps them out as many as 28 days a month. Four are stationed at the scholasticate, two in Bacolod, and one has charge of the retreat house and the shrine of Our Lady in Tamontaka, Cotabato.

Hongkong opened her arms to the Oblates in 1966. The school there is staffed by men from this Province. How the Oblates got there is an interesting and revealing story. The Philippines Provincial, Rev. Father Joseph Milford, thought that it was time, in spite of how thinly spread out our Fathers in the missions were, that the Province had foreign missions of its own. Hongkong was considered because of the possibility of getting into Communist China, at least so the joke goes.

So the Provincial approached His Excellency, Bishop Bianchi of Hongkong, "Bishop, we would like to come into your diocese." The Bishop countered, "What would you like to do?" "We are at your disposal; what can we do for you?" answered the Provincial. Said the Bishop surprised, "This is the first time a religious said something like this to me."

That is how the Oblates got into schoolwork in Her Majesty's Crown Colony, and with this, this brief sketch of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the Philippines comes to a close. They have been delighted to be of service to the people and, thanks be to the Lord, have seen years blessed with good fortune.