



HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN THE PHILIPPINES

Pablo Fernandez, O.P.

Chapter 27

PROJECTS FOR MATERIAL PROGRESS

The missionaries in the Philippines were not so much given to projects for material progress during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, but in general concerned themselves only with their pastoral tasks and the construction of churches. But in the 19th century, we find them emulating one another in the search for a better material world for the Filipinos. The times were ripe, for even if they had come slowly or late, the currents of civilization and modern progress had by then reached these shores. The unexpected increase in population and the foundation of new towns served to spur the missionaries on to work in this regard.

The Franciscan Fray Joaquín de Coria writes:

Everything that one finds in these widespread provinces of the Philippines in the matter of churches, schools, town halls, bridges, streets, irrigation dykes, is practically the exclusive work of the missionaries, in cooperation with the local magistrates or *gobernadorcillos* and the people. The native is obliged to work at the public works for forty days of the year. As a result, the missionary who is ordinarily the architect of these projects, together with the *gobernadorcillo*, and watching lest the people be occupied during the season for working in their farms, designated the days

and the tasks of the public works which were announced by the town crier. One day, the people made bricks; another day, wood was gathered to burn and dry them; a third day, they burned lime; etc. In this way, these existing works have been carried out without costing the treasury a single *cuarto*.¹

This chapter will be a brief review of these works to which those heralds of the gospel directed their energies.

I. *Planning and Founding Towns.* When the gospel first reached the Philippines, there were already centers of town life, like Cebu and Manila; but they were few and quite thinly populated. The people by tradition chose for their places of residence — and in this they showed great foresight — the two sides of the mouths of rivers. In the hinterlands, there were settlements, as was to be expected, but these were clusters of bamboo and nipa huts of one room each, raised on posts about a meter and a half above the ground.

The first thing that conquerors and missionaries alike did on arriving at a place was to choose the best site for a town which they laid out in straight lines. As much as possible, this was to be far from swamps, on flat open space, by the bank or not far from a river. Then they planted a cross, around which they marked off areas reserved for the public buildings of the church and of the government: the church *convento* or parish residence, the school, the town hall, with their respective courtyards. All these were built around a square plaza.

Many times it was not easy to form new towns or to transfer native settlements to a better site, due to the attachment of the people to the places of their birth or to the burial grounds of their ancestors' bones. This explains why such foundations or relocations were frequently a source of unending *expedientes* from the government and the bitter disappointments of the missionaries.

An example of these towns which owe their origin to the initiative of the missionary was Lemery, a town in the ancient district of Concepcion in Panay Island. It was Fray Paulino

¹ *Memoria sobre Filipinas*, MSS in AUST, Sección de "Folletos," 177, fol. 10v.

Diaz, O.S.A. who transformed it in the middle of the last century from a poor barrio, peopled by residents habitually given to banditry, into a relatively prosperous town.²

An example also of those selfless apostles in the erection of towns is perhaps the town of Tuguegarao. Fray Hilarion Ma. Ocio says:

. . . the outlay of the town is perhaps the prettiest that one can imagine. Some 20 or 30 streets drawn in a line not much longer across than lengthwise, and crossing at right angles, form a perfect octagon; many clusters of houses, each of which has its own orchard filled with trees, which give them a quaint beauty: all of this the work of the immortal Fray Lobató, a religious of great talents and creativity.³

II. *Roads.* A good number of the streets and roads of the Philippines today follow the general outline and trajectory of the roads that existed during the Spanish regime. These were very probably in the majority of cases an improvement over the ancient trails and paths of the natives. It must have been difficult for the Filipino workers, almost always under the direction of the missionary, to open and maintain streets and roads through swampy areas, groves and thick forest, because the instability and lack of firmness of the soil demanded a solid pavement on those roads. In general, however, because they were not well paved, the roads turned into mud-holes during the rainy season, or during the dry, into clouds of dust, and all throughout the year, they were a problem that needed constant repair.

If they served only as pathways for men and beasts of burden, the roads were called *de herradura* ("for the horse-shoe"); if they were passable by pull-carts, *de carretones* ("for carts"). At the end of the 19th century, some roads were paved with concrete; but the majority consisted of a top layer more or less thick of earth, sand and gravel.

² Marín y Morales, Valentín, O.P., *Ensayo de una síntesis de los trabajos realizados por las Corporaciones religiosas españolas en Filipinas*, II (Manila, Imprenta de Sto. Tomas, 1901), 133.

³ *Monumento dominicano*, APSR, MSS, "Ministerios," I, 185.

Let us consider some of the projects of the missionaries in this regard.

Fray Lorenzo de Santa Maria († 1585), a Franciscan lay brother, was perhaps the first, or one of the first, to dedicate himself to the work of opening roads in the Philippines. He wanted to make it easy for the Christian neophytes to come to the church, especially for mass. Until he fell sick, he labored to clear areas overgrown with weeds and flatten rough terrain.⁴

In 1876, the people of Dulag, Leyte, under the direction of Father José Fernandez, also a Franciscan, opened a road 18 kilometers long to Tanauan. To finish it, they had to blow up the rock in certain areas and the same priest also taught the people how to make augers.⁵ We need not say anything about the other roads in the towns of Leyte and Samar opened under the supervision of the Franciscans. They frequently had to provide the food, the drink, the work and draught animals at their own expense, and they had to hire up to 200 workers.⁶

But the most famous roads in Philippine history have been those opened in 1739 by the Dominican Fray Manuel del Río and, towards the end of the 19th century, those by Fray Juan F. Villaverde, also a Dominican. The government and the Dominican missionaries had greatly desired opening the former road to give them a quicker and freer pathway across the country from Upper Pampanga (now Nueva Ecija) to Cagayan, instead of the 15 days they had to spend if they travelled by sea; but the Igorrots and Gaddangs had always opposed the project. Finally, in 1739, Fr. del Río succeeded in completing the project. It started from Maliongliong, Pangasinan, cut across the heights of the mountains of the Central Cordillera, descended to the Ituy Valley (south Nueva Vizcaya), and continued through the passes of Abungul mountain to Gamu in the south Isabela province.⁷

We need not point out that for a work of such extent, with insufficient means and few workers, Father del Río had to

⁴ Marín, *Op. cit.*, II, 353.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 375-379.

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷ Anónimo, *Relación de los sucesos de la misión de Santa Cruz de Ituy en la provincia de Paniquí, media entre las de Pangasinan y Cagayan de las Filipinas*. 1739, 4, 12-14.

follow the existing paths and trails. This road, nonetheless, which had won fame for its constructor even in the halls of Rome and Madrid, did not last long because of the hostility of the Igorrots. It would have been better perhaps if it had been built through the Caraballo range, from San José to Aritao. But this was not possible for the Dominicans did not administer the missions in Upper Pampanga.

Better known were the roads traced by Fr. Villaverde, more modern, and which had attracted the attention of the Americans at the turn of the century. Three roads were built by him: 1) one from Bagabag, Nueva Vizcaya to Kiangan, 40 kilometers long, 1 meter wide and with an incline of not more than 10 degrees; 2) a second, from Bagabag to Carig (Isabela), passing through Abungul, also with not more than 10 degrees in its deepest incline and called by the people the "road of the Holy Rosary"; 3) the most used and the best known, a third road in 1889 from Aritao, passing through the Caraballo mountains to San Nicolas, 47 kilometers long. In constructing these roads, Father Villaverde used a theodolite or levelling needle which is still preserved in the Museum of the University of Santo Tomas.⁶ The same father also planned to build another road between Aritao and Puncan, besides drawing up a blueprint for a railroad, over the Caraballo mountains without need of a tunnel. But because of his age and his transfer to Kiangan in 1892, the plans were not carried out.

At the suggestion of his own Provincial Superior, Fray Simeón de San Agustín, a Recollect brother received an appointment from Governor Rafael Maria Aguilar to open the road for the town of San Sebastian, then a suburb in the outskirts of Quiapo. The brother died shortly thereafter on 20 November 1801 because of the excessive labor he undertook to carry out the wishes of the authorities for the sake of the common good.⁷ Fray Marcial Bellido, another Recollect, showed the kind of man he was when he built a road over a truly difficult terrain,

⁶ Malumbres, Julián, O.P., *Biografía del P. Fr. Juan Fernández Villaverde*, Manila, Tip. Pont. de la Univ. de Sto. Tomas, 1924, p.14 ff; APSR, "Cagayan," VIII, fol. 37 ("Las Obras del P. Villaverde").

⁷ Sabada, Francisco, O.S.A., *Catálogo de los religiosos agustinos recoletos*, etc. (Madrid, 1906), 317.

to connect Masinloc, Zambales with its collateral, Palawig.¹⁰ In the last decade of the 19th century, a third Recollect, Fray Celestino Yoldi, opened a road when he moved the town of San Juan de Bolboc (Batangas) from a low, swampy area to a better, healthier and prettier site.¹¹

III. *Bridges.* If bridges are needed in every clime and country, they are much more necessary in the Philippines where the land is crisscrossed by rivers and numerous streams and estuaries. In laying out roads, therefore, the missionaries also took care to construct bridges where the land required them, and repaired them when floods or inundations swept them away. To lessen this latter danger, which in the Philippines is not unusual even today, the friars sought to substitute for their temporary or makeshift wooden bridges brick or concrete structures.

The Franciscans Fray Francisco de Gata (†1591) who came to the country in 1579, dedicated himself to the construction of bridges in the towns administered by the Franciscans in order to facilitate church-going for the people.¹² In Mahayhay, a town of Laguna, there were six stone bridges constructed and to a great extent paid for by the Franciscan fathers. A Franciscan missionary, Fray Victorino del Moral built a bridge across the Holla river in 1851, called "del Capricho" because of its daring structure—resting on a double pier, measuring 150 feet long and 48 feet wide. This daring design won the praise of the chief architect of the Philippines who wrote in a government report submitted on 7 December 1852, that it was a "very bold construction in its beauty and structure." It withstood without sustaining any cracks the earthquakes of 16 September 1852, 3 June 1863, and those of 1880.¹³

The extraordinarily solid bridge of Carig, a barrio of Tuguegarao, was the work of the Dominican Fray Antonio Lobato.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 456.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 659-660.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *Op. cit.*

Among the Recollects, it was Brother Lucas de Jesus Maria († 1792), universally acknowledged for his architectural skill, who "built to the admiration of all the last pier of the bridge over the Pasig which faces the Rosario street."¹⁵ On 5 February 1857, the acting governor, Don Ramon Montero, decided to honor with a medal Fray Matias Carbonell, a Recollect lay brother, for the services rendered in the erection of the bridge of Isabela II¹⁶ over the river near the Villa in the Recollect hacienda at Imus, Cavite. The work facilitated and shortened communications between the neighboring towns and the surrounding provinces.¹⁷

IV. *Dykes.* In the Philippines, the abundant rivers flow freely, especially during the rainy season; but ordinarily, even during the dry season, they course along deep and wide gorges and river beds, making it difficult to construct dykes that could control the waters to irrigate the fields. The dykes that have been constructed needed many thousands of pesos which the towns were not in a position to contribute. It is not surprising, then, that Fray Martinez de Zúñiga should write in his *Estadismo*: "Which town in the Philippines can pay for these huge expenses? Which individual person among the Filipinos or mestizos is capable of undertaking these works? The dykes that now exist — these the Spaniards have built or the Religious Orders."¹⁸ Here are a few examples of what he meant.

Several Augustinian friars spared no efforts helping the people of Balaoang, Ilocos, to build two dykes to irrigate their farm lands. The dykes measured 12 meters long, 8 meters high and 3 meters thick.¹⁹

In Libon, Albay, different Franciscan fathers labored to straighten out a dyke that had blocked the Quinalig river there for many years previously, and had been reason why many rice fields had been neglected. Once it was repaired, the people

¹⁵ Marín, *Op. cit.*, 199.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 269-270.

¹⁸ Martínez de Zúñiga, Joaquín, O.S.A., *Estadismo de las Islas Filipinas* (Madrid, 1892), I, 52.

¹⁹ Marín, *Op. cit.*, 101.

came back to till their abandoned lands, occasioning an increase in the population.²⁰

The dyke in the San Juan river in Calamba, Laguna, which for more than 200 years had spread fertility over the lands and terrain of Pansol which the Rizal family had leased, was constructed by the Jesuits who until 1768 were owners of an extensive property in this locality. Fr. Martínez de Zúñiga comments: ". . . . after the expulsion [of the Jesuits], it became the property of the king, but its administrators neglected it such that the dyke no longer served for irrigation, for which reason almost all those lands which before used to yield rich harvests of rice, are at the moment empty and without tillage."²¹ Later, we do not know when or by whom, the dyke was rebuilt and for many years spread fertility anew throughout these farm lands.

In the same way, the Dominican Fray José Torres, named curate of Mangaldan, Pangasinan in 1825, initiated and supervised construction of a dyke and a series of irrigation canals which greatly benefited farming in the town.²² This dyke, set up in the river Tolong by the *sitio* Mapagdaan, was finally destroyed through the years, due more to its faulty structure than to the flow of the water. Instead, therefore, of repairing it, the succeeding curate, Fray Ramon Fernandez, O.P., erected a new one, 18 brazas long, 3 brazas wide and 3 brazas deep. The people, now realizing the benefits such a project would bring to their crops, enthusiastically seconded the project with energy.²³

The dyke in Casundit in Imus, Cavite, "the most solid work found in the Islands," was built by the Recollect lay brother, Fray Lucas de Jesus Maria.²⁴

V. *Canals*. From 1884 to the end of the last century, several Augustinians strove and partly succeeded in re-channelling rivers that caused great harm to the towns.²⁵ Fray José Esparragosa in 1846 finished such a project in Baler, Que-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 364.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, 52-53.

²² Ocio, Hilario Maria, O.P., *Compendio de la Reseña biográfica, etc* (Manila, 1895), 593.

²³ Cfr. *Diario de Manila*, 18 Julio 1850.

²⁴ Sábada, *Op. cit.*, 273.

²⁵ Marin, *Op. cit.*, 86.

zon, paying for it from his own funds. He opened a canal more than a league long, capable of irrigating land that supported 13,000 Christians. The priests who succeeded him did not spare any labor until they were able to bring the water to the other points of the same parish.²⁶

At the urging of Fray Máximo Rico, a Franciscan missionary in Morong, and with his supervision, the people opened a canal to irrigate a wide flatland called "Balso," despite the difficulty of having to cut through a mountain of stone.²⁷ The inhabitants of Siniloan, led by the Augustinian Fray Agustín Jiménez, did the same thing, for the purpose of cultivating a wider area and increasing their harvests of palay.²⁸ Finally, we ought not to omit the massive dyke built by Fray Juan Fernando, O.P. over the Meycauayan river, a structure that caught the attention of experienced engineers in hydraulics.²⁹

VI. *Artesian Wells.* The people of Betis, Pampanga, owe to Fray Manuel Camañas the digging of the artesian well which supplied them with drinking water.³⁰ Likewise, Fathers B. Fernandez and Z. Fernandez dug three wells 60 meters deep in Alcoy, Cebu, to provide drinking water for the people.³¹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 355.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 356.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 674.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 114.