

In a Nutshell...

"ALL CHRISTIANS who are aware of the true value of their Christian Faith have to agree that the greatest and most significant event in our history was the evangelization of our people, when we 'turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God' (1 Thes 1, 9). 'Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gifts' (2 Cor 9, 15). It was our conversion to Christianity that ushered us into the family of civilized nations" (Joint Pastoral Letter, February 2nd, 1964).

We are just a few days away from the historical event that has the whole nation a-foot, namely, the 4th centennial of the Christianization of the Philippines. This celebration will be nationwide, but the center will be Cebu City where the Spanish missionaries began their work four centuries ago.

In order to make the celebration of this Centenary as worthy as the occasion demands, the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines has decided to hold the following activities:

1. Send a petition to the Holy Father that he may deign
 - a) declare the year 1965 a Jubilee Year for the Philippines; thus, it will be a year of thanksgiving and of grace;
 - b) confer the title of Minor Basilica on the Santo Niño shrine in Cebu City;
 - c) grant the privilege of Canonical Coronation of the image of Santo Niño de Cebu, the image that was so closely connected with the first missionary endeavors of the Augustinians in these islands.
2. To hold in Cebu City, the cradle of Christianity in the Philippines, the Third National Eucharistic Congress from April 28 to May 2, 1965.
3. To bless the cornerstone of a seminary for the Philippine Foreign Mission Society, a missionary congregation which the Hierarchy has agreed to establish.

The Catholic Church in the Philippines has gone a long way since the first missionaries introduced Christianity into this Archipelago, in 1565. It was a crusade fraught with unspeakable sacrifices and hardships galore, and yet it was a most marvelous feat. If we cast a glance four hundred years back, we will realize that even before the turn of the 16th century, the zealous missionaries had already penetrated such remote places as the Ilocos region, Cagayan, Abra, Pangasinan and the Bicol region, not to mention the immediate neighboring provinces of Negros, Panay, Bohol, Leyte and the Island of Mindanao. Thus we see that by the middle of the 17th century the missionaries, of different Religious Orders, had already spread all over the Islands.

This bespeaks the truly missionary and evangelical spirit that animated them to bring the people of this religiously fertile soil into the fold of Christ. The positive result of their missionary zeal can be

gleaned from the fact that by 1579 Pope Gregory XIII erected the diocese of Manila as a Suffragan of Mexico. Then again, in 1595 three new dioceses were added, namely, Nueva Segovia, Nueva Caceres and Cebu, while the diocese of Manila was raised to the rank of an Archdiocese.

As the Catholic Faith spread further and further throughout the Archipelago, more and more dioceses and ecclesiastical districts were erected, and with the erection of new dioceses, more and more vocations for the holy priesthood resulted.

The missionaries built not only churches but also schools, hospitals, and orphanages. They not only taught the people religion but also introduced them to Western civilization. They also instructed them in the science of horticulture and agriculture as well as in animal husbandry. "Where the Friars were the tutors of the people, it was frequent for them to mingle in their sermons some useful lessons on agriculture, industrial and commercial affairs," states the historian Retana.

"We feel bound to show our sincere gratitude to Catholic Spain, and very specially to its Religious Orders. For they were the actual factors of our Filipino Civilization, and they were the ones who really placed the foundations of our Filipino Nationality," averred Archbishop José Maria Cuenco of Jaro.

That the Christianization of the Philippines was foremostly the work of grace, is shown in the following statistics:

a) POPULATION:	
Inhabitants	28,866,476
Catholics (82%)	23,537,554
Non-Catholics (18%)	5,328,922
b) HIERARCHY:	
Archdioceses	8
Dioceses	19
Prelatures	11
Apostolic Vicariates	1
Parishes	1,581
Priests	4,175
Diocesan	1,935
Religious	2,240
Religious	8,406
Men	3,118
Women	5,288
c) INSTITUTIONS:	
Seminaries: Major	14
Minor	30
Seminarians: Majors	1,014
Minors	2,785
Catholic Schools	1,442
Enrollment	604,037

And thus we conclude with a quotation from the Joint Pastoral Letter: "Divine Providence has truly chosen our country to be the 'light-house of Catholicism' in the Orient, as John XXIII said (Address to President Macapagal). We can apply to our people those words of the Lord to the Israelites: 'I will set my Dwelling among you, and will not disdain you. Ever present in your midst, I will be your God, and you will be my people' (Lev. 26, 11-12)."

by Luis E. Schoenfeld, S.V.G.