

Franciscan Missions in the Philippine Islands

San Francisco del Monte: Mission Trail Series

"A lay brother of the Franciscan order of friars," says an old chronicle, "was the foundation stone of the Holy and Apostolic Province of St. George the Great, which was placed and sustained on the fruits of honor and uprightness." The venerable Fray Antonio de San Gregorio, for such was the name of the brother, desiring to go to evangelize in the name of Christ the people of the Solomon islands, and overcoming innumerable obstacles, obtained permission from the prelates of the order, from our Catholic Monarch, Philip II, and from the Roman Pontiff, to enlist missionaries for his purpose. He quickly found sixteen fervent companions who, departing from the Holy Province of San José, situated in the two Castillas, happily arrived at Seville in the year 1576, where, capitularly congregated, they named as their first prelate the Son of God Fray Pedro de Alfaro. From that date they remained organized under the name of San Felipe, whose name was retained until the following year, 1577, when our Holy Father Gregory XIII denominated the organization that of San Gregorio (St. George), and in 1586 Sixto V erected it into a province by his bull *Dum ad uberes fructus, etc.*, honoring it likewise with the titles of Holy and Apostolic.

"Our zealous missionaries were on the point of departing for the Solomon islands, when Philip II, informed by the Augustinian Fray Diego de Herrera, of the urgent necessity for missionaries in these islands (the Philippines), issued a royal decree that the Franciscan mission then in Seville should sail for the Philippines--which therefore was done in the harbor of San Lucar de Barrameda in the first part of July, 1576.

"Happy and contented, they voyaged toward New Spain (Mexico), when an epidemic broke out on the ship and afforded them an opportunity to demonstrate their fervent charity. Four missionaries died, and another in Vera Cruz and another in Jalapa. To replace these, six others were recruited in the province of the Santo Evangelio de la Observancia. The venerable founder, Fray Antonio de San Gregorio, returned to Spain from Mexico upon urgent errands relative to the mission, and another friar was left sick in Jalapa when the mission embarked; so that, although in the first mission there had been twenty-three religious, there did not arrive in these islands more than fifteen, whose arrival was on June 24, 1577.

"The enthusiasm, jubilation and extraordinary pleasure demonstrated by the Very Noble and Ever Loyal City of Manila for the sons of the seraph of Assisi, clearly revealed the abundant blessings expected from their unquestioned apostolic zeal. The city received them in a manner so singular that it has never been equalled. The Master of Camp, Don Pedro Chaves, who governed the islands at the time because of the absence of the Sr. Governor and Captain General Don Francisco de Sande, ordered all the troops into parade formation along the route the evangelists would have to take to enter the city. Accompanied by Sr. D. Pedro Chaves himself, by all persons of distinction, and by a multitude of the native inhabitants, amid a din of vivas, acclamations, music, salvos of artillery and universal rejoicing, the missionaries repaired to the monastery of the Augustinians, where they were cordially and generously made welcome."

"Such then was the coming of the first Franciscans to the Philippines. Their history in general since that time must be taken up in a later paper, and this one confined to the sanctuary of San Francisco del Monte, now developing into a beautiful suburb of Manila.

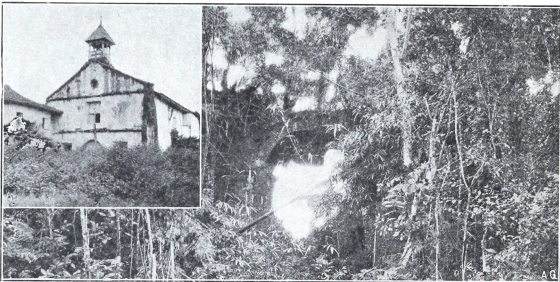
No one need be reminded, perhaps, of the fanatic character of the faith of the Franciscans: the hardships heroic individuals among them have endured on a hundred borders of civilization throughout the world at this day. Fathetic figures indeed are, therefore, the few robed zealots who still occupy the ancient monastery in Manila; who, under circumstances and inno-

vations they can in no wise comprehend, but which they fear are fraught with terrible consequences for the human soul, are all aging in restless dequitude. They attend the bells, they chant the solemn service, they confess the contrite; but as they no longer evangelize the heathen and the pagan and sustain the neophyte in his moments of early doubt, they are like men lost in their way. The world has moved on and they have been unable to follow its wayward progress. They question the saints that of old banished epidemics and labored in the very sight of men to repulse the armed attacks of heretics upon the city, and the saints give them no counsel. Aimless, but with undiminished faith, they live their last complaining and impotent years.

But the reader is now looking upon the Franciscans, a strict schismatic branch of the Augustinians, their patron St. Francis of Assisi, in another age--an age when the church was the state, for all practical purposes, and the aims of government were to promote the work of the missions and maintain the authority of the evangelizing friars.

Thus, concerning San Francisco del Monte estate, one sees:

"On February 17, 1590, the Sr. Governor and Captain General D. Santiago de Vera gave to this province of S. Gregorio in the name of His



Franciscan Church and Ruined Chapel, San Francisco del Monte: Now a Beautiful Manila Suburb

Majesty a small *encomienda* (a country estate, with the inhabitants thereof) situated a little more than a league from Manila, toward the northeast, for the founding of a monastery where the religious might retire from time to time to enjoy a vacation and for prayers and meditation.

"Certainly the site is admirably adapted to its purpose, its thousand marvels impel one to dedicate himself to virtue. It is truly a wilderness, though so close by Manila, and thoroughly delightful because of the grateful shade of its trees, the varied bird life, and the river, meandering through it in the form of a horseshoe from northwest toward the southern boundary. By virtue of the donation, the Franciscans took possession of the *encomienda* the same year, 1590; and there was constructed, by order of the holy prelate Fray Pedro Bautista, who selected the site, a small monastery and hermitage of bamboo and nipa palm, under the advocacy of Our Lady of Monticello. Later it took the name of San Francisco del Monte, vulgarly applied to it from the beginning.

"In 1593, the monastery and hermitage was rebuilt, of wood, and in 1599 from stone at the expense of two generous and pious gentlemen, Captains D. Pedro Salazar and D. Domingo Ortiz de Chagoya.

"In the rebellion of the Chinese in 1639, the structure suffered the diabolical fury of

these savages, who destroyed it almost entirely in their retreat from Manila. At last, in the years from 1639 to 1699, the structure still in existence was built, the cost being borne by D. Tomás de Endaya, its patron. The building, although of simple design, is, notwithstanding, quite solid. It is cemented upon an enormous rock on the crest of a small mountain and is large enough to accommodate twelve religious, which number it has had in at times when the missionaries were numerous.

"It was even a house for novitiates in ancient times.

"The church was dedicated in the year mentioned, 1699, to the holy protonomarchs of Japan, San Pedro Bautista and his companions, in memory of their having sanctified this solitary retreat. A thousand recollections of devotion awaken the attention of the Christian in this famous sanctuary. He may see in its church a most revered image of Our Lady of Sorrows, which in ancient times was in a little stone chapel which served as the last station of the *via crucis*, which, commencing in the courtyard of the monastery, continued toward the north the exact distance that the Mount of Calvary is distant from Pilate's palace in Jerusalem. The chapel was built upon a tiny hill, at the foot of which, some hundred paces from the chapel, is the fountain of the Virgin. The waters of this fountain, not quite clear in the stream, when left to settle for a time are exquisite and very healthful.

"Time which consumes all things, and a poverty which a little or nothing can repair, have been the reason why the chapel is now beheld a total ruin.

"A very curious cave below the main altar of the church also attracts the attention. In this cave the martyrs who are justly glorified in this

holy province of San Gregorio, in the fierce clutches of the stern discipline, rehearsed the letting of their noble blood, which shortly should be poured out in torrents in honor and defense of Christ crucified. Here were prepared with holy exercises all the missionaries who went from this apostolic province for the kingdoms of Japan, China, Cochinchina, Cambodia, Siam, Ternate and a hundred other parts. Now there is left but a single friar, as a custodian."

How pale beside this record are those which tell of the missions in America, supported and in the midst of powerful colonies; whereas in the Philippines, distant from Spain by half the circumference of the world, there was but a feeble colony supplied and maintained by a single ship a year--this often never reaching port either because of storms or successful attacks by the British or Dutch. It was under such conditions that the missions sent forth their evangelists to proud empires like China and Japan: to no nomadic but not unfriendly tribes, such as the Indians of America, but to ancient, rich and resourceful nations boastful of their prowess in war and jealous of their pagan deities. From such a place, into such places, went the Christian zealots--Spanish, and believing that Philip ought to add to his realm all that they conquered with the cross--with the startling message, "Thou shalt have no other gods."