

Notes on

**THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH
IN THE PHILIPPINES*
1521 - 1898**

(continued)

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Chapter Eleven

COUNCILS AND SYNODS

1. **The First Synod in the Philippines Held in 1582.** A resumé of its acts, apparently incomplete and published in *Philippiniana Sacra*, carries the following epigraph: "A Summary of A Meeting which was held in the form of a Council in the year 1582, in order to provide a basis for questions touching the spread of the Faith and to justify the conquests made and still to be made in the future by the Spaniards."²

* An essay towards a history of the Church in the Philippines during the Spanish period 1521-1898, translated by Jose Arcilla S.J., faculty member of Ateneo University, Department of History.

¹ Cfr. *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. IV, No. 12 (September-December, 1969) 431-537.

² The true acts of this assembly must have disappeared in the fire of 1583 which destroyed the greater section of Manila, then a city of wooden houses. The author of the *Anales Eclesiasticos* says: "In these archives, all the original papers perished, and with them those of the synod [just] celebrated." *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. II, No. 5 (May-August, 1967), p. 462. The acts published in this review are a *Summary*, that is, a resumé or compendium. The second book seems to be missing, but it has two appendices which cannot belong to the body of the acts from what we read in *Philippiniana*

Present at this meeting, besides Bishop Salazar, were the prelates and learned men of the Orders, some jurists and, on occasion, experienced captains. They worked to gain information about the land, and make sure that the discussions proceeded in truth and in justice.³

The *Summary* consists of two parts. Part One, with five brief chapters; Part Two, with six chapters divided into paragraphs according to the following topics: 1. The King's Concerns; 2. Governors; 3. Royal Officials; 4. *Alcaldes Mayores* and other Administrators of Justice; 5. Captains and Soldiers Engaged in the task of Pacification, otherwise known as "Conquest"; 6. *Encomenderos, Hacenderos, Collectors, Their Servants and Slaves*. Four other chapters are promised, but these are not discussed in the proper place, for the second part abruptly ends after paragraph 20 of Chapter VI with two appendices entitled, "Orders and Instructions for Observance by *Alcaldes Mayores*" and "Tariff Rates." These, however, are discussed in various paragraphs throughout the six chapters mentioned.⁴

According to the fourth chapter of Part One, the purpose of the meeting was "to discuss the good order and system to be followed in the administration of this new Church so that she may march forward." But because the new Church in the Philippines in her continued progress, was encumbered with many obstacles from "persons, things, usages and customs," as is clear from the *Summary*, discussions in the meeting

Sacra (Vol. IV, No. 12) p. 529: "For any crime, cause, or reason no pecuniary punishments are inflicted on the *indios* because the king has so commanded in the instructions given to Governor Perez [Dasmariñas]." Dasmariñas was appointed governor of the Philippines on 9 August 1589 and arrived in Manila 8 May 1590, a few years after the abortive synod. (cfr. Perez, Lorenzo, O.F.M., "Origin de las Misiones Franciscanas en el Extremo Oriente," *Archivo Ibero-Americano*, Año 11, No. 7, (Enero-Febrero de 1915) 386-87.

³ Present at the synod, besides Bishop Salazar, were the diocesan Provisor Fr. Cristobal de Salvatierra; Fr. Antonio Sedeño and Alonso Sanchez (Jesuits); Andres de Aguirre, Juan Pimentel, Francisco Manrique, Diego Muñoz, Juan de Plasencia, Juan de Ayora, Vicente Valero and other Franciscans, the Dean of the Cathedral, Fr. Diego Vazquez de Mercado, a secular priest.

⁴ The chapters mentioned but not discussed in the *Summary* are: 7. Sailors, Commissars for the equipment of the King's galleys and other Royal Revenues; 8. Spaniards Who Live among the *Indios* and Deal with them; 9. The *Indio* Chiefs; 10. Chinese Christians Who Reside and Trade in these Islands.

concentrated mainly on removing these difficulties. Hence, the decisions give the impression of being prohibitions rather than constructive policies.

This meeting was called also "in order to remove the scruples of the confessors regarding serious matters which rightly should be settled in confession, and for the peace of conscience of the penitents."⁶

One easily concludes from reading the *Summary* that the meeting or synod of 1582 was both a religious and civil assembly.

Since in this work we cannot delay to analyze this important document for the Church in the Philippines, it will be enough to cite certain points so that the reader may have an idea of the love for justice and truth which inspired it.

On the rights of captains, soldiers, governors and judges of the Philippines, the *Summary* says that they had no claims other than what the king had granted them; and the king could give only what he had received from Christ, namely, the power or the faculty granted him by the popes to preach the gospel throughout the world. Now, since this mission was difficult, if not impossible to fulfill unless the kings of Spain took possession of the land, it was necessary to conquer or, in other words, to deprive the natives of their natural right of self-government in the order to bestow a greater good of the supernatural order: the freedom of the sons of God, based on the principles of Christianity.

On the other hand, if the Filipinos, sufficiently organized and civilized, had not resisted the Gospel, the king, in the mind of the synod, would have had no right at all to send soldiers for the protection of the missionaries and occupy the land.

However, this higher authorization did not entitle the Spaniards to deprive the natives of their natural right to their individual property or to their dependents, "since the gospel," says the *Summary*, "dispossesses no one of what is his."

"What immediately come out of this whole discussion," comments the Dominican historian Fr. Valentin Marin, "is the extreme sensitivity of those men. They were putting on trial the rights to these lands

⁶ Archivo de la Univ. de Sto Tomás, Sección de "Baceros," No. 14, fol. 1.

which the king of Spain could claim, despite the bull of Alexander VI, sheerly out of their respect for another's property."⁶ Because in that age of wars and conquests many abuses were committed against a half-civilized society, the assembly emphasized the obligation of civil officials, especially the *encomenderos*, to restore ill-gotten goods to the natives, it strictly charged confessors not to absolve the delinquents so easily, and to clearly announce to the officials of the natives that they ought to be the father and protector of the native element.

In the *Summary* there was a recommendation to the *encomenderos* to try to group the natives into organized towns, to make provision for ministers of Christian doctrine, or, if not, to teach the catechism themselves. It was also recommended that they look to the maintenance of order and Christian morality, that they build in the *encomienda* a church for religious purposes and a house for the minister.

If we accept the judgment of Fr. Chirino, the synod was a success. The synod had "laid down definite and basic formulations. The members were properly informed and freed from error; the way was cleared and eased for the administration of the sacraments; those concerned were inspired and eager to satisfy their obligations and make the proper restitution; and all the estates and offices were respected and put in order."⁷

But Fr. Hernan Suarez, also a Jesuit missionary in the Philippines at the time of the synod, wrote to the General of the Order, Fr. Aquaviva: "The bishop called the religious together to solve several

⁶ Marin, Valentin, *Síntesis de un Ensayo* etc., 320, ff. Besides the authors mentioned, the older historians who discuss even summarily and in general this synod are: San Agustín, Gaspar, O.S.A., *Conquistas* (Madrid, 1696), 319; Colin, S.J., *Labor Evangélica*, 70; San Antonio, Juan Francisco, O.F.M., *Crónica de la Apostólica Provincia de San Gregorio de Religiosos Descalzos de N.P.S. Francisco en las islas Filipinas, China, Japon* etc. (Sampaloc, 1738), Primera Parte, 175-176; 563-565; Martínez, Domingo O.F.M., *Compendio histórico de la Apostólica Provincia de San Gregorio de Filipinas* (Manila, 1756), 25, No. 62; Aduarte, Diego, O.P., *Historia* etc. (Zaragoza, 1693), 172-173; Delgado, Juan, S.J., *Historia General Sacro-Profana* (Manila, 1892) 59-60. Among the moderns: de la Costa, Horacio, S.J., *The Jesuits in the Philippines* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1961), 15-136.

⁷ Colin-Pastells, *Labor Evangélica*, (Barcelona, 1900) Vol. I, 264.

problems that demanded a solution. The secretary of the meeting was Fr. Alonso Sanchez, who drew up the minutes of the agenda. But neither his view prevailed, nor did the resolutions to a great extent effect much, for the friars held opposite views to the bishop's, and everyone is full of his own ideas." Even if we agree with Fr. Suarez, we cannot deny that the synod resulted in much good, above all in the question of restitution, thanks to the tenacity and resourcefulness of Bishop Salazar, who obliged many Spaniards to restore ill-gotten property out of which he established a fund whose interest was set aside for the construction of churches and the ransom of captives.⁸

2. The Synod of Cebu (1600). Two years after he had taken possession of his see in 1598, Bishop Agurto decided to celebrate a synod for the religious and secular priests of his diocese during the octave of Pentecost. He hoped, through synodal resolutions, to arrive at unanimity in teaching Christian doctrine and in the administration of the sacraments to the natives. To this end he appointed a group of six, two secular priests, two Augustinians and two Jesuits, to revise a Visayan translation of the Catechism. The synod sent a procurator to the *Royal Audiencia* to seek to outlaw polygamy as a practice against natural law but still widespread among the unconverted Visayan subjects of the king. It also sought that marriage among the natives be based on perpetual consent.⁹

3. Attempts During the 17th Century for a Provincial Council.

In 1585, the third provincial council of Mexico was held in Mexico City. Because Manila was suffragan to the archbishopric of Mexico City, Bishop Salazar was invited to attend. But he excused himself because of the distance, his old age and his infirmities.

⁸ Astrain, Antonio, S.J., *Historia de la Compañia de Jesús en la Asistencia de España* (Madrid, 1913), Tomo IV, Lib. III, cap. III, 450 as quoted by Lorenzo Pérez, *loc. cit.*, 384.

⁹ Chirino, Pedro, S.J. *Relación de las Islas Filipinas* (Manila. Historical Conservation Society, 1969) pp. 175-76: 178. Concepción, Juan de la O.R.S.A., *Historia General de Filipinas*, Tomo III, 109-111.

Since the Church in the Philippines was declared independent of Mexico in 1595 by Clement VIII, it was necessary to look to her own government and discipline. Nothing better suited the purpose than a provincial council, it seemed. And so, the fifth Prelate of Manila, Archbishop Miguel Garcia Serrano, tried to celebrate one in 1621. He could not do anything however, because of the peculiar set-up of the Philippine Church within the *Patronato Real*. The archbishop had to be satisfied with sending a Canon of his Cathedral, the licentiate Juan Cervicos, to Rome to solicit from the Holy Father, Pope Urban VIII, the Brief, dated 11 March 1626, by which the Supreme Pontiff arranged that the decrees of the third Council of Mexico should also apply to the Philippines until Manila could hold its own provincial council. There is no doubt that this council had legal validity for a long time in the Philippines. And even Fr. Benito Corominas, a professor of Canon Law at the University of Santo Tomas who died in 1881, believed that up to his time, it was still in force.¹⁰

Archbishop Poblete, who governed the archdiocese of Manila in 1653-1669, edited with the help of some learned ecclesiastics, some "Constitutions" in preparation for a provincial council he was planning to convoke. But the council remained a "plan" because in the same year, 1661, the bishops of Nueva Segovia, Nueva Cáceres and Cebu died."¹¹

¹⁰ Tamayo, Serapio, *Idea general de la disciplina eclesiástica en Filipinas durante la Dominación Española* (Manila: Establecimiento tipográfico del Colegio de Santo Tomas, 1906), 15-16.

¹¹ "Finding the three suffragan bishops with him and wanting very much to hold a provincial council to prepare for the Manila Council to prepare for the Manila Council and its synodal constitutions, his Excellency, Bishop Poblete retired for two months to the town of Silang, bringing along four [sic] of the more learned Jesuits whom he could consult for this purpose, Frs. Francisco de Roa, Juan Antonio Sanna, and Francisco Perez. All of these were doctors of theology, the first two were ex-provincials, and the last mentioned one of the most erudite in the Islands. Bishop Poblete made the spiritual exercises according to the tradition of that holy Order and then he devoted his time to study and to plan the Manila Council and the synodal constitutions of the Archdiocese. After he had finished them and returned to the city to carry out his project, he was disappointed in his efforts by the beginnings of a revolutionary movement then surfacing in Pampanga, Panga-

4. **The Provincial Council of Manila (1771).** This was the situation when by the Royal Cedula of 21 August 1769, known as the "*tomó regio*" (the Royal Decree"), Charles III decreed that the bishops of the Americas and the Philippines should celebrate provincial councils without delay. In compliance with the royal mandate, Archbishop Basilio Sancho of Manila called together early in 1771 the three suffragan bishops to plan the opening of the provincial council on 19 May. Unfortunately, the bane of discord entered the sessions of the council, occasioned by the lodging of a protest by the Franciscan Bishop Antonio de Luna of Nueva Cáceres against the appointment as secretaries of Fathers Ildefonso Garcia and Joaquin Traggia, Piarists and members of the household of the prelate of Manila. Bishop Luna took it as an insult to the Chapter, among whom there were not lacking in his judgment capable individuals for such an assignment. The final result of this, besides other motives for discord, was a decree of expulsion published on 22 July, against Bishop Luna, who retired in high dander to his see, having first appealed to the Royal Council of the Indies.

Another incident which helped envenom the procedure of the council was the absence of Bishop Miguel Lino de Espeleta of Cebu. Held back because of sickness, he had to delegate his powers to Doctor Clemente Blanco Bermudez, whom the council recognized as the bishop's delegate over the protests of Bishop Luna. But the question became embittered when word came on 27 September that Bishop Espeleta had died. Nonetheless, the delegate Bermudez continued in his post, in spite of the protests of Bishop Luna who argued, not without reason, that the delegation had ceased at the death of the delegating bishop.

Finally, after several sessions, the council was closed on 24 November. They needed only to obtain the signature of the king and of the

sinan and among the Chinese. For this reason the bishops could not come to the City, and the council had to be postponed. After the uprising had been quelled, in the same year, 1661, the three suffragans died: Most Reverend Doctor Juan de Velez of Cebu, Most Reverend Fray Antonio de San Gregorio of Camarines, and Most Reverend Fray Rodrigo de Cardenas of Cagayan. With their death, this work remained only in the following state. . . ." (The text of the *Synodal Constitutions* follow). The text is kept in AUST, Seccion de "Libros," tomo 2, folios 59-114.

pope. To obtain them, Fr. Traggia sailed for Madrid and Rome. But when the king learned of what happened, he ordered the priest on his arrival, to retire to his convent without even presenting himself at the court. And so, this messenger of the Acts failed to obtain their papal approval.

All this adversely affected the validity of this assembly which never enjoyed legal force. Historically the acts are not without interest, for they do not fail to throw light on many points of the religious life of the Philippines.

The Acts of this council consist of six *Actions*, or Sessions. The first, on 19 May, is more of a preliminary nature. The second, held on 15 August, discusses the bishops' role. The third, entitled *De cleri institutionibus* (*Clerical Discipline*), was held on 8 September. On 29 of the same month, the first discussions were held on parish priests and missionaries. During the fifth session on 27 October, they talked about the administration of the sacraments and of reform. The council was closed in the sixth session, during which the Fathers declared, without awaiting papal approbation, that from then on, the third Council of Mexico did not have any more binding force.¹²

5. **The Synod of Calasiao.** The Acts of the Manila Council of 1771 provided that the suffragan bishops should in their turn hold diocesan synods. In obedience to the ruling, Bishop Miguel Garcia of Nueva Segovia announced a diocesan meeting to be held at Calasiao in 1773. We could say that at that meeting there was not the slightest discussion. The bishop had drawn up the acts beforehand, caused them to be read to the assembly, and immediately demanded the approval of the assembly.¹³

¹² Fonseca, Joaquin, O.P. *Historia de los PP. Dominicós en las Islas Filipinas etc.* (Madrid, 1871) Tomo V, 97-124. Bantique, Pedro N., *The Provincial Council of Manila of 1771*, a Doctoral Thesis (Wash., D.C., The Cath. U. Press, 1957). In the Dominican archives, Quezon City, there is a preparatory plan of this council which is of greater literary and historical value than the Acts of the Council, since the former has a more elaborate style and is more detailed.

¹³ Barrion, Sister M. Caridad, O.S.B., *Religious Life of the Laity in the Eighteenth Century Philippines* (A Doctoral thesis, Mss., Manila, 1960).

The synodal acts consist of 28 chapters. The first two discuss Christian doctrine and preaching; the following seven, the sacraments; one chapter follows regarding property and the administration of ecclesiastical goods; and two chapters are about the veneration of the Blessed Virgin and of the holy cross. Also included in the acts are known important themes such as the celebration of feasts, public morality, schools, the organization of the services in the parishes.

Even if these acts did not receive royal or papal approval, they are an abundant source of information on the life and religious customs of an important sector of the Filipino people in those days.

Because of these frustrations, besides the interference of the *Patronato* which obstructed the convocation of councils and synods, it is not surprising that the bishops in the Philippines felt little enthusiasm for these meetings, although Popes Pius V, Gregory XIII and Paul V had ordained that they be held after every few years.¹⁴

Despite these failures, the Church in the Philippines has not been lacking in adequate ecclesiastical legislation. For, besides the Tridentine decrees, the papal briefs and bulls dispatched to the Indies in general or to the Philippines in particular, the Church could still count on the Laws of the Indies, Royal cédulas, the decrees of the third Mexican council, the ordinary and extraordinary privileges promulgated by both the popes and the kings of Spain for the spiritual government of the people, which the canonists in the Philippines so ably interpreted here.

¹⁴ Tamayo, *Op. cit.*, 20. A copy of the Acts of this synod, made towards the middle of the 19th century, is kept in the Archives mentioned above.