

Dominican Evangelizers among the Ifugaos (1847-1871)

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The punitive expeditions of Sr. Mariano Oscariz¹ and the peaceful journeys of the Augustinian missionaries to the mountains rising to the west of Nueva Vizcaya resulted in the founding of the missions of Mayoayao, Bunhian, Silipan and Kiangán, whose origins and vicissitudes we will describe in the present article.

The Missions of Mayoayao and Bunhian. In compliance with a royal order dated Feb. 1, 1849, the central government ordered the founding of the missions of Mayoayao and Bunhian, requesting two missionaries from the Province of the Holy Rosary for whom it disbursed the sum of fifty pesos monthly. The Provincial, Fr. Vicente Ayala, at first refused to give more than one missionary, but, prevailed upon by the Governor, finally appointed Fathers Jose Tomas Vilanova and Ruperto Alarcon to carry out the enterprise, the latter in substitution for Father Francisco Gainza, who had fallen gravely ill because of his missionary labors among the Gaddans of the lowlands.²

On the 21st of September in 1849, after a solemn mass in which they acted as ministers, and hearing the prayer *pro itinerantibus* and receiving the benedic-

¹Cfr. APSR (Archives of the province of Our Lady of the Rosary), San Juan del Monte, Metro Manila, Section "Cagayan" Isabela), Vol. 26, "Expedición militar at Mayóyao," Doc. No. 24, Fols. 239-346, and Doc. No. 27 "Expediciones del Sr. Oscariz a los mayóyaos, silipanes y kianganes en 1847 y 1848." - For a more comprehensive study on the punitive expeditions of Mariano Oscariz against the Ifugaos, specially the Mayoyaos, see: "The Mayóyaos in 1850" in *Acta Manilana*, April, 1967, No. 3, pp. 46-53.

²OCIO, HILARIO MARIA, O.P., *Monumento Dominicano, o sea, Memorial de las Casas que ha adquirido la provincia del Santísimo Rosario de Filipinas, desde 1587 hasta 1898*, Ms in APSR, Section "Ministerios," Vol. 1, p. 293.

tion of their Superior amidst the impressive notes of the *Te Deum* and the harmony of the music, Father Vilanova and Alarcon were affectionately sent off by their brothers in the Order who had come from different points to attend the ceremony, as well as Sr. Oscariz who wished to enhance the occasion with his presence, and Father Gainza who, scarcely recovered from a serious illness, had come to Camarag (now Echague) from the far North of Cagayan for the purpose of helping in whatever was possible in the preparation for the journey. Then, they took the road to the mountains.³

We cannot but wonder at the sight of these military, civil and ecclesiastical authorities putting themselves to such trouble to bid a tender farewell to those two humble missionaries who went to expose their lives in the cause of Christianity and civilization in noxious climates, or throw themselves like gentle sheep into the arms of those unpredictable people, who would receive them today as apostles with music and dancing and tomorrow make them the object of a perilous ambush from the cover of their thickets.

While the religious who had come to the farewell ceremonies returned to their respective stations, Fathers Vilanova and Alarcon, after crossing the Diffun River, barefoot and with pants rolled up to their thighs, arrived at the fort of Begona where they discovered that, due to an oversight or unintentional error, enough provisions had not been prepared for the trip. Then they encountered the broad Magat River in the midst of their countless labors and difficulties, which for some days had overflowed its bed because of continuous rainfall, and they walked along its banks until the approach of night, when they were surprised by a tempest with thunder and lighting, followed by torrential rain, which obliged them to take shelter and pass the night in a hut of cogon grass in the company of a crowd of pagans.

The downpour had soaked their clothes when they undertook the ascent of a high mountain, capped with thick clouds. Father Alarcon, to avoid catching cold, took off his [wet] robe and put on a *bahag* (the dress of the Igorots) while Fr. Vilanova, less perspicacious than his companion, began to suffer a chill and fever which quickly brought him to the ground unconscious. The accompanying Filipinos laid him in a hammock and carried him to Bunhian, where they placed him on the floor of a simple hut - the Igorots didn't know the use of beds - until he recovered from his swoon after four or five hours.⁴

On the 27th they had a solemn feast in one of the villages of Bunhian in which Fr. Vilanova, already recovered from his weakness, sprinkled the mountains and

³*Diario de Manila*, September 30, 1849; Cfr. also: AUST (archives of the University of Santo Tomas), Section "Folletos," Vol. 15, pp. 54-58.

⁴OCIO, *Compendio de la Reseña Biográfica de los Religiosos de la provincia del Santísimo Rosario*, Manila, 1895, pp. 818-822.

valleys with holy water to drive away the powers of hell that had possessed them undisputed since time immemorial, and Fr. Alarcon sang the mass with the help of two boys from the lowlands and two interpreters, quite skillful in singing and in handling the guitar and rebec.⁵

In a short time they founded the stations of Our Lady of Sorrows in Mayoayao and the Holy Guardian Angel in Bunhian, which the Provincial chapter approved in 1851 and accepted as stations of the Province.⁶

The two missionaries, who had orders not to separate, lived together till the month of December of 1850, when the Bunhians, wishing to have one of the religious among them, obliged Fr. Alarcon to establish his residence in the valley of Bunhian after repeated supplications.⁷

Father Alarcon, in the enthusiasm of inexperience, began to hand out various trinkets, which only produced a feeling of antipathy and aversion among those who didn't receive any, without gaining the good will of those who did.⁸

Father Vilanova on the contrary, was a man of activity and orderly disposition who quickly understood the alien psychology of the Mayoayaos. After making a trip to the lowlands to look for provisions, he entered the narrow valleys of Mayoayao anew; he visited their numerous villages one after the other; he made a census with the greatest possible accuracy; he gathered with the *camaranes* (headmen) and vested them with pants, jackets and handkerchiefs; he distributed blankets, brass wire and beads among lesser people with much order and fairness. In this way he was able to gain the hearts of these naturally shy and suspicious people to be able to proclaim the truth of the Gospel to them, asking them to bring their sick in to him with the aim of curing their bodies if possible, and saving their souls.⁹

Sr. Oscariz visited the two missions in 1850, and was the object of an unmistakable demonstration of love on behalf of the Mayoayaos. This occasion moved Fr. Vilanova to propose the division of the mission into three groups, which he called *Belmonte* (Dummang), *Villanueva de San Pedro* (Mayoayao) and *Nueva Ocana* (Dangayan). Sr. Oscariz heartily approved the division and submitted it for superior approval to Sr. Urbiztondo, Governor General of the Islands, who ordered that Dummang be called henceforth *Oscariz*, in memory of the young pacifier:

⁵*Ibid.*, Cfr. "Letter of Father José Tomás Vilanova to Father Jose Fuixa in APSR, MSS, Section "Cagayán," (uncatalogued typescript, p. 9).

⁶OCIO, *Monumento*, p. 248.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸"Letter of Father Vilanova to Father Francisco Gaínza," dated in Mayoayao, 9 December, 1849, p. 24 (typescript copy in APSR).

⁹"Letter of Father Vilanova to the Prior Provincial", published in *Diario de Manila* on August 20, 1850.

Mayoayao *Vilanova*, out of respect for the founder of the mission; and Dangayan, *Nueva Ocaña*. At the same time he approved the construction of a road which the Mayoayaos had opened from the Magat River Valley under the capable direction of Fr. Vilanova.¹⁰

Desiring the Mayoayaos to enter into the ways of civilization immediately, Fr. Vilanova named Balaso, son of the old Mantiguing, mayor of the whole valley in as much as he seemed to be endowed with moderation and enjoyed the sympathy of all; he selected a lieutenant, a judge and a constable in accordance with the desires of the camaranes and the people who would govern subject to Balaso. From that time on, the Mayoayaos began to call these appointees by the titles of their office and not by their own names.¹¹

Moreover, he divided the three groups into villages, separating them according to the streams, and subdivided the villages (built as a general rule in little valleys) into settlements which ran up to the neighboring hills and spread out in different directions. He also proposed to build a little place to serve the church in every settlement where he could say mass, administer the sacraments and proclaim the word of God.¹²

This famous missionary seems to have been born to burn up his youthful energies and make a magnificent display of his organizing talents among abject and restless tribesmen; he had to go barefoot since the shoes he had brought up from the lowlands had soon yielded to the constant friction of the pebbles and the action of mud and water, travelling the aid of a heavy rustic staff, or on all fours to avoid or minimize dangerous falls, suffering terrible loneliness, braving strong downpours, sleeping in the houses of the Igorots on the bare floor, and eating the messes which they offered without scruple or the least manifestation of disgust or repugnance.¹³

At first the Mayoayaos would just give themselves up to death in their sicknesses without consulting the missionary; later, after repeated exhortations by Fr. Vilanova, they began to carry them to the convent, where they commonly received the sacrament of baptism before dying. The brave Menguet, in other times the terror of the Christians, presented himself to Fr. Vilanova one day with his five-year-old son gravely ill in his arms. The missionary baptized him with all solemnity

¹⁰Cfr. AUST, *loc. cit.*, p. 62; OCIO, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

¹¹"Carta del P. Vilanova sobre su instalación en el Mayóyao y reflexiones mías (i.e. of Father Gainza) a nombre del *Diario*, in AUST, *loc. cit.*, p. 61 ff.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Father Vilanova recounts all these trials and sufferings (and many more) in his twenty two original letters, addressed to different persons, from Mayoayao since 1849 until 1854, still extant in the Dominican archives, (San Juan del Monte, Metro Manila), MSS, Section "Cagayán," Vol. 25, Doc. No. 14, Fols. 1-41. Some of them, corroded by the ink, are falling apart, and for this reason we have chosen to use the well-made typewritten copy already referred to in footnote No. 5.

in the chapel of the convento in the presence of many pagans. Menguet carried the sick [child] to his house and, after he had drawn his last breath, returned with the corpse to the convento, where Fr. Vilanova put the habit of the Order on him as a shroud to impress those present, adorned him with a crown of flowers and paper wings, placed him in a little casket of wood, and on St. John's Day, interred him solemnly in a cemetery which he had made shortly before.

Here is a brief description of the obsequies. After celebrating the mass *corpore praesente*, Fr. Vilanova set forth for the cemetery, preceded by Menguet, who carried a cross on high to which was fastened a standard of the Virgin of Sorrows, and by some pagans who walked gravely before the coffin with burning candles. Many pagans gathered to behold a ceremony which had never before been performed in the depths of their remote valleys.¹⁴

On Feb. 26, 1851, Fr. Vilanova blessed the church of Nueva Ocana, built of boards, and the new road in the presence of Sr. Oscariz and some Dominican vicars of the lowlands. Then Fr. Alarcon, missionary of Bunhian, celebrated a solemn mass, after which he blessed a Spanish flag, gift of the Governor.¹⁵

The mission of Mayoayao prospered under the capable direction of its first apostle, until the year 1854 when Fr. Vilanova, desiring a change of air - the climate of the mountains had, indeed, seriously undermined his health - requested the Father Provincial that he be transferred to another place; but the Mayoayaos, who had guessed his thoughts, earnestly supplicated him not to abandon them and began the construction of a Mission House near the fort of Begona (later renamed Oscariz) (where it was planned to transfer the Bunhians) as a clear proof of their affection and attachment. The Missionary yielded to their supplications and continued another year as head of the mission of Mayoayao.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the state of the mission of Bunhian deteriorated visibly. It suffered robberies and killings so that Fr. Vilanova had to go among the Bunhians himself to oblige them to restore what had been stolen, and stay in Cawayan, where he built a dwelling for Fr. Ramon Reixach, successor to Fr. Alarcon.¹⁷

The mission of the Mayoayaos, on the other hand, received the death blow when its founder, Fr. Jose Tomas Vilanova, expired in Angadanan on March 10, 1855, victim of his apostolic labors.¹⁸

Fr. Reixach, who took over the missions both of Mayoayao and Bunhian by

¹⁴cfr. "Letter of Father Vilanova to Father Gainza, dated in Mayoayao, 13 July, 1850 and preserved in AUST, Section of "Folletos, Vol. 115, pp. 64-65.

¹⁵OCIO, *Monumento*, p. 250.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

order of the Provincial Head in 1855, completely lacked the high talents which had distinguished his predecessor, and was only able to rouse the antipathy of the Igorots for having let the convent of Begona burn which they had erected at great exertion and sweat. The Provincial Chapters of 1859 and 1863 didn't name any specific religious for the then abandoned missions of Mayoayao and Bunhian, and that of 1867 completely omits their names.¹⁹

The Missions of Silipan. The Spaniards had not visited the tribe of Silipans until the year 1848 in which, on one of their punitive expeditions, they encountered authentic proof of the natural ferocity and inclination to plunder of this tribe - a great quantity of human skulls with which they macabrely adorned the interiors of their houses, and an immense quantity of skulls of cows and horses which they must surely have seized from neighboring tribes for they lacked this kind of livestock themselves.

The Provincial Chapter meeting in 1851 assigned the mission of the Silipans to Father Vicente Moreno, who established a station under the patronage of St. Domingo de Guzman in the town of *Ullicon*. His successors did nothing worthy of mention, and the mission of Silipan followed the same decline that had characterized Mayoayao and Bunhian, until its name also disappeared from the Capitulary Acts of 1967.²⁰

The Missions of Kiangán. The territory of the Kiangans is situated along the banks of the Ibulao River, which has its origin in the eastern watershed of the great Cordillera Central of Northern Luzon and makes its passage extremely difficult for the missionary by dashing down among great rocks and gorges.

This geographic factor gave origin to the two settlements of Kiangán - that of *Logawe*, built on the left bank of the Ibulao, and that of *Ibaay* which extended at some length on the right bank. Fr. Ruperto Alarcon laid the foundations of the mission of Kiangán in 1853 by establishing his residence in Lagawe, where he built a modest church of reeds and a convent of boards, which were burned by a crazy Igorot in 1857. He later opened a road, and made an arduous excursion to Mayoayao and Bunhian, crossing the imposing precipices of Silipan and Alimit.

Father Vicente Sales succeeded him, living for a time in a humble Igorot house until he was able to erect a convento of reeds which also served him as a chapel. Fr. Joaquin Guixa improved the convento built a modest church in Lagawe. He also took charge of the Christian flock of Ibaay, crossing the turbulent Ibulao more than once at the peril of his life, and widened the road begun by Fr. Alarcon.²¹

¹⁹JULIAN MALUMBRES, O.P., "Breve relación de las misiones de Silipan, Bungian y Mayoayao, desde el año 1845 hasta 1888," (Cfr. Library of the University of Santo Tomás, Section of Microfilms," Roll 66, Vol. 31, Doc. 14).

²⁰OCIO, *Monumento*, pp. 252-254.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 257-259.

In the year 1862 Fr. Jose Lorenzo arrived at the mission, a religious animated by true zeal for the conversion of souls who managed to impart an extraordinary energy to the decadent mission. He opened different communication routes between the villages, created the settlement of Ambabag with people removed from separate and almost inaccessible villages, erected modest living squatters, and prepared the materials for another one more commodious which he wasn't able to begin; he managed the faithful attendance of children in school and of pagan adults at catechetical classes and baptized adults at the reception of the sacraments. Unfortunately, the work accomplished by Fr. Lorenzo in the short space of five years came to an abrupt end when a pagan mortally wounded him with a spear thrust at a turn of the road which leads to the village of Maput. The celebrated Fr. Villaverde was not able to arrive in time to witness his last breath. All the documents of the time lament the loss of this renowned missionary who had converted the mission of Kiangnan into a progressive and flourishing mission.²²

Finally, the tragic death of Fr. Victorino Garcia, who was found at the point of death in the bottom of a ravine near the mission of Lagawe, and the treacherous murder of three soldiers, induced the Father Provincial, Fr. Joaquin Guixa, to arrange with the Governor of the Province after the approval of the Bishop of Nueva Segovia, for the transfer of the mission of Ibaay to a place called Ibung (now Villaverde), near Bintawan, an outstation of Solano, and that of Legawe to the wilderness of *Diadi*. While the Christian development of Ibung prospered rapidly, due more than anything else to the immigration of Ilocanos, that of *Diadi* only caused expense to the Order, despite the frequency with which the Government granted help to those who made their domiciles there.²³

Fr. Juan Villaverde, immediate successor to Fr. Lorenzo in the mission of Kiangnan, was the one who successfully accomplished the discouraging and aggravating work of transferring the Christians of Ibaay and Lagawe to Ibung and *Diadi*. With the alms that were consigned by the Father Provincial and those which he kept saving from his own allotment - for it is said he only lived on a little rice and greens - he erected some houses on the plain for the Igorots who came down from the mountains; he distributed land and agricultural tools to them; he had others more experienced than they were teach them the art of agriculture; he provided them with rice until the fields, after five years of cultivation, produced sufficient for the consumption of the population; he attached a colony of lepers to whom he likewise administered. He had to overcome immense obstacles before he saw the consolidation of his work - the attachment of the Igorots to their miserable plots of land [in the mountains], the sicknesses which decimated the population, the ill-will of those who were left in the mountains, the indolence of those on the

²²JOSE MARIA BRUGUES, *Descripción del valle de Cagayán*, MS in APSR, Section "Cagayán," Vol. 1, pp. 269-270; PABLO FERNANDEZ, O.P., *Dominicos donde nace el sol, Historia de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario*, Ediciones "Yuste," Barcelona, 1958, p. 395.

²³*Ibid.*

plain, bad harvests, and, finally, a fever which completely deprived him of his strength; but, through it all, his zeal for the salvation of souls, his ingenuity and his constancy triumphed. Moreover, he opened a meandering road from the village of Boloc, through a long stretch of tortuous slopes to end on the heights of Kiangnan, (1885). And, in order to study the terrain, he travelled on foot through the dangerous riverbeds, often sleeping out in the elements or in the houses of Igorots, whom he persuaded to cooperate in the construction of the road when they were free from agriculture work.²⁴

Fr. Villaverde, having spent a quarter of a century in labor and privation, and before paying the price for his magnanimous life to the malevolent climate of the mountains, left this road as a testimony to posterity and those of Santo Rosario, which put the plains of Ituy and Paniqui in communication and of San Nicolas, which overcame the imposing heights of the Caraballo, to unite the provinces of Nueva Vizcaya and Pangasinan.²⁵

As a closing remark, let us add that the Mayoayao, Bunhian and Silipan missions were never reopened by the Dominicans, while that of Kiangnan was restored in 1887 by Father Julian Malumbres and ably administered by him, and by Father Villaverde and other missionaries until 1898 when they were forced to leave it due to the Philippine Revolution. Latter on, after the lapse of more than a decade, the CICM Fathers resumed their work and have maintained it until the present time. □

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 305-306.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 307-308.

For additional information about the establishment, vicissitudes and end of these Missions, Cfr.: FRANCISCO GAINZA, O.P., *Memoria sobre Nueva Vizcaya*, Establecimiento tipográfico de los Amigos del País, Manila, 1849, pp. 1-47 (a copy can be found in APSR, MSS, Section "Cagayán," Vol. 25, Documento No. 8); BUENAVENTURA CAMPA, O.P., "Los Mayoayao y la raza ifugao" in *Correo Sino-anamita*, Imprenta del Real Colegio de Santo Tomás, Vol. XXVI (1892) pp. 169-208, and Vol. XXVII, pp. 279-321: (reprinted by W.E. Retana with the same title, Madrid, 1894); JULIAN MALUMBRES, O.P., *Historia de la Isabela*, Manila, Tip. Linotype del Colegio de Santo Tomás, 1918, Chapters 13-14; *Historia de Nueva Vizcaya y Provincia Montañosa*, Manila, Tip. Linotype del Colegio de Santo Tomás, 1918, Chapter 7: *Biografía del P. Juan Fernández Villaverde*, Manila, Tip. Pontificia de la Universidad de Santo Tomás, 1924; WILLIAM Henry Scott, *The Discovery of the Igorots, Spanish contacts with the pagans of Northern Luzon*, New Day Publishers, Quezon City, 1974, pp. 236-237, 250-261; GUILLERMO TEJON, O.P., *Juan Villaverde, O.P. Missionary and Road Builder*, University of Santo Tomás, 1982, PP. 66-95; The Mayoayao in 1850 "in *Acta Manilana*, April, 1967, No. 3, pp. 46-78; JOSEFINA LIM PE, "Spanish contacts with the Ifugaos" in the *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. XIII, No. 38, May-August, 1978, pp. 193-249.