



A Dominican Pillar in Philippine Historiography: Fidel Villarroel, O.P.

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Described as “the holder of the master key to UST’s past,” Fr. Fidel Villarroel, O.P. produced significant research and writing that enriched Philippine historiography. His works spanned Philippine history, Philippine Church history from the early Spanish period to the end of the Second World War. His topics included the early Dominican missionaries, Dominican saints and martyrs, Filipino heroes, and the history of the University of Santo Tomas. Aside from being the university’s foremost historian, Fr. Villarroel holds the distinction of being the country’s most prolific saint maker. He authored the biographies of Dominican saints and martyrs from St. Lorenzo Ruiz to Blessed Buenaventura Garcia Paredes, O.P. He also authored various histories of the University of Santo Tomas, the latest of which is a two-volume work that was described as a labor of love. In writing his various works, he wrote in the context of national and global history thereby giving a proper perspective in the understanding and appreciation of history.

Keywords: *Philippine history, Philippine church history, Dominicans history, Filipino heroes, UST history*

Introduction: Fr. Villarroel, the Historian

Throughout most of his adult life Fr. Fidel Villarroel devoted himself in the research and writing of Philippine Church history and the lives of Filipino heroes. Fr. Villarroel authored 23 major works on ecclesiastical history, mostly involving the Dominican Order in the Philippines and

• *PHILIPPINIANA SACRA*, Vol. LI, No. 152 (January-April, 2016) pp. 117-141.

the lives of Filipino heroes, saints and martyrs. His writings which are sourced from primary sources are considered authoritative works in the study of Philippine history.

Fr. Villarroel was born on March 18, 1929 in the town of Tejerina in the province of Leon, Spain. While studying at the Dominican Schools of La Mejorada and Santa Maria de Nieva, he decided to enter the priestly vocation. It was during his high school years that Fr. Villarroel wanted to be like his Dominican professors. He took up Philosophy and Theology at the House of Studies in the Convent of Avila where he began his Dominican vocation. In 1953 he was ordained as a priest of the Order. Although Fr. Villarroel did not think of becoming a historian, he had an inclination for it. At that time he was focused on becoming a Dominican priest.¹ In the same year of his ordination his Dominican superiors sent him along with a classmate to take up post graduate studies in history at the University of London. After finishing his Master's degree in History in 1957, Fr. Villarroel was assigned to the Philippines to become head of the Spanish department of the University of Santo Tomas, a post which he held for 25 years.²

In 1959 Fr. Villarroel was appointed Archivist of the University of Santo Tomas Archives (AUST). He held this office Tomas (AUST) for almost half a century, the longest serving in the University. He also served as the Prefect of Libraries in the University and Professor of Church History in the Faculty of Sacred Theology. His continued studies in the University of Santo Tomas earned him a Doctorate of Sacred Theology.

Aside from his duties in the University, Fr. Villarroel served as Secretary to the Apostolic Nunciature from 1959 to 1991. He was also the Academic Director of the Academia Filipina de la Lengua Española which was the local affiliate of the Real Academia Española based in Madrid, Spain. He was also a member of the Asosacion de Academicas de la Lengua Española.

Fr. Villarroel's duties as the University's archivist and Prefect of Libraries placed in him a unique position to write about Philippine history and Philippine Church history. The UST Archives is a veritable treasure trove of historical documents dating back to the establishment of the University in 1611. These included reports, letters from the Dominican Order and transcripts of records of Filipino heroes and foreigners who later became saints and martyrs after studying in the University. The UST Library the country's oldest, is a repository of books, journals, newspapers, and other printed materials which even predate the University. It was upon his

¹ Azheepineda. *UST Archives Director Fr. Fidel Villarroel, O.P.: Master Key to UST's Past* May 1, 2012. (Accessed December 1, 2015)

² The Varsitarian Website. *UST Historian named Master of Theology* May 1, 2012. (Accessed October 30, 2015)

appointment as Archivist of UST when Fr. Villarroel began to research and write about Philippine History. His special interest was the Filipino patriots who studied in UST like Jose Rizal, Fr. Jose Burgos and Marcelo H. del Pilar. “Since my arrival in the country in 1957, I always had the history of the Philippines in mind. Most of my books and my researches have been about Philippine history and also Church history,” Fr. Villarroel said.³

With the rich historical sources at his disposal, Fr. Villarroel managed to create 23 major historical works and 65 other articles on history which appeared in scholarly journals which included the *Philippiniana Sacra* and the *UNITAS*. Apart from historical writings, Fr. Villarroel collected poetry written by Thomasians — the volume came out in time for the UST’s quadricentennial commemoration.

For his contributions to historical research and dedicated service to the Church, Fr. Villarroel received various awards; among them was a *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* from Pope John Paul II in 1984 and the Cruz de la Isabella la Catolica from King Juan Carlos of Spain in 1985.⁴ His other awards were the Catholic Authors Award by the Asian Catholic Publishers, Inc. in 1991 and a National Book Award in 1999. The latter award was given for his work *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution*. In 2009 Fr. Villarroel was awarded the title Master of Sacred Theology of the Dominican Order. This title was once held by the founder of the Dominican Order, St. Dominic de Guzman. In describing the honor given to Fr. Villarroel, Fr. Rodel Aligan, O.P. the Dean of the Faculty of Sacred Theology said: “It is a rare honor, especially nowadays, in order to be a recipient, one must have shown exemplary performance in scholarly pursuits.”⁵ In 2014, Fr. Villarroel received the Gintong Aklat Award for his two-volume book *A History of the University of Santo Tomas Four Centuries of Higher Education in the Philippines*.⁶

The Prolific Saint-Maker

Access to archival Dominican documents in the UST archives allowed Fr. Villarroel to write about the missionary work in Vietnam during the 19th century. His work was *Cruzada Española en Vietnam: Compañía de Cochinchina*. This book, which was published in 1972, was the first to extensively discuss the role of the Dominicans from the Philippines as well as lay Filipinos in the efforts to spread Christianity in Vietnam. That country adopted a hostile policy against Christian missionaries which

³ *Op. cit.*

⁴ Jubilee awards *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* May 2, 2012. (Accessed October 30, 2015)

⁵ *Op. cit.*

⁶ Varsitarian.net/breaking news/20041007/ historian and ex ust archivist receives gintong aklat award. (Accessed November 5, 2015)

led to the martyrdom of many missionaries and converts. The Christianization efforts eventually led to the conquest of colonization of Vietnam by the French with substantial Filipino participation as Spain was allied with France. Eventually the whole of Indo China would become a French colony.

In 1974, Fr. Villarroel wrote about the role of the University of Santo Tomas in the development and enrichment of Filipino literature in Spanish. Many of the great Filipino writers in Spanish were alumni of the University. They range from nationalist writers such as Jose Rizal and Marcelo H. del Pilar to writers during the American period such as Claro Mayo Recto, Cecilio Apostol, Fernando Ma. Guerrero, and Isidro Marfori who represented the Philippines in the golden age of Spanish literature.

Fr. Villarroel wrote extensively on Church history especially on the aspect that involved the Dominican Order in the Philippines. Among them were *Fray Jerónimo Román: Historia del Siglo de Oro* which was published in 1974; *El Padre Antonio Gonzalez, Martir*, published in 1981; *Christian Witnessing: Martyrdom and Martyrs* (1981); *Un Siglo de Apostolado (1887-1987)*; *Lorenzo De Manila: The Protomartyr of the Philippines and His Companions* (1987); and *Miguel De Benavides, O.P., 1550-1605: Friar, Bishop, and University Founder* (2005).⁷

As a biographer, Fr. Villarroel was called as the “prolific saint-maker” as he wrote the official church position or *Positio Super Introducione Causae* for the beatification and eventual canonization of St. Lorenzo Ruiz and five of his Dominican companions.⁸ St. Lorenzo and his companions were executed as martyrs during the persecution of Christians by the Tokugawa Shogunate in the 17th century. Among St. Lorenzo’s companions was Fr. Antonio Gonzalez, O.P. who was a former rector and professor of the University of Santo Tomas. The others were Fr. Domingo Ibañez de Erquicia, O.P., Fr. Lucas del Espiritu Santos, O.P. and Fr. Guillaume Courtet. They were beatified by Pope John Paul II during his visit to the Philippines in 1981 and later canonized also by Pope John Paul II on October 18, 1987.⁹

Fr. Villarroel also conducted research about the martyrs of Vietnam of whom four of them were canonized as saints namely Bishop Domingo Henares, O.P., Fr. Vicente Liem de la Paz, O.P., Bishop Jose Maria Diaz, O.P. and Fr. San Jurio and Pedro Almato, O.P. These Dominicans were martyred during the 18th and 19th century as

⁷ Philippine Daily Inquirer Website. *UST History Charts Evolution of Higher Learning in the Philippines* May 1, 2012. (Accessed November 5, 2015)

⁸ Fidel Villarroel, O.P., *Lorenzo de Manila, The Proto-Martyr of The Philippines and his Companions* - Fr. Fidel Villarroel, O.P., 1988, p. 1.

⁹ azheepineda. “UST Archives director Fr. Fidel Villarroel, O.P. : Master key to UST’s past. (Accessed November 5, 2015)

the reigning monarchs in Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China which now comprised modern Vietnam instituted harsh measures against Christian missionaries and their converts. They were canonized by Pope John Paul on June 19, 1988.

On October 28, 2007 Pope Benedict XVI beatified 498 victims of the Spanish Civil War. It was the largest mass beatification instituted. Of the 498 six were Dominicans who once served or studied in the University of Santo Tomas these were Blessed Buenaventura Garcia Paredes, Blessed Jesus Villaverde Andres, Blessed Pedro Ibañez, Alonso, Blessed Manuel Moreno Martinez, Blessed Fernandez Mariñas and Blessed Jose Maria Lopez Carillo.¹⁰ Fr. Villarroel played an important part in conducting the research of their biographies and in the writing of the official position for their proclamation by the Church as Blessed.

Shedding Light and Dispelling Myths

It was in the writing of Philippine History Fr. Villarroel played an important part. The treatment of the Spanish period in the Philippines is often stereotyped by the so-called nationalist historians as an oppressive period, filled with racial bigotry and strong arm politics, with the natives becoming the oppressed and were usually shortchanged by the colonizers. Fr. Villarroel portrayed a rather different picture. In his research about the Referendum of Manila in 1599, it was the Filipino nobles of Manila who opted to accept Spanish rule. The research appeared in an issue of the UNITAS in 1999.

In his research, Fr. Villarroel wrote that the native chiefs wholeheartedly accepted Spanish rule in exchange for Spanish protection and they accepted the rule of a foreign country after witnessing the benevolence of the newcomers. Villarroel wrote that the referendum was repeated on other parts of the country like in Mangaldan, Pangasinan, the Cagayan Valley and other parts of the country in which the leading citizens of the native communities accepted Spanish rule. Critics may argue that the position of Fr. Villarroel was understandable as he is a Spaniard and he is writing as an apologist for his country. His works furthermore would be based on a Spanish point of view. It should be understood that Fr. Villarroel's research is based on actual documents and the burden lies on the critics to refute the documentary evidence cited by Fr. Villarroel in his work.

Fr. Villarroel's historical research and writings debunked many biases in Philippine history especially those involving Filipino heroes. In writing about the life of Marcelo H. del Pilar, an important person in Philippine history, Fr. Villarroel

¹⁰ varsitarian.net/quadricentennial_supplement/the_thomasian_saints_and_martyrs (Accessed October 30, 2015)

stressed that del Pilar — an enemy of the friars and a Freemason during his time — leading ended his life as a Catholic. Fr. Villarroel in his work on the religious conversion of Marcelo H. del Pilar wrote about the last days of del Pilar, he died as a Catholic on July 4, 1896 in Barcelona, Spain after having renounced Freemasonry.¹¹ His example was followed also by the other Freemasons including Rizal and Isabelo de los Reyes.

In writing about the life of Apolinario Mabini, Fr. Villarroel made an important contribution to Philippine historiography by correcting Mabini's date of birth. Most biographies about Mabini including the official one adapted by the government to commemorate his birth recognize July 23, 1864 as his date of birth. Mabini's baptismal certificate issued on July 22, 1864 described Mabini as "*Un niño de un día*," or a child of one day. Mabini himself considered July 23 as his birthday. Interpreting the Spanish document based on the reckoning practices during the Spanish period, Fr. Villarroel said that the proper date of Mabini's birth was July 22, 1864 since it is considered that a child is already a day old on the very day he was born.¹² Through his research, Fr. Villarroel demonstrated that Mabini was a very talented student despite his poverty. Compared to Rizal, Mabini was a superior student. In fact, one of his former professors predicted that some day, this young man will be of great influence to this country, and he also expressed his wishes to live to that day when his prediction about Mabini is realized.

It is when Fr. Villarroel writes about Rizal that he would dispel popular myths about the hero and fill in the blanks about his life and about the condition of the country. Stories about Rizal are surrounded by anti-Church propaganda, lies and half-truths. In his work *José Rizal and the University of Santo Tomas* (1982), Fr. Villarroel wrote that the Dominican connection between the Order and Rizal started long before the hero was born. Upon his arrival from China in the late 18th century, Rizal's ancestor, Lam Co, began his connection with the Dominicans. It was logical that he started his story in Binondo where the port of Manila was located. Lam Co was baptized by the Dominicans in Binondo which was a Dominican parish. It also explains why he adopted the name Domingo, after the founder of the Order.

¹¹ Fidel Villarroel, O.P., Marcelo H. del Pilar His Religious Conversions. (Manila: UST Publishing House, 1997).

¹² Fidel Villarroel, O.P., *Apolinario Mabini His Birth Date and Student Years*, 1964.

For a time the officials at the National Historical Institute now the National Historical Commission of the Philippines debated on the date of Mabini's birthdate whether it was July 22 or July 23. They consulted Fr. Villarroel and obtained his research which indicated that the proper date of birth was July 22 since an infant is already a day old when he was born. Though Fr. Villarroel's interpretation of the document was valid, the official commemoration of Mabini's birthdate set at July 23, 1864. The argument was based on Mabini's letters which indicated that July 23 was the date and that the best person who could indicate his own date of birth of date is the person himself.

Domingo Lamco's close relationship with the Dominicans would bring him to the Hacienda of Biñan which was managed by the Order. Rizal's father, Francisco Mercado, Fr. Villarroel wrote, became a lessee in the new hacienda of Calamba which was acquired by the Dominicans in 1833. He must have gained the favor of the Dominican administrators through his hard work and good relations with the owners of the estate that the lands leased to Don Francisco amounted to more than 500 hectares. Later Rizal's family would be leased choice lands in the Calamba estate and in 1885, Rizal's brother, Paciano, was allowed to cultivate areas in Pansol and Los Baños with the understanding that the family will not pay a single centavo of rent for the next five years. This arrangement showed the favored status of Rizal's family with the Dominican administrators.

The young Rizal was familiar with the Dominican administrators who called him "Pepe Mercado" and Fr. Villarroel even narrates that Rizal offered his services to them. What kind of services he was offering, Fr. Villarroel did not specify. When Rizal's mother Doña Teodora was accused of attempted murder in 1872 by Doña Teodora de Alberto, wife of Jose Alberto, it was the Dominicans who helped the Rizal family secure the lawyers who defended her in court. She was released after two years of incarceration.

Since the Rector of the University of Santo Tomas was given the authority by Queen Isabella II to supervise higher education in the Philippines, the Dominicans would again touch Rizal's life when the Secretary General of the University issued an announcement for the entrance examination for the *Bachiller en Artes* course. Rizal came to Manila and chose to study at the Jesuit-run Ateneo Municipal. Fr. Villarroel commented the choice of Ateneo was a personal one.

Between 1877 and 1878, Rizal would continue his studies at the University of Santo Tomas. Many of Rizal's biographers often romanticized Rizal's choice of medicine — to cure his mother's worsening eyesight. Fr. Villarroel instills reality by citing the actual factors why Rizal chose to become a physician: The Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy which was established in 1871 had just graduated its first batch of students who immediately found employment in Manila's Health Bureau. The new college of medicine and pharmacy represented an exciting new frontier in education as the course in Philosophy, where Rizal was first enrolled, was now experiencing declining enrolment while that of medicine was increasing. Socially enrolling in medicine was a way of attracting friends. These reasons which were cited by Fr. Villarroel were responsible for Rizal's choice for medicine rather than his desire to cure his mother's eyes. Rizal would abandon his course in Philosophy and enter the Faculty Medicine and Pharmacy.

Also authors on Rizal's life would make comparisons between his former school of Ateneo and the Pontifical University. Comparing the grades Rizal obtained in Ateneo with those in UST, these authors would interpret that Rizal had a hard time in the latter. Fr. Villarroel would put those grades into the proper context: Rizal's studies at the Ateneo were for a Bachiller en Artes which is equivalent to today's high school course while his studies at the University of Santo Tomas were for a course leading to a licentiate in medicine. Certainly, the medical course would be more difficult and challenging compared to a high school course.

The most potent myth leveled by anti-Dominican and anti-Spanish writers about Rizal in UST was the allegation that Rizal was discriminated by the Spaniards while in the University; that this discrimination resulted in his less-than-excellent grades; that the teaching and equipment in the University was obsolete and the professors were oppressive and that the facilities were not available for the use of the students. Often these writers would cite a chapter in Rizal's novel *El Filibusterismo* entitled "The Class in Physics" to show discrimination against natives and arrogance of the Spanish professors who were friars and the obsolescence of the teaching and tools in education. Fr. Villarroel refutes these allegations point by point.

If there was discrimination against natives, Fr. Villarroel wrote, all the Spaniards in Rizal's class would have passed the course. There were six Spaniards in his class and five of them dropped out while Rizal was a student in the University, and the last one also dropped out when Rizal left the University to continue his studies in Spain. Rizal never complained about his grades; in fact, he appreciated them as he was still among the top students in class. If Rizal was discriminated by the Spaniards, he would not be allowed to take the preparatory course to Medicine and first year Medicine at the same time. It would be like a student taking up his pre-med course and first year medicine or a law student taking up his pre-law course and first year law at the same time. Certainly this would not be allowed. However, Rizal was given this special privilege of taking up the preparatory course to Medicine or *Ampliacion* and First Year Medicine at the same time. This privilege can only be possible with the approval of the Governor General. Aside from Rizal, three other students were given this special privilege namely Agustin Monasterio, Carlos Gatmaitan, and Justo Panis. Therefore, Fr. Villarroel concludes, far from being discriminated, Rizal was in fact, favored. If he was discriminated, such discrimination would be in a positive manner.¹³

As for that abusive professor in the class of physics which was portrayed in *El Filibusterismo*, Fr. Villarroel made an investigation on who was Rizal's professor in a physics class. There was no friar professor like in the novel nor a physics subject but

¹³ Fidel Villarroel, O.P. *Jose Rizal and the University of Santo Tomas* (Manila: 1984), pp. 80- 105.

the closest thing to Rizal's description was Jose Franco who handled General Anatomy and Histology 2, Descriptive Anatomy II, Exercises of Dissection, Physiology, and Private and Public Hygiene subjects. Rizal remembers Franco for being notorious in failing his students. "At the beginning of my career, he used to threaten us with failing us all," according to Rizal. Most likely Franco was the model for Padre Million in the chapter the Class in Physics in his novel *El Filibusterismo*. Rizal would meet Franco again, this time as his classmate at the Universidad Central de Madrid in 1884.

As for the alleged substandard instruction and facilities, Fr. Villarroel depicted Rizal's college, the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy as a well-equipped component of the University with a well-qualified faculty. Fr. Villarroel enumerates some of the facilities including the newly acquired scientific equipment and an amphitheater for observing surgical operations. The teaching staff was also sent abroad for further training.

If Rizal got lower grades compared to the Ateneo, Fr. Villarroel writes, it was because his inclination was in the liberal arts and not the natural sciences. There were also distractions. Fr. Villarroel writes in contrast to the Ateneo — where the students were closely monitored by their professors, UST students, who are supposed to be more mature and responsible, were allowed to do as they please after class. They are not anymore required to attend mass in the morning and since classes were held only in the morning, the afternoons were free. Students can fall into the wiles of the opposite sex or join *barkadas* or gangs. One such *barkada* joined by Rizal was El Compañerismo whose members were known as Los Compañeros de Jehu. While in UST, Rizal had at least four girlfriends, and he was seeing three of them almost at the same time from 1881 to 1882, namely Leonor Valenzuela, Leonor Rivera, and Vicenta Ybardaloza. Fr. Villarroel also writes about the practice of "la cuacha," which during the 19th century means to play truant or be idle. Certainly Rizal would have at one or several times would have engaged in these activities.¹⁴

On the other hand, while there were no more professors to monitor his activities, it would be in UST where one could see the real Rizal. In the Ateneo Rizal's works were pro-Spanish such as the one praising Sebastian El Cano (*Es Español..*) for circumnavigating the world or the poem praising the Spaniards for defeating the Moros in Jolo in 1851 (*Urbiztondo El Terror de Jolo*), or religious in nature like *Al Niño Jesus* or *A la Virgen Maria* in UST, his outstanding works such as the poem *A la Juventud Filipina* and the play *El Consejo de los Dioses* which both won top prizes in literary contests, were nationalistic in character. It was therefore in UST we can see the blossoming of this nationalistic character of Rizal.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-135

When Rizal left UST to continue his studies in Spain, Fr. Villarroel states that his decision to leave the Philippines was a personal one and that this meant his family had the means to support his studies abroad. This dispels insinuations by some authors that Rizal was forced to leave for Spain because he was placed in a blacklist by the friars or the colonial government; that he was a trouble maker; that he had to flee the country; or that there was a worsening of relations between his family and the Dominican administrators of the Calamba Estate.

The next discussion of the relationship between Rizal and the Dominicans was narrated by Fr. Villarroel. Upon his return to the Philippines in 1887, Rizal got involved in the *Protesta de Calamba*. Here Fr. Villarroel discussed in detail the Protesta which was an agrarian problem. The problem stemmed from the investigation by then Governor General Emilio Terrero to see if the Dominicans were paying the right taxes from the income of their landholdings. Rizal got involved by furnishing the report accusing the Dominicans of not supporting the annual town fiesta; that they did not just own the hacienda but the entire town of Calamba, that the tenants were losing money to the undue advantage of the Dominican administrators; that the Dominican administrators raised their rent every year; that the tenants who worked clearing lands found themselves dispossessed and that the high rates of interest were charged for delayed payment and if the rent could not be paid, the administrators would confiscate the carabaos and other farm animals. The first two reasons did not answer the issue of the proper payment of taxes by the Dominicans. The other issues such as the yearly rent increases and the dispossession of lands from failure to pay the monthly rent could be answered by amicable settlement between the tenants and the Dominican administrators. However, the most powerful accusation leveled by Rizal was he questioned the legitimacy of the ownership of the landholdings of the Dominicans or at least parts of it.

The result of the *Protesta* was the expulsion of Rizal's family and the other tenants. Many authors connected that the removals of Rizal's family along with other tenants with Rizal's work especially his authorship of the *Noli Me Tangere* which depicted the abuses and vices of the friars. This is simply untrue. Fr. Villarroel writes that the expulsion of the tenants was simply a matter of law and economics. Rizal's authorship of the *Noli Me Tangere* had nothing to do with the expulsion of his family and the other tenants. Rizal's family and the other tenants refused to pay the increased land rental owed to the Dominican administrators. This was worsened when they were advised by their lawyer Felipe Buencamino not to pay the Dominicans anything until they have proven the ownership of the hacienda of Calamba in court.

As for the loss of productivity of the tenants in their farms, Fr. Villarroel writes that the cause was due to the addiction of the farmers to gambling rather than

doing farm work. Fr. Villarroel said the Dominicans had to remind the farmers to stop neglecting their lands at the expense of their heirs. In many instances the tenants were losing money not from poor harvests but from losses in gambling. Fr. Villarroel even identifies the house of Rizal's sister, Lucia, where the gambling was taking place. As for the increasing amount of rent, the Dominicans claimed that they have a right to benefit from their investments. In many cases land was rent-free for five years and after that period they would now charge rent. This privilege was also extended to Rizal's family. In 1885 in anticipation of the death of Rizal's father, the Dominicans allowed Rizal's sisters to lease additional lands.

In discussing the income derived from the Calamba Hacienda, Fr. Villarroel wrote that the money earned from rents financed missionary work not just in the Philippines but also in Vietnam and China where the Order maintained missions. The Dominican House in Hong Kong was supported by funds from Calamba and other landholdings managed by the Order. Dominican educational institutions such as the University of Santo Tomas and the Colegio de San Juan de Letran derived their support from the income from Dominican landholdings. As for the increased annual rents, Fr. Villarroel utilized an economic reason that the Dominicans as landowners were merely exercising their right to benefit from their own investments. The Order had constructed irrigation systems from which the tenants themselves benefitted.

Fr. Villarroel writes that far from being oppressive landowners as depicted by various authors, the Dominicans were open to amicable settlement regarding the payment of rent including the granting of a generous grace periods until they would be able to pay to no avail. The Dominicans spent one year in trying to persuade the tenants to pay until they were forced to file a case in court. The tenants won the case at the Justice of the Peace in Calamba whose decision Fr. Villarroel claimed was dictated by Rizal's brother Paciano. The tenants lost when the case was appealed to the Court of First Instance in Santa Cruz. The decision upheld that the Calamba property was legally owned by the Dominicans. The case was also elevated to the higher court in Manila and ultimately at the Supreme Court in Madrid.

When the Santa Cruz court ruled in favor of the Dominican administrators, they did not wait for the decision of the court in Manila. This was not mentioned in Fr. Villarroel's narration of the outcome of the *protesta*. Agents of the court supported by government soldiers destroyed 50 houses in the hacienda. At that time Governor General Valeriano Weyler who replaced Governor Terrero sent more troops and ordered the deportation of many individuals including Paciano and Rizal's brother Silvestre Ubaldo who were sent to Mindoro while another brother-in-law Manuel Hidalgo, was deported to Bohol.

By explaining the legal and economic circumstances, we can now see the Protesta de Calamba in a more balanced manner. This was made possible by the research conducted by Fr. Villarroel.

Fr. Villarroel wrote about the connection of Rizal to the Dominicans even into Rizal's days. Many authors pointed to Archbishop Bernardino Nozaleda, O.P. as the one who clamored for Rizal's arrest. He viewed Rizal as the instigator of the Philippine Revolution and inspirer of the Katipunan. While this was true it was also Archbishop Nozaleda who took it upon himself to allow Rizal to renounce his masonic beliefs. Before he became the archbishop of Manila, Fr. Nozaleda was the Vice Rector of the University of Santo Tomas. Rizal was then a student in the University. Fr. Nozaleda was the likely model for Fr. Sibyla in his two novels. Though Fr. Nozaleda may have desired to have Rizal account for his alleged offenses against Spain (i.e. being the very spirit of the insurrection, as described by his prosecutors), Fr. Nozaleda made an effort to save Rizal's soul. Fr. Villarroel wrote that it was Archbishop Nozaleda who sent Jesuit priests into Rizal's detention cell to convince him to retract his Masonic beliefs and return to the Catholic Church. It was also Archbishop Nozaleda who furnished Rizal a draft of his retraction. A retraction personally written by Rizal was secured by Fr. Vilaclara on the early morning hours of December 30, 1896, a few hours before his execution at Bagumbayan. Unknown to many, Fr. Villarroel writes that it was Archbishop Nozaleda who asked Governor General Camilo de Polavieja an indult or pardon for Rizal but his request was denied.¹⁵

A View of the "Other Side"

Fr. Villarroel's writings about Philippine history often show the other side of the past. By doing so, it allows readers to have a different perspective about the country's past. In 1999 Fr. Villarroel came out with a book entitled *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution, 1896-1903*. Given the timing of the release of the book which was during the commemoration of the centennial of the Philippine Revolution and the establishment of the Philippine Republic, one might suspect that Fr. Villarroel's was a response to the surge of publications by nationalist authors. These authors often portray the Spaniards, especially the friars as the villains of the Philippine Revolution and that the friars were licentious, greedy and oppressive like the images depicted in Rizal's novels. In publishing his book Fr. Villarroel depicted the friars not as evil and power-hungry individuals. Some of them were moderates and provided counsel to both Filipino reformists and rebels. One of whom was Fr. Evaristo Fernandez Arias who was respected by all students of the University for his scholarship and wise advice. Rizal depicted him as the good friar in his novel *El*

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 287.

Filibusterismo and gave him the same name — Fr. Fernandez. He told the students not to be too radical in their demands and that responsibility must be exercised along with increased freedom. By putting his real name in the novel (not as an alias), this shows Rizal's high regard for this Dominican friar. Fr. Fernandez also advised insurgents including Emilio Aguinaldo not to subscribe to teachings of organizations that are incompatible with those of the Church. Fr. Fernandez was referring to Freemasonry which has influenced the minds of reformists and revolutionists.¹⁶

Included in Fr. Villarroel's work is the appeal of Fr. Fernandez to General Aguinaldo. At that time Filipino forces already blockaded Manila. In his appeal, Fr. Fernandez wrote to Aguinaldo that he once praised Spain during the Truce of Biak-na-Bato and that the revolutionists that they emulated like Voltaire, Robespierre, Luther are all anarchists, all troublemakers, even gangs of bandits. He said that while God allows moral evil, they will not be exempt from punishment. Fr. Fernandez said that to rebel against religious authority is to rebel against God. He called on General Aguinaldo to release all friars in rebel custody.

According to Fr. Villarroel, the friars were opposed to the Philippine Revolution and Philippine independence, fearing that their work during the three centuries of Spanish domination would be imperiled. Fr. Villarroel then writes that their explicable fear would be groundless. In his analysis, he points out that the missionaries failed to realize that it was precisely that magnificent enterprise that led the Philippines to its maturity, to its capacity for nationhood.¹⁷

In the same book, Fr. Villarroel writes about the Church during the Philippine Revolution. He portrayed that it was not a monolithic organization as religious orders fought one another. Fr. Villarroel writes that the Regular orders accused the Seculars of siding with the Filipinos in ending the supremacy of the Church in the Philippines; that the Dominicans accused the Jesuits of training and inspiring the Filipino reformists who in turn helped inspire the revolutionists. Fr. Villarroel included in his work 69 documents which included telegrams of the friars to the government in Spain; the self-examination of the friars on the causes of the Revolution and the fate of the 123 Dominican prisoners-of-war. Fr. Villarroel writes that it was the Seculars who requested the release of the Dominicans held by Filipino Revolutionists. Fr. Villarroel made available the documents of war damage claims of the Dominicans to the American authorities, the renunciation of their parishes in Northern Luzon and what happened to the Order and their properties including the friar lands after the Filipino-American War.

¹⁶ Fidel Villarroel, O.P. *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution, 1896-1903* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 1999), p. 225-227.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, from the back blurb of the book.

The University Historian

In commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of the University of Santo Tomas in 2011, Fr. Villarroel came up with a two-volume work entitled *A History of Santo Tomas: Four Centuries of Higher Education in the Philippines (1611-2011)*. Fr. Villarroel said that he began writing this book ten years before 2011. The work, which is based on archival documents, is characterized by its thoroughness and heavy detail. It showed the university as it travelled through time and responded to the challenges of history. Aside from the institution, it portrayed important players — the administrators, the faculty, the students, and their achievements.

Fr. Villarroel was not the first to write about the history of the University as they were others before him. Among them were Manuel Artigas Y Cuerva, a noted Spanish bibliographer and historian who wrote the history of the University from 1611 up to its tricentenary in 1911. Fr. Pablo Fernandez, O.P. also wrote another history in 1928. In 1969 Fr. Juan Sanchez published the second comprehensive history of the University entitled *Sinopsis Historica Documentada de la Universidad de Santo Tomas de Manila*. As for its quality, Fr. Sanchez's work was described as a reliable compendium of the University's history but had the lacked the quality of placing the story of the University in the context of national and world History. There were other histories of the University in miniature or abridged forms including the ones made by Fr. Pablo Fernandez in 1958. Fr. Villarroel himself published the history of the University in 1961, 1965, and 1987. There was also one made by Manuel Gonzalez Pola in 1969.¹⁸

In 1971, UST Professor Josefina Lim-Pe wrote another history as her doctoral dissertation. Fr. Villarroel wrote other histories of the University in 1961, 1965, and in 1987. Dr. Jose Victor Torres wrote about the history of the University also as his doctoral dissertation and published it as a book. However it was only about the history of the University during the American period. Fr. Villarroel's latest work on the University's history was marked with its comprehensiveness and heavy detail. The earlier works merely narrate the growth of the University as an institution. In Fr. Villarroel's hands, the story of the University was written in the context of the history of the Philippines as it faces various internal and external challenges.

As a learning institution in a Spanish colony, Fr. Villarroel portrayed the story of the University in the context of Philippine and world history. One event in Spain that affected the University was the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767. The royal order took effect in the islands the following year.¹⁹ The University took over the buildings

¹⁸ Fidel Villarroel, O.P., *A History of Santo Tomas: Four Centuries of Higher Education in the Philippines (1611-2011)* Vol. (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2014) I. p. xxii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 223-224.

administered by the Jesuits such as the Colegio de San Jose which eventually became the building of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery when it was established in 1871. In 1778 there was a renewed threat of invasion from Great Britain and the University prepared itself for the worst. It formed four companies of students and professors to fight the British. Though the invasion never came, a communication was sent to Spain suggesting that the University be given the title of “Royal” because of its loyalty to the Crown. The title was given in 1785.²⁰

One important duty given to the University was the authority given to the Rector to supervise all secondary education in the Philippines. This authority was bestowed by Queen Isabella II in 1865. From that time on the University of Santo Tomas was given the sole power to grant decrees and academic titles even if the student finished his education elsewhere. The University also handled the final examinations of all the students in higher education. Rizal himself was a product of this arrangement.

The most serious threat to the University’s existence came when the Overseas Minister Segismundo Moret y Prendergast and Interior Minister Mateo Praxedes Sagasta issued a series of decrees in 1870, one of them ordering the secularization of the University. Under this decree, the University of Santo Tomas will be suppressed and the along with the other institutions held by the religious like the Colegio de Letran, the Jesuit-run Ateneo Municipal and the Escuela Nautica. These institutions will be recreated as the Instituto Filipino. It was not the first time when the Spanish government attempted to suppress the University. It was mulling over the possibility as early as the beginning of the 18th century. It was almost secularized during the term of Governor General Simon de Anda in 1768.²¹

The effort to secularize institutions is actually a worldwide trend and an effect of the Age of Enlightenment. To many Filipino students of history, secularization referred to the turning over of parishes from the Regular clergy to the Seculars. But secularization in the context of the Age of Enlightenment would be turning over institutions such as schools, universities, and hospitals handled by the Church to be handled by laymen. As early as the 1700s, there were plans to secularize the University of Santo Tomas but it would be in 1871 when it would be ordered to do so. Fr. Villarroel writes that the Dominicans respectfully asked the authorities in Madrid to reconsider the decree. The planned secularization did not push through because of the change of government in Spain.²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 251-257.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 129-135.

Attempts to secularize the University did not end in 1871 as Filipino reformists and their Spanish allies petitioned the authorities in Madrid to put the University in the hands of laymen. There will also be individuals, many of whom were once UST students who would petition for the suppression of the University and the expulsion of the friars. These included Marcelo H. del Pilar and Jose Rizal. There was one time when the University was actually suppressed. This was in 1898 when the Universidad Científico Literaria was established in Malolos. By the beginning of the Second World War, the University had two campuses, the original one at Intramuros and the new one at Sampaloc. During the Japanese occupation, classes in the Sampaloc campus were suspended as some of the buildings and grounds were used as internment camp for Allied internees.

As with his other works, Fr. Villarroel debunked the old established stereotypes provided by other authors and the public. One aspect as important as that follows the writing of the will and the death of Fr. Miguel de Benavides, O.P. According to this, the University cannot be immediately founded as it had to wait for the funds in the endowment to increase with the addition of funds provided by other donors. Even as a Royal and Pontifical University, it did not receive financial assistance from the Spanish Crown or the Vatican, it had to raise its own funds — thus the need for the Dominicans to have haciendas which funded not only the University but other Dominican institutions in the Philippines and abroad. Fr. Villarroel writes that the Constitution of the University prohibits it from receiving funds from the Spanish monarchy.

In spite of being the oldest university in Asia, the University was always on the side of modernization. Fr. Villarroel writes that it is the oldest school for civil law in Asia, the oldest college of medicine and pharmacy. Even as it was the first, the University, Fr. Villarroel writes, kept itself abreast of scientific developments. He mentions the acquisition of modern equipment used in instructions which were actually used by students by students contrary to what was portrayed in Rizal's Class in Physics in his *El Filibusterismo*. The professors too, were professionally trained and many were sent abroad for their studies.

Another aspect revealed in Fr. Villarroel's writings was that the University was the first institution to open its doors to women. In 1879, after consideration by Governor General Domingo Moriones, the University opened the Escuela de Matronas y Parteras— the School for Midwives. This school which was supervised by the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy, held classes at the Colegio de San Jose building away from its main building at Intramuros. The school lasted until 1915 and the University again became an all-male institution until women were readmitted in

the College of Education and the Faculty of Pharmacy in 1926.²³

An important quality of Fr. Villarroel's writing of the history of the University is his discussion about student life in the University. It discussed the entry of non-Spaniards in the 1700s; the procedure of defenses of theses and dissertation during Spanish rule; the graduation of students; the involvement of students in protests and the entry of monarchists, liberals, future reformists and revolutionists in the University. The University of Santo Tomas was actually a melting pot of various peoples from different cultures and persuasions.

Perhaps the best quality of Fr. Villarroels' treatment of the history of UST was his narration of the lives of the illustrious Thomasians— administrators, professors and students alike. Already mentioned was Fr. Evaristo Fernandez Arias who was an outstanding Thomasian professor and theologian; Fr. Casto de Elera who compiled the fauna of the Philippines and published a book on the subject. His work *Fauna de Filipinas* was the counterpart of *La Flora de Filipinas* which was written by the Augustinian friar Fr. Manuel Blanco. Another great Thomasian was Fr. Norberto del Prado who was described as one of the greatest Thomists ever produced by the University. His bibliography includes voluminous sermons, treatises and various articles which were included in 208 titles of his writings. At the same time the University was producing graduates who were advocating far-reaching changes. The most important part in Fr. Villarroel's work about the University is his writing about the saints and martyrs who walked through its portals. Already mentioned were St. Lorenzo Ruiz, St. Antonio Gonzalez and their companions in Japan; St. Vicente Liem de la Paz and his companions in Vietnam and Blessed Buenaventura Garcia Paredes, O.P. and his fellow martyrs in Civil War-era Spain.

Other Thomasians played a role in the events in Philippine history chief among them were Rizal himself. Fr. Villarroel dedicated an entire chapter of his book to discuss Rizal as a medical student and an alumnus of the University. This detailed treatment of Rizal's life in the University dispelled accusations and insulations by the so-called nationalist authors who charged the Dominican administrators of racial discrimination, poor treatment and bad instruction when he was a student in the University. Fr. Villarroel wrote about Rizal even when he was no longer a university student until his last days in Fort Santiago. Fr. Villarroel was able to explain to the

²³ Fr. Villarroel's research proved that there were female students in the University during the Spanish period with the establishment of the *Escuela de Matronas y Parteras* in 1879. Unfortunately this fact was not reflected in the historical marker installed by the National Historical Commission in 2011 which indicated the entry of women only in 1926.

See Fidel Villarroel, O.P., "The Origins of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Santo Tomas (1871-1880)," In: Fr. Angel Aparcio, Ed. *Proceedings of the First International Conference on History of Medicine in the Philippines* (Manila: Miguel de Benavides Library, 2008), pp. 146-149.

accusations and was backed up by historical evidence. One may wonder if Rizal was a beneficiary of the benevolent treatment by the Dominicans, why did he turn against them? Here Fr. Villarroel did not condemn Rizal nor he pointed to factors why Rizal became an enemy of the Church. We may look to other sources such as the letters of Fr. Pastells to Rizal who said the change in Rizal's character was caused after he left for Europe and was exposed to masonic and anti-clerical teachings.

Another Thomasian who became prominent was Fr. Jose Burgos who earned eight degrees from the University. Together, he and Fr. Jacinto Zamora advocated secularization of all parishes. Other graduates included Ambrosio Rianzares Bautista, the author of the Philippine Independence Proclamation; Apolinario Mabini, President Aguinaldo's adviser and an advocate of a church free of friars; Antonio Luna who desired the expulsion of friars and many others. There were also those who were reactionaries and conservatives such as Archbishop Benardino Nozaleda who called for the arrest of Rizal; Archbishop Meliton Martinez who doubted the guilt of Fathers Jose Burgos, Jacinto Zamora and Mariano Gomes in the complicity in the Cavite Mutiny; Felipe Calderon who advocated a union of Church and State in the Philippine government. Fr. Villarroel writes that of the 150 total deputies in Malolos who signed the 1899 Philippine Constitution, 63 were Thomasians. Fr. Villarroel interpreted the crisis experienced by the University as a struggle between "Two Spains"—one a modernizing and liberalizing Spain, and the other, a bastion of conservatism which is strictly Catholic.²⁴

With the establishment of American rule, Fr. Villarroel writes that the University had to undergo changes if it is to survive in the new century. UST availed of foreign experts to impart knowledge in the American system. A new medium of instruction was adopted and eventually most of its classes were moved to the new campus in the Sulucan estate in Sampaloc. As a conservative institution the University resisted coeducational classes and did its utmost to separate male and female students. Fr. Villarroel writes that this arrangement was done to avoid scandals. Eventually most of the classes were coeducational.

To stem the spread of secularism, anti-church literature like Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* were banned in the University and the newspaper *Libertas* was published to be the mouthpiece of the Church as the Philippines develops its society under the separation of Church and State. Like in the Spanish period Fr. Villarroel narrates student life as Dominican faculty members watched over their male and female students. There were separate doors and passageways for men and women. He also explains the presence of the Regent in every college. He said there will be one priest professor of mature age and of good gifts of social manners who will act as Inspector,

²⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 62.

Priest-Professor or Dean so that he can always take care of the convenience of the separation of sexes and avoiding all occasions of danger or scandal. The women were never alone but always under the view whether of the professor or the instructor or at the least of the classes under severe discipline.²⁵

As in the Spanish period, Fr. Villarroel narrated the contributions of UST to nation-building through its graduates. As in the 1899 Malolos Congress, Thomasians placed themselves at the service of their country in the Philippine Assembly which was convened in 1907. Fr. Villarroel mentions the UST alumni of the American period which included Manuel Quezon and Sergio Osmeña who became presidents of the Philippine Commonwealth and before that Osmeña was the Speaker of the First Philippine Assembly in 1907 while Quezon became the country's first Senate President in 1916. Jose P. Laurel who was a former student rose to become Secretary of the Interior under the Americans and later President of the Philippine Republic under the Japanese and Senator in the 1950s. Another notable alumnus was Claro M. Recto who became President of the 1934 Constitutional Convention and later Foreign Affairs Minister during the Japanese Occupation and Senator during the postwar period. Ojrt prominent Thomasians were Vicente Singson Encarnacion, Ruperto Montinola and Norberto Romualdez who were in the drafting committee of the 1934 Constitutional Convention. ²⁶In religious matters, a UST alumni Jorge Barlin became the first Filipino bishop who became the shepherd of the diocese of Nueva Caceres. Other Filipino bishops who were UST alumni were Juan Gorordo of Cebu, Fr. Pablo Singzon of Calbayog, Fr. Alfredo Verzosa of Lipa, Fr. Santiago Sancho of Tuguegarao and later Archbishop of Nueva Segovia, Fr. Sofronio Hacbang of Calbayog and Fr. Alfredo Obviar of Lucena and Lipa.

As change is the only constant in reality, new colleges were created in the University while others vanished. Fr. Villarroel identifies the new colleges in the American period as the colleges of Education, Science and Commerce while the ones that were abolished were the School of Notaries and courses such as Dentistry and Foreign Service.

The coming of the Second World War was described as "The Greatest Aberration."²⁷ The Sampaloc campus was used as a marshaling area for ROTC graduates wishing to join the United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). During the Japanese occupation the campus was home to 3,700 Allied internees consisting of Americans, British, and even Filipinos of mixed American or British parentage along with other internees at war with the Axis power. They occupied the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 329.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

first two floors of the Main Building, the Annex or Economics Building at the back of the Main Building, the Education Building (now the San Martin Wing of the UST Hospital) and the Gymnasium.

Like in the early American period, the Dominican administrators had to deal with the new powers. A serious controversy arose when Camilo Osias, the Minister of Education (not Secretary, as written by Fr. Villarroel) issued a statement that the University of Santo Tomas including its ecclesiastical faculties and seminary should fall under the Ministry of Education. This was because Osias perceived the Dominicans as harboring anti-Axis (Japan, Italy and Germany) feelings. The controversy was solved after having an audience with President Laurel and it was explained that under the legislation and tradition of the Catholic Church the seminaries and ecclesiastical faculties were exempt from the jurisdiction of government agencies.²⁸ While classes in Sampaloc were closed, the Intramuros campus continued operating and students were declared graduates as soon as they defended their theses and dissertations.

Life in the Sampaloc campus which is known as Camp No. 1 or the Santo Tomas Internment Camp was a story of privation and suffering. The gloom and boredom was broken only by a few movies and plays. The situation became worse in late 1944, which was, on the other hand, marked by deprivations. On February 3, 1945, the camp was liberated but not without casualties. One of the first to die was Captain Manuel Colayco, a guerrilla leader and a UST alumnus. While the Sampaloc campus was liberated by US forces, the Intramuros campus was razed to the ground by the Japanese along with the other buildings in the district. Also destroyed was the San Juan de Dios Hospital which was the hospital for the Faculty of Medicine. The old hospital cannot be used anymore. It became therefore necessary, according to Fr. Villarroel to convert the Education building which now became the UST Hospital. One relic from the old campus, the statue of Fr. Miguel de Benavides, was salvaged from the Intramuros campus. It was reinstalled in front of the Main Building where it stands today. The statue was unveiled on November 13, 1946.

An Incomplete Work

With the coming of Philippine independence on July 4, 1946, the University again entered a new era— the era of the Philippine Republic. It would usher in a new era that would be characterized by rebuilding from the ashes of the war and continuing the mission of the University. Here, Fr. Villarroel speaks in the first person as he addresses the reader:

“I regret to say, however, that as far as the University’s written history is concerned,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 373.

this is **THE END** of my narrative about this beloved university. The writing of his book has been my joyful obsession, and it has given me an unparalleled sense of fulfillment, aside from the satisfaction I derive from teaching Church History in the Ecclesiastical Faculties of the university and my duties as Archivist.

Now at the dawning of my eightieth year, I have to realize that how wise the Sapiential Books are in warning us that 'our life lasts for seventy years, eighty for those in good health. Ill health has descended upon me as a daily visitor and companion. This notwithstanding, and although I succeeded in writing only up to the first half of the 4th century of the university, I am filled with gratitude for God's unending grace and loving guidance. And so it is with great joy that I say with the venerable Simeon of the New Testament, **Nunc dimittis servum tuum Domine.**"²⁹

With these words, Fr. Villarroel left his work unfinished as poor health prevented him from writing further. There is a gap of 65 years from 1946 to 2011 which may represent the third chapter of his book. Fr. Villarroel would have written about the rehabilitation of the University; the abandonment of the Intramuros campus; the accession of the First Filipino Rector of the University and the Filipinization of the institution. He would have written how the University dealt with legislation on educational reforms and the creation of new colleges and faculties in the University. The postwar years also saw the rise of student activism and unionism among faculty members and employees. These would have been documented by Fr. Villarroel. Another important development, too, would be the establishment of various student organizations such as the Pax Romana and the Student Catholic Action which were created as a response to rising secularism, as well as other organizations. The same period also saw the imposition of martial law, the EDSA People Power incident, EDSA II and EDSA III. How the university reacted to these events would have been written by Fr. Villarroel. The same period also witnessed the visits of two popes, Pope Paul VI in 1971 and Pope John Paul II in 1981 and in 1995. Certainly Fr. Villarroel was in the thick of these visits and he may have written something about them. The University also kept turning out illustrious graduates, many of them have become prominent in Philippine society, some have become captains of industry, leaders in the academe, law and politics and in the Christian hierarchy. The events of the past 65 years may well serve as the third volume of Fr. Villarroel's work. Since he is a very prolific writer, he may have written something but yet may need some polishing and reorganizing. Fr. Villarroel was not averse to having somebody continue his work but this person certainly has very big shoes to fill.

²⁹ Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 446

The complete Latin taken from Luke 2:29, the story of Simeon upon seeing the Child Jesus in the temple was "*Nunc dimittis, Domine, servum tuum in pace, quia viderunt oculi mei salutare tuum.*) (Now Master, you can let your servant go in peace... because my eyes have seen your salvation)

Concluding Remarks

Fr. Villarroel's historical writings are a valuable contribution to Philippine historiography. As the chief historian of the University, he dedicated a lifetime of historical writings that added new information to Philippine history. This new information was culled from archival documents and interpreted after rigorous research. Whenever he writes, he opens a new perspective for the reader which allows a better understanding of history. At the same time, Fr. Villarroel debunked myths, biases, and stereotypes about the past. His historical writings do not only benefit the study of the country's history but the whole of Christendom as well as Fr. Villarroel did the research and wrote the biographies of exemplary Christians who are now canonized as saints or beatified as blessed. Filipino Catholics should be grateful to Fr. Villarroel who wrote the officio for St. Lorenzo Ruiz. Through his efforts Lorenzo Ruiz became the first Filipino saint.

Often history was used as propaganda to support the ideology or objective of the ones who wrote it. This is usually the true in the case of the nationalist historians. Their view of history is simplistic- the Filipinos and the foreigners— usually the invaders and colonizers. The nationalistic view of history is portray the Filipinos as the heroes of their struggle. They were the ones oppressed by the invaders and colonizers but eventually they gained their victory through a nationalist struggle. The invaders and colonizers, on the other hand, are portrayed as abusers of the oppressors Filipinos. They were the ones who deceived the Filipinos and deprived them of their freedom through colonization. However, when we combine the view from the other side— in this case the Spaniards, the perspective of history becomes different. We can see why the invaders or colonizers were portrayed as they were.

This was what exactly Fr. Villarroel did. In discussing how the Filipinos were colonized, it was not entirely due to superior weapons and promises of eternal salvation the natives became wards of Spain, but their leaders opted to become Spanish subjects. In the discussion of the life of Rizal, a large part of the story about the hero was propaganda. For example, Rizal's choice to take medical studies in UST was not to take care of his mother's failing eyesight but he was attracted by the prospects of the new course in the University. His decision to enter Ateneo instead of Letran and his decision to leave UST to continue his studies abroad was not due to any oppressive treatment on the part of the Spanish authorities or the Dominicans but his decision was motivated by personal choice. In the *Protesta de Calamba* controversy, the tenants complained about dwindling harvests and rising rent. Fr. Villarroel wrote that the cause of the declining harvests in the farms was not due to declining productivity of the land but the laziness of the farmers who were addicted

to gambling. Fr. Villarroel even pointed out that the gambling was taking part in the house of one of Rizal's sisters. Often the friars were depicted as power-hungry and abusive by nationalist historians. The label cannot be applied to all of them—Fr. Evaristo Fernandez Arias was admired by many. Even Rizal made him a character in his novel and painted in him as a benevolent soul. The nationalist historians will never write about him. Also while Archbishop Bernardino Nozaleda clamored for Rizal's arrest, it was he who asked for his pardon from the Governor-General and it was he who patiently worked to make Rizal realize the errors of Freemasonry and write his retraction. Fr. Villarroel balanced the works of the nationalist historians like Teodoro Agoncillo and Renato Constantino and the pro colonial writers which included such as Jose Maria del Castillo who ridiculed the reformists and later the revolutionists and friars like Fr. Mariano Gil also belittled the Katipunan calling it an associatioin of notable criminals. Fr. Villarroel through the use of documents to back his writings, history was placed closer to the truth.

Since Fr. Villarroel is a Spaniard and a Dominican friar, he is often accused of using his writings to defend the acts of his countrymen and his religious order. But going through his works, he was no apologist for Spain or the Dominicans but he allows documentary evidence to explain historical issues which have been given outright condemnation by other authors. His approach of giving the view from "the other side" which contrasts with the nationalistic views of authors like Teodoro Agoncillo and Renato Constantino. With his inputs as well from other sources from the Spanish side, the student of history creates a wider picture of the past. Fr. Villarroel even discussed his countrymen's shortcomings which caused the Philippine Revolution. This included the failure of the Spaniards to anticipate the actions of the Filipinos due to the deficiencies in the colonial order. The Spaniards failed to realize that the Philippine Revolution was a Filipino enterprise as the nation begins to claim the status of nationhood.

I had an opportunity to review one of Fr. Villarroel's works, *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution*. I was asked to do a critique about the book by Dr. Mecheline Manalastas, then the Director of the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House. At first I was reluctant to do a very frank critique for fear of offending the author but Dr. Manalastas insisted that I do a no holds barred review of the book and that I should not hold back any punches when I do a critique of his work.

In my review, I said that this was either anticipation or a reaction to the flood of nationalistic historical literature which came out during the centennial of the Philippine Revolution and the establishment of the First Philippine Republic. Going through its pages, the book explained the actions of the Church and the Spanish

clergy in response to the events of the time. I also noted down what I thought were shortcomings such as the Spanish clergy appeared to be in a state of denial in losing control over the Philippines and their churches. Though Fr. Rodriguez Arias' appeal to the insurgents appeared polite, it showed a paternalistic air which said that the rebels were committing a great error. This attitude was denounced by the revolutionists and reformists alike who believe that they were on equal terms with the Spaniards and that it was now their time to lead the destiny of their native land.

After I published my critique, I learned that Fr. Villarroel welcomed my impressions and remarks about his work. He even congratulated me for my frank remarks. Though his work was markedly pro-Spanish, Fr. Villarroel did not apologize for the acts of his countrymen during the Revolution. He explained the historical issues based on the documents he had in his possession. It was understandable that the Spanish friars were also citizens of Spain and thus their allegiance lie with their country.

In 2013, I had another chance of reviewing Fr. Villarroel's other work. This time it was his latest work, *A History of the University of Santo Tomas Four Centuries of Higher Education in the Philippines*. I also had a chance to interview him not only about the book but also his other works. The book was an insider's view of the history of the University and it showed an institution going through the history of the islands and the world in general. The book put into light aspects of the University's history and the Dominican Order that are usually glossed over in the general history of the Philippines or cast aside by nationalist historians. It discussed the traditions, statutes and laws of the University, their rationale and effect. The book paid special attention to the individuals, administrators, faculty, students, and graduates who eventually became great men in Philippine and Church history. These great men became saints, martyrs, blessed, presidents, chief justices, senators, and leaders in various fields. The book was not merely an institutional history but rather a social history of the University. Its only great imperfection was that while the mind was willing, Fr. Villarroel's health was slowly failing him and he had to stop at the inauguration of the Philippine Republic.

There are however, some blind spots in Fr. Villarroel's writings which need clarification. These blind spots are areas with no satisfactory historical explanation. Some of these blind spots were why no doctorate degree was not awarded to *indios* following the execution of the Gom-Bur-Za priests? Another is why Rizal was given the special privilege of taking the *ampliacion* course and first year medicine at the same time? I raised these issues during my interviews with Fr. Villarroel and he replied that the causes were unknown. Often these unknown causes leave a space for speculation and even attacks by anti-Spanish writers.

Also historical documents in the Philippine National Archives show a kind of tax called *canon* which was levied on farmers of Calamba. A *canon* is charged whenever a particular land is measured by surveyors; a new fence was constructed in the land or when some improvements were done in the property³⁰. Canons were charged whenever there were harvests and rates were increasing yearly. One information was that the canon payment in Calamba rose from P45 to P900 yearly. The issue of *canon* payments was not mentioned in Fr. Villarroel's discussion of the *Protesta de Calamba* controversy. One complaint of the farmers was that the Dominican administrators did not issue receipts for whatever payments they made. This was not addressed in Fr. Villarroel's discussion of the *protesta*. Also unexplained was the haste of the Dominicans to evict the tenants of the hacienda without waiting for the decision of the court in Manila. The tenants who tried to harvest their crops were prevented from doing so and were accused of thievery.³¹

In conclusion, historians and authors will acknowledge their debt of gratitude to Fr. Villarroel for his scholarly work which enriched the study of Philippine Church history and the history of the country in one of its most pivotal periods. It would be impossible to write about Dominican history in the Philippines, the lives of Rizal, del Pilar and Mabini, St. Lorenzo Ruiz, the Dominican saints and martyrs without referring to Fr. Villarroel and his scholarly works. It would be possible, however to continue Fr. Villarroel's work and to emulate his zeal for thoroughness in research and the way he analyzed history. If somebody would like to continue writing with the same thoroughness and zeal as Fr. Villarroel observed, it would be a daunting task as he certainly has very big shoes to fill. Villarroel with his perspicacity, attention to detail, and dedication should be an inspiration for all researchers and writers of history. ■



³⁰ Raymond Abejo, *Ang Nawaglit na Tahanan: Mga Bagong Tuklas na Tala Ukol kay Rizal at Mga Taga-Calamba* (Maynila: Pambansang Sinupan ng mga Tala, 1997), p. 17.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.