

Bishop Miguel Poblete: The Eighth Archbishop of Manila

BY ORLANDO R. FULLER, STD

It was only in 1771 when the ecclesiastical province of the Philippines could hold its own provincial council¹ after having been declared independent from Mexico by Clement VIII in 1595. One century before it took place, there had been attempts to hold one. With a vision of good government and discipline, the fifth Prelate of Manila, MIGUEL GARCIA SERRANO attempted to hold the first in 1617 but his good intentions were obstructed by the *patronato real* (royal patronage) which did not favor the convocation of such council at that time. The attempt, therefore, never went beyond its initial stages. The second attempt was not only made but also well planned by another prelate bearing the same name, MIGUEL POBLETE, the eighth Metropolitan Archbishop of Manila (1653-1667). Aided by some learned ecclesiastics, he drafted the "Constituciones Sinodales" which were intended to serve as the basis and guidelines for the deliberations in the planned council.²

¹The first provincial council ever held in the Philippines was under archbishop Basilio Sancho, in virtue of a Royal Decree of Charles III, declaring that the bishops of the Americas and the Philippines should hold provincial councils without delay.

²The original manuscript is preserved at the Archives of the University of Santo Tomas (AUST). The said document was made available to the author for his thesis-writing for the Licentiate in Sacred Theology (1975) by Fr. Pablo Fernandez, OP. The Metropolitan Archbishop of Manila had the prerogative of suggesting the subject matter for the provincial council. The four experts who helped draft the *constituciones* were: Fr. Francisco de Roa, Fr. Juan Antonio Sanna, Fr. Francisco Perez and Fr. Francisco Collins, all members of the Society of Jesus.

Only one factor prevented it from being held in 1661 since Bishop Poblete had to call it off because of the untimely death of the three suffragan bishops.³

How much do we know of the life of Bishop Poblete? Perhaps it would be of human and historical interest to know more about him. A schematic story of his life can be read from *Theatro Ecclesiástico*, a manuscript in the archives of the Manila Archdiocese, and in the library of the University of Santo Tomas in microfilm form.⁴

Birth and Schooling

The year 1603 saw in the city of Mexico the birth of healthy baby, destined to be the third prelate to bear the name "Miguel"⁵ and the eighth to rule the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Manila. His parents, Sr. Francisco de Millan and Doña Maria de Poblete had just migrated there.⁶ By 1628, he had had obtained a bachelor's degree in Philosophy, Theology and Canon Law, and in December 28, 1631, he earned his doctorate in Sacred Theology in Mexico University.

Professional and Pastoral Offices

In the same university, he was chancellor for three terms, professor, rector and finally Visitor. He became a curate in the Diocese of Mechoacan and Santa Fe. He was appointed a member of the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition and Holy Crusade. In 1637, he held the position of Synodal Examiner, Vicar of Ares and Visitor General. Having discharged all these duties with justice and integrity, he was promoted to School-Master of the Cathedral Church of Puebla de los Angeles where he has been a professor of Theology. He was also known to be a great preacher, worker and treasurer for the construction of the church of Puebla. The Diocese of Nicaragua was offered to him in 1644 but he graciously declined.

³Namely, Juan de Velez of Cebu, Antonio de San Gregorio of Camarines and Rodrigo de Cardenas of Cagayan.

⁴Cf. note no. 2.

⁵The other two were Bishop Miguel Benavides, OP, the founder of the University of Santo Tomas, and Bishop Miguel Garcia Serrano.

⁶It was not unusual at that time to take the family name of the mother.

His Appointment as Archbishop of Manila

Bishop Juan de Palafox, the Prelate of Puebla, had great admiration for him due to his dedication and sincerity in his work. Through his recommendation, Poblete was appointed archbishop of Manila in virtue of the royal decree of Philip IV, then King of Spain. In his modesty, he did not want that his appointment would be made public until after one month, for he deemed it necessary to consult first the Prelate of Puebla, who asked him if he was being consulted as a School Master or as an archbishop. The moment Poblete answered as "archbishop", Bishop Palafox donned on him his own hat, and ordered the ringing of bells in all the churches. Pope Innocent X gave his *fiat* to the royal decree and the Bull arrived in September 9, 1650. He was consecrated by Archbishop Juan de Mañosca, the Visitor General of the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition. When he came to the Philippines, his port of entry was Cavite where he was met with festive acclamations and proceeded to Manila sometime later.

His Achievements as Metropolitan Archbishop

Worthy of mention are the following: lifting of the excommunication imposed upon the city by Bishop Guerrero; construction of the Cathedral due to which he went from house to house asking for donations; the printing of the choir rules; prohibition of the Chinese infidels from celebrating their Easter (Pascua); the teaching of the christian doctrine to the Chinese *Sangleyes* and the printing of the *Doctrina Christiana* - the first printed book in the Philippines (1593) - in Tagalog, Pampango and Chinese. He also ordered all the curates to examine every Sunday their parishioners about the christian faith and to keep separate books for baptisms, marriages, funerals and church funds. He greatly desired, as aforementioned, to hold a provincial council as a means to curb the many existing abuses at the time. It could have been his greatest achievement had it materialized.

His Last Illness and Death

Bishop Poblete got seriously ill on July 25, 1667 because of a fainting spell. The people around him thought he was going to die but with the aid of doctors, he survived, thus lengthening his life for another five months. Meanwhile, the sermon on the *reales exequias* with the occasion of the death of Philip IV, was assigned to him. Though not feeling well as yet, he retired to his house by the riverside to prepare it.

He tried to hide his condition as he prepared the sermon, only to find out later on that his sickness grew worse because of bleeding which drained much of his strength, thereby making it impossible for him to deliver the sermon. This task was passed on to Fray Francisco Solis, then Provincial of the Franciscans. The vigil of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of 1667 saw him much more weakened by fever and thus he was asked to make his testament and, this finished, he was to be administered the Viaticum. Having done so, the Blessed Sacrament was brought to him from Sta. Cruz at four o'clock in the afternoon. He momentarily rallied, however, and remained so with a happy and serene face as if he had never had any ailment at all. Thus, his being anointed was put off. Finally, sometime later that same night, he received the last rites after which he ordered the Governor and *Royal Audiencia* to notify Señor Arcediano Millan de Poblete, his nephew, that should he die that evening, the must not allow the tolling of bells in the Cathedral and in other churches.

At seven in the evening, he felt so much fatigue that he summoned Father Juan de Paz, his confessor, and at that time Prior of Santo Domingo Convent and the Rector of the University of Santo Tomas. Both had a long talk from then until midnight. At one o'clock, he wanted to rest a while and the others retired to the hall, except a trusted servant who attended to him. After a little while, as the others returned to his room, they found him lying over his right arm, his left hand was reaching out to the nearby table, and his eyes were closed. Thinking that he might be sleeping, they made a slight noise while Father Paz called out to him. That same moment, the clock struck two o'clock of the morning of December 8, 1667, Thursday.

His face beamed with joy and serenity. His nephew, following the will of his uncle-bishop, ordered that his body should not be embalmed and that his interment be made without pomposity. The controversy arose whether or not to follow his wish. It was resolved that his last wish did not bind them, so he was embalmed and the bells were rung in all churches.

In the process of embalming his body, three unusual things were observed: first, his body seemed alive within the fourteen hours after his death; second, a small aposteme was found above his heart; and third, his body had all the signs and properties of having kept his virginal purity intact during the course of his life.