

IV Centennial of the Evangelization of the Cagayan Valley

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This year of 1994 marks the IV centennial of the evangelization of the Cagayan Valley by the Dominican Fathers of the Holy Rosary Province. It is but fitting and proper that we should recall such a glorious event while some of its salient stages and happenings are being mentioned and extolled. The passing of this centenary will most likely go unknown and unadverted. Nevertheless, the following fact must be strongly attested, the seed of faith which was planted along the banks of the Cagayan River 400 years ago is, at present time, still growing and flourishing. This is perhaps the best tribute that history can offer today to the hundreds of Dominican missionaries who worked so hard and zealously in this portion of the Lord's vineyard.

For a better understanding of the evangelical work of the Dominican missionaries, we must bear in mind that the Cagayan Valley extended, at the time of the mission, to three provinces, namely Isabela, Nueva Vizcaya and Cagayan. It was in the year 1836 when Governor Lardizabal created the provinces of Cagayan and Nueva Vizcaya. This partition was approved by Royal Decree of April 10, 1841. The province of Isabela was established also by Royal Decree on March 31, 1856. It is clear then that by the Cagayan Valley we mean the vast area of land that goes along the course of Cagayan River.

First to explore the coast of Cagayan was Captain Juan Salcedo when in 1572 he went along the coast of Northern Luzon without venturing to enter and explore the Cagayan River. But in 1581, the Governor of the Islands, Don Gonzalo Ronquillo, sent the courageous Juan Pablo Carrion with the express mission of fighting and expelling the Japanese Pirate Tayfusu from the mouth of Cagayan River and at

the same time to bring the whole province under the dominion of Spain. The Japanese pirate was finally forced to retreat and to set out for other shores.

It was relatively easy for Carrion to conquer the whole area that goes from the north of Luzon to Tuguegarao following the course of the Cagayan River. However, his troops did not reach all the recesses of the Valley that for almost three centuries hid some tribes which never accepted Spanish sovereignty.

The first two missionaries ever to step on the Cagayan Valley with the evangelical mission of Christ's salvation were Fr. Cristobal de Salvatierra, O.P., Vicar General of the Bishopric of Manila, and Fr. Francisco Rodríguez, an Augustinian religious. The presence of these two priests in these lands was due to the fact that both were chaplains of the Spanish troops. Their missionary work was curtailed by their particular mission.

As soon as Carrion pacified this area, he built immediately the city of Nueva Segovia, now known as La-lo, where he erected a chapel which was entrusted to the care of the Augustinian Fathers. Historians have argued as to who were the first to evangelize the Cagayan Valley. Without entering into such discussion one thing seems to be clear. The presence of the Augustinians in this region was because they had been appointed as chaplains of the Spanish troops. In fact the permanence of these priests was very short as it has been attested by the well-known contemporary historian Fr. Diego Aduarte in his *Historia de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario de Filipinas, Japón y China*. It is plausible that these Augustinians must have tried to convert some of the natives, but certainly their apostolic endeavors could not go beyond their job as chaplains of the Spanish troops that were engaged in the conquest of the land.

It was in the year 1594 when Governor Don Luis Pérez Dasmariñas asked the Dominican Superior in Manila to take charge of the spiritual care of the Spanish garrison in the city of La-lo, and at the same time to start the evangelization of the Cagayan Valley which had been submitted to the sovereignty of Spain with little blood shedding. Two religious priests were sent to this new mission, Fr. Diego de Soria and Fr. Tomás Castellar. After some period of trial to convert the natives these two Fathers were so discouraged and disappointed that they decided to abandon the mission and go back to Manila as the Augustinians had done earlier. When they were at the port of Patta, almost ready to

get the boat bound to Manila, they met providentially six Dominican Fathers who had recently arrived from Spain and were sent by the Superiors of Manila to reinforce the newly organized mission in Cagayan Valley. This happy encounter lifted up the spirit of the two disheartened missionaries who decided to stay, and all together made a spiritual retreat before entering seriously into their new ministry. Afterwards, the territory was divided among the members of the group and immediately they began the evangelization of the whole area of the Cagayan Valley. Fr. Soria and Fr. Castellar remained in the city of La-lo; Fr. Miguel de San Jacinto and Fr. Gaspar Zarpate stationed themselves in the town of Patta; Fr. Ambrosio Martínez and the lay-brother Domingo de San Blas set out for Abulug, and Fr. Antonio de Soria and another lay-brother took quarters in the town of Camalaniugan.

Patta and La-lo were the two most important centers at the initial moment of the mission. The venerable ruins of the old church and convent in Patta show that this place must have been an important outpost in the early stage of the evangelization. The conversion of the natives to the faith of Christ came about mainly through the example of one of the chiefs of the region called Siriban. Converted to the faith by Fr. Soria in the town of La-lo made possible that the lesser chieftains together with the whole population received the waters of baptism. The town of Abulug was at first hostile to the preaching of the Gospel. But all of a sudden the hearts of the people turned to the good news of salvation and massively they were all baptized. In Camalaniugan the conversion to the faith of most of the people came about because of the striking example given by the missionaries, who despite the many difficulties and hardships they encountered, never gave any sign of discouragement or any desire to leave the place. Fr. Aduarte recalls the following anecdote in his *Historia*... "Whenever the natives approached the Dominican Fathers and asked them when they would leave the place, the answer was always the same, with a smile in their lips: "When the waters of your big river Cagayan drie up."

As the years went on, more and more missionaries were added to expand the radius of the evangelization over the whole Valley. In the centuries which followed practically the whole of Cagayan Valley heard and accepted the message of salvation preached by the Dominican Missionaries. Mention should be made here that some of the towns of Nueva Vizcaya knew the light of faith thanks to the efforts and dedication of the Augustinian Fathers. Nevertheless such parishes were put later on under the jurisdiction of the Dominican Fathers.

Fr. Hilario Ma. Ocio, in his unpublished work *Monumento Dominicano o sea Memorial de las casas que ha adquirido la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario desde 1587 a 1898*, shows this highly significant data. The Dominican missionaries took spiritual care of 55 towns and many other small barrios in the Province of Cagayan, 31 towns with the respective barrios in the Province of Isabela, and 16 towns with many other barrios in the Province of Nueva Vizcaya. Perhaps these cool statistics do not give a clear and vivid idea of the evangelical work done by the missionaries within three centuries. A more pondered consideration may lead to the conclusion that the planting of the Catholic faith in the whole Cagayan Valley may well be considered as one of the most impressive and glorious moments in the history of the evangelization of the Philippines.

The very first work encountered by the missionaries was to bring down from the mountains the natives and gathered them in small towns which the missionaries built and designed. As it can be seen, some of those villages have kept up to these days the old plan proposed by the missionaries. Such is the case of Tuguegarao, Claveria and Solano, just to mention some of them. Fr. Ocio points out how the creation of most towns along the banks of the Cagayan River was the work of the Dominican Fathers. How many times, he says, due to diverse circumstances the missionaries saw to their dismay the natives going back again to the mountains after destroying and burning everything that had been built after so much effort and patience. To start all over again was the task of these untiring missionaries. It will take many pages to enumerate the incidents and episodes or events where these men of God showed their tenacity, endurance, dedication, sacrifice, faith and love for the people they evangelized. One thing has to be stated very emphatically, most of these missionaries were men of great holiness as it has been ratified by the Church declaring some of them Saints and Blessed. They were also men endowed with great intelligence and skilled in human sciences, specially in the knowledge of the psychology of the people they had to deal with. The majority of them were chosen from the best people that lived in the Dominican convents of Spain and their coming to the Philippines was only motivated by the desire to spread the Gospel and to uplift the people they converted.

We should not overlook the fact that these missionaries had the ability to adapt themselves to the special circumstances where they had to live and work. No less admirable was their skill to teach catechism and the main dogmas of our faith to people who were primitive in their

customs and ways of learning. Historians and pastoralists wonder today and ask what could be the missionaries' secret to succeed in teaching the faith to the people during those times.

Certainly the whole period of evangelization of the Philippines marks the time for special action of the Holy Spirit. Any conversion to the faith has to be explained, in the last analysis, because of particular graces granted by God to the persons called. If these missionaries seemed to be so successful in their enterprise, then God's grace must have been very abundant to make possible this hour of God and history.

Worthy of mention is also the socio-cultural work operated by the Dominican missionaries throughout the whole Valley of Cagayan. The following data give a sample of what was done in behalf of the people who were in dire need of help and guidance.

1. It has been already stated that most of the towns of the Valley were planned and constructed by the skill and initiative of the missionaries. On many occasions and due to the frequent floods of the Cagayan river the towns had to be re-located with the natural hard work and discouragement.

2. Churches and convents still existing in many towns show evidently the architectural and engineering ability of the missionaries who by force of the circumstances had to be themselves the ones to plan and execute every step of it.

3. The construction of bridges over the rivers was one of the main preoccupations of the missionaries. The story is told of the river near Claveria where crocodiles killed many people every year. It was Fr. Ramón Pujadas who constructed a bridge saving thus the lives of hundreds of people. The bridge of Iguid, built in 1608 over the wide Cagayan River, was the work of Fr. Pedro de San Pedro while the one of Carig was the idea of Fr. Lobato de Sto. Tomas. The bridge near the town of Dupax was the longest, 24 meters long and 8 meters wide.

4. The development of agriculture was one of the enterprises that preoccupied most the missionaries and their dedication and solicitude for this problem show how much they loved their people. To them is credited the construction of important irrigation canals and the planting of coconut trees, sugar cane, fruit trees and other crops. It was in this manner how the people were freed from the horrors of famine. Fr. Borja brought to Abulug in the 19th century the silkworm industry which unfortunately was destroyed by pests.

5. The town of Buguey which was accepted as missionary post in 1596, boasted of possessing the best library in the Province of Cagayan.

6. Near the city of La-lo, in Tocolana, there was for many years a small hospital that served as an infirmary for the missionaries who became sick and for the cure of many people of the region. This hospital was attended always by a Dominican Father and two lay-brothers skillful in the art and science of curing the sick. The Government of Manila helped and supported this charitable institution. It was here where Blessed Francisco de Capillas practiced his great charity for the sick before he was sent to China to die as the first martyr. The ruins of this institution can still be seen today not far from the main road, near a cemetery.

7. Some of the main tourist-attractions of the Cagayan Valley today are the giant-brick-furnaces built long ago by those enterprising missionaries. Tuguegarao, Camalanuigan and Dupax still show the remnants of huge furnaces used to make bricks for the construction of churches, convents and social-public places. Fr. Antonio Lobato de Santo Tomas was the architect of this magnificent work which rendered so much good to the whole Valley where to obtain stone was quite difficult and hard. We should also say in honor of Fr. Lobato that he composed and wrote the dictionary "Ibanag-Español" together with a book of grammar on the same language. Being a good preacher, he also wrote a book comprising the sermons he preached to the people of God.

8. Special mention must be made of the Colegio of Blessed Imelda of Tuguegarao, founded by Fr. Bragues in 1891, where the Dominican Sisters imparted education to the young Filipino girls of the Valley. Later on this college developed into a first and secondary school for boys under the name of Colegio de San Jacinto. Many prominent men of the Cagayan Valley studied and were formed by the Dominican Fathers who also educated in this school young seminarians for a certain number of years. The prestigious university of Saint Paul of Tuguegarao occupies today the former place of the Colegio de San Jacinto.

9. One of the most outstanding figures in the social promotion and upliftment of the region of Nueva Vizcaya was F. Juan Fernández Villaverde, who was responsible for the planning of the town of Solano. He built also the road leading to Ibug together with the construction of many stone bridges and other engineering works. Another important way of communication done by this Father was the road from Aritao to Saint Nicholas bordering the Caraballo mountains. No wonder then

that those who have studied Fr. Villaverde's life and deeds affirmed that he did "the work of a giant" considering the possibilities he had in those days. Thanks to the road he constructed of seventy kilometers long, the access of Nueva Vizcaya and Pangasinan was made possible. He likewise helped in establishing communications of Pangasinan with the region of Quiangan and Cagayan.

This brief account on the work of evangelization and social promotion of the people of the Cagayan Valley by the Dominican missionaries along 400 years would not be complete if mention were not made of the popular devotion they promoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It should be said that the devotion to Our Lady of the Holy Rosary among the people was one of the most decisive factors in spreading the good news of salvation. The Cagayan Valley has up to these days a famous shrine devoted to Our Lady of Piat. Undoubtedly, it was the devotion and help of Virgin Mary that inspired, guided and sustained the missionary work throughout the years. With the sanctuary of Piat, well known in the whole Valley, people loved to come in pilgrimages and celebrate "romerias." The following account is taken from Fr. Ocio's *Monumento Dominicano*:

"Speaking of Piat, it should be stated the following on the *ermita* of our Lady venerated in the town of Piat. This image which was carved in Macau, China, stayed in the city of La-lo for certain time, and later on was transferred to Piat where she was placed in one of the altars of the church of the town. Some years later the Fathers thinking that the people would love to have an image of our Lady with face and hands made of ivory, they changed images sending the old one to Tuguegarao. When the people of Piat noticed what had happened they showed their displeasure and everything was done until the beloved image from Macau was again in her throne. Under these circumstances Rev. Fr. Vicar, Juan de Sta. Ana had the idea of placing the venerable image between Tuao and Piat. For this purpose a small *ermita* was prepared and the miraculous image was enthroned on 26th of January, 1623, amidst a great assembly of faithful from the Cagayan Valley. The old *ermita* had to be enlarged to accommodate the big number of pilgrims continuously visiting the shrine. In 1876, Fr. Jose Gumet added a portico made with steel bars."

As devotion and pilgrimages continue today unremittedly, few years ago the old *ermita* gave way to a new and spacious temple where old traditions are kept alive with a great manifestation of popular religiosity.

Before I close this brief survey on the work performed by the Dominican missionaries of the Holy Rosary Province in Cagayan Valley, I would like to mention here the names of those Dominicans who served the Church as bishops of the diocese of Nueva Segovia. Chronologically arranged, they were the following:

1. Most Rev. Fr. Miguel de Benavides, appointed as first bishop of Nueva Segovia. He entered into his diocese in 1599 and in 1603 he became archbishop of Manila.
2. Most Rev. Fr. Diego de Soria, named bishop of Nueva Segovia in 1604. He died in Vigan in 1616.
3. Most Rev. Fr. Diego Aduarte, who after long service to the Holy Rosary Province was elevated to the dignity of bishop of Nueva Segovia in 1635. He is the author of the *History of the Holy Rosary Province* in her earliest period of mission work.
4. Most Rev. Fr. Rodrigo de Cardenas, Master in Sacred Theology who succeeded Fr. Diego Aduarte as bishop of Nueva Segovia. He died in Manila in 1662.
5. Most Rev. Fr. Pedro Mejorada, who was Rector of the University of Santo Tomas and Provincial in 1710. He died in 1718 as bishop of Nueva Segovia.
6. Most Rev. Manuel del Río, a zealous missionary in the Cagayan Valley. He had to return to Manila because of his sickness. He died in 1744. After his burial the Royal Decrees arrived in Manila promoting him to the bishopric of Nueva Segovia.
7. Most Rev. Fr. Juan de Archedera, Rector of the University of Santo Tomas and Provincial of the Holy Rosary Province. While he was bishop of Nueva Segovia he acted temporarily as the General Governor of the Islands. He died 1752.
8. Most Rev. Fr. Bernardo Uztariz. He held important responsibilities in the life of the Holy Rosary Province. He was made bishop of Nueva Segovia in 1761. He died on August, 1764.
9. Most Rev. Fr. Miguel García, who took his office as bishop of Nueva Segovia on June 20, 1776.
10. Most Rev. Fr. Jose Burillo, who worked as missionary in different parts of Cagayan. He was Rector of the University of Santo Tomas

and Provincial. He was appointed bishop of Nueva Segovia, but before his consecration died in 1815.

11. Most Rev. Fr. Francisco Alban, professor at the University of Santo Tomas, Prior of Santo Domingo de Manila and Provincial, he was made bishop of Nueva Segovia in 1818. He died in 1837.
12. Most Rev. Fr. Rafael Masoliver, who taught at the University of Santo Tomas and in Letran College. Named bishop of Nueva Segovia, he died before his consecration in 1846.
13. Most Rev. Fr. Jose Hevia Campomanes, parish priest of Binondo church. He was elected as bishop of Nueva Segovia and took possession of his office in Vigan in 1890. He suffered much during the independence revolution, a situation which forced him to present his resignation as bishop of Nueva Segovia. He returned to Spain where he was appointed bishop of Badajoz. While he was conducting a pastoral visit died, in 1904.

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