

Cebu—Cradle of the Philippine Church and Seat of Far-East Christianity

Philippine Church history began on Easter Sunday, March 31, 1521 when the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan landed in the tiny island of Limasawa and there they celebrated the very first mass in Philippine soil. On Jubilate Sunday (third Sunday of Easter) April 14 of the same year, Fr. Pedro Valderrama, the chaplain of Magellan, baptized Rajah Humabon and more than 500 natives after reaching the island of Zebu (Cebu). By the early Filipinos' profession of faith in Christ, united with the Spanish voyagers in the same belief, and celebration of the Lord's Supper,[1] they became the first Christian community thereby laying the foundation of the Church. Queen Juana, the wife of Humabon, was presented with the statue of the *Sto. Niño* (the Child Jesus) as a baptismal gift which prompted her deep reverence, thus, she became its first devotee. High-spirited were the first Filipino Christians in their newly found faith and with the miraculous healing of a sickly man cemented their conviction of its efficacy over their idols and promised to burn every pagan shrines they could find.[2]

Sadly, the Christian victory in Southeast Asia and the Philippines was met with an obstacle. Venerable Fulton J. Sheen once said that whenever there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, "there is always an extra show of force by the anti-Spirit or the demonic," especially in ecumenical councils.[3] During Pentecost when the Universal Church was born (Acts 2:1-4), what came after was the persecution marked by the death of St. Stephen (Acts 7:55-59). Just few weeks after the Holy Spirit first touched the Filipino Christians in Cebu, there would be an unforeseen conflict in the nearby island of Mactan where Magellan would die and the rest of the Spanish survivors flee. Without pastors to enforce the faith, the early Cebuanos focused their sight on the *Sto. Niño* while others reverted, though not of their own fault. Patiently, the Holy Child stayed with natives for 44 years as if He refused to give up on another child, the infant Philippine Church. Indeed, the Child Jesus never abandoned the Filipinos as Miguel Lopez de Legazpi and Rev. Andres de Urdaneta, in the galleon *San Pedro*, would later anchor in the same island in April of 1565.

After a minor naval to shore skirmish with the natives, a soldier named Juan de Camuz discovered the miraculously unscathed Holy Icon from the burnt ruin of a house and encouraged the explorers to re-Christianize the island. Hence, the recovery of the *Sto. Niño* symbolized the recovery of a once lost and dying Christian community. By this time Tupas, the nephew of Humabon, was the rajah. He was one of the remnants of the church being previously baptized and would serve as the continuity after made friendship with the Spaniards and being re-admitted to the Catholic fold.

This local church community would flourish and again precede in Christian tradition: after the finding of the Holy Image the first procession in the Philippines occurred, and later the territory became the first Christian city (*Santissimo Nombre de Jesus*) in the Far East dedicated to the blessed name of Jesus.[4] The first Christian marriage in the country transpired that of Isabel (the newly baptized niece of Rajah Tupas) and Andres (the Greek caulker of Legazpi), their children then baptized representing the first infant baptisms.[5] The very first Christian church was built near the

fort (later reconstructed and elevated as the Metropolitan Cathedral of St. Vitales) and a second church, also the first monastery, built on the site where the image of the Child Jesus was found (today's Basilica del Sto. Niño).[6] The Spaniards and the Cebuano natives celebrated the first distinctly Asian Christian feast dedicated the Holy Child on April 28, 1565.[7] There was also the first confession and the last rites of an inhabitant.[8] Undoubtedly, the first Christmas, Holy Week, and All Saints Day were observed in the island. It was here the Scripture was first read; also the first resistance against the Mohammedan advance from the south.[9] The list of precedence would go on.

The First Apostles of the Philippines

The great navigator Rev. Andres de Urdaneta, O.S.A., heralded the formal evangelization. A soldier from Guipúzcoa, Spain and later chose to serve God as he entered the Augustinian Order, Fr. Urdaneta was assigned to for the Philippine expedition by King Philip II of Spain “for the service of God, our Lord.”[10] The Augustinian superior accepted to accompany even his old age and frail health, though rejected the offer as commander.[11] Along with him were Frays Diego de Herrera, Andrés de Aguirre, Martin de Rada, and Pedro de Gamboa—all from the same order. Fr. Urdaneta revitalized and shepherded the Cebuano Christian community and because of his treatment of the natives, the pious father was called “protector of the Indians” and the first Prelate of the Philippines (pre-diocesan).[12]

Fr. Urdaneta sailed from Cebu in July of 1565 back to Spain to report the expedition and suffered much that fourteen of his crew died.[13] After all the hardship, he resolved to return to the Philippines for the faith, but friends deterred the father as his age couldn't withstand an expedition back. He worked tirelessly in Mexico as under his watch, second wave of apostles dispatched for Cebu. Indeed, Fr. Urdaneta and the rest of these pioneering evangelists—in their suffering, labor, and death which the fruits the Philippine Church now enjoy—are worthy causes for sainthood.

Fr. Deigo de Herrera, the first prior of the country, succeeded Fr. Urdaneta in pastoring the natives. Later, the remaining Philippine apostles were forced westwards temporarily due to conflict with the Portuguese and laid the foundations of the Christian community in the Panay Island in 1569. A year later, the second batch of missionaries reached Cebu. The island became the center for evangelization for its strategic location. A notable missionary was Fr. Alfonso Jimenez, O.S.A., who travelled and penetrated the Camarines region through the islands of Masbate, Leyte, Samar, and Burias. He was called the first apostle of the region. By 1571, Fr. Herrera who was assigned as chaplain of Legazpi, from Panay advanced further north and founded the local Church community in Manila. It is said that the good father thereafter voyaged in the *Espiritu Santo* and shipwrecked in Catanduanes; there he attempted to convert the natives and later martyred for the faith. On 1574 the Spaniards lead by Juan de Salcedo marched from Manila further north with the Augustinian missionaries and pioneered the evangelization in the Ilocos (starting with Vigan) and the Cagayan regions.

The Oldest Sees in the Country

As the years go by, the particular churches would flourish and later be made dioceses and the five oldest in the country: Santissimo Nombre de Jesus (Church of Cebu), Manila (Church of Manila), Nueva Caceres (Church of Camarines),^[14] Nueva Segovia (Church of Cagayan),^[15] and much later from the Cebu bishopric, Santa Isabel de Jaro (Church of Panay). Manila was the first to be made diocese in 1578 and raised archdiocese in 1595 when the territory was made the second center of the Spanish colonial government (before the conquest of Manila, the first capital of the country was Cebu).

The first and yet humble Church from Cebu remained a diocese for 369 years, though it was a significant servant to Philippine Christendom as it has the most extensive territory stretching from nearby islands and reaching south to the majorly Mohammedan region of Mindanao and the Marianas Islands to administer. Not only in its territory but also to the northern region since during the colonial era whenever there was a prolonged vacancy with the See of Manila, the bishop of Cebu would temporarily administer the faithful located there. This unique practice in Church history started with Cebu's second bishop Pedro de Arce, O.S.A. (1621-1645) who administered the Archdiocese of Manila twice in his reign as Cebu prelate. Bishops Miguel Lino de Ezpeleta (the first Philippine-born prelate) would do the same from 1759 to 1761 and Martin Gracia y Alcocer in 1901 to 1903, all peacefully gave the governance to the newly elected Manila prelates afterward. Thus, the service of the See of the Most Holy Name of Jesus stretched from east to west, the deep south, and even north shaping that of a cross.

Like the Sto. Niño, the Church of Cebu has a child for its first saint, the teenage catechist Pedro Calungsod. The diocese also has other holy servants of Christ notably the Spanish missionary Blessed Diego de San Vitore, S.J., together with St. Pedro, pioneered the evangelization in Guam—both were martyred on April 2, 1672.

The Mother Church of the Archipelago

The ecclesiastical setting would remain the same until the Philippines broke away from the Spanish royal patronage by the 1900s thereby giving the old Churches equal dignity of being archdioceses. Thereafter, more dioceses would be born out of them and from other newly defined ecclesiastical territories.

After the colonial era, the importance of the Church in Cebu was acknowledged. On May 2, 1965 during the fourth centenary of Christianity of the Philippines celebrated in the island, Pope Blessed Paul VI declared in his radio message to elevate the San Agustin Church (the church which enshrined the almost half a millennium old wooden statue of the Child Jesus) to what is now the Basilica del Sto. Niño and called it "the symbol of birth and growth of Christianity the Philippines"^[16] consequently recognizing the Archdiocese of Cebu as the center of Christianity in the archipelago. The same pope also described the minor basilica as "the Mother and Head of all Churches in the Philippines" (*mater et caput... omnium ecclesiarum Insularum Philippinarum*).^[17]

Indeed, the faith and the Philippine Church owed its beginning in a small central island as Pope St. John Paul II, in his 1981 Philippine visit, would say:

“The Philippine nation is deserving of particular honor since, from the beginning of its Christianization, from the moment that Magellan planted the Cross in Cebu four hundred and sixty years ago, on April 15, 1521, all through the centuries, its people have remained true to the Christian faith. In an achievement that remains unparalleled in history, the message of Christ took root in the hearts of the people within a very brief span of time, and the Church was thus strongly implanted in this nation of seven thousand islands and numerous tribal and ethnic communities.”[18]

Hence, a day exalting the first baptism of the Filipinos, first proclamation of the Gospel, and beginning of the Church in the country should rightly be commemorated.

The Seat of Christianity in the Far East

Many Catholics have regarded Cebu as the “seat of Christianity” in Southeast Asia. In the same Philippine fourth centenary radio message, Blessed Paul VI said of the country:

“As a great Catholic nation in South-East Asia, you are truly «a city set on a mountain (which) cannot be hidden... A lamp put upon a lampstand, so as to give light to all» (*Math.* 14-15). Consider how great is your responsibility to give good example to those of other faiths, and thus sweetly draw men to the Heart of Jesus, king and center of all hearts. Manifest your gratitude for four centuries of grace by striving to give the best example of Faith, Hope and Love, of all the other Christian virtues, to the entire world, especially the nations nearest to you.”[19]

And the country being the lamp, St. John Paul II would mention the light and its location in his homily for families during his 1981 visit in Cebu:

“Finding myself in this important city known as the cradle of Christianity in the Philippines, I want to express my deep joy and profound thanksgiving to the Lord of history. The thought that for 450 years the light of the Gospel has shone with undimmed brightness in this land and on its people is cause for great rejoicing.”[20]

Truly in the isle the first rays emanated and from this first Christian city, the “great Catholic nation in South-East Asia” began, thus, the seat of Christianity in the Far East. And finally, in the same homily, the great and saintly pope said about the Primatial Church of Cebu:

“It can truly be said that growth in faith and Christian living has been until now a constant feature of the Church in Cebu as well as in the whole of the Philippines.

The glorious past gives great hope for the future. The harmonious relationship... between the hierarchy and the diocesan aid religious clergy; the deep commitment to evangelization by priests, religious and laity; the existence of a solid ecclesial sense and the profound religiosity of the people—all this constitutes great spiritual force for the building up of a dynamic Church in Cebu.”[21]

The archdiocese continues to be a humble servant in Christ and its faithful striving to be good examples to their countrymen and neighboring nations. The celebration of the 450th rediscovery (*Kaplag*) of the Sto. Niño is set for 2015, also with great joy Cebu is made host of the 51st Eucharistic Congress for 2016, and the Cebuanos along with the rest of the Filipino people would thank the Lord as the country celebrate 500 years of Christianity in 2021.

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Notes:

1. Antonio Pigafetta, *Magellan's Voyage Around the World*, vol. 1, trans. James A. Robertson (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906), 139 -157 [Hereafter cited as *Magellan's Voyage*].
2. *Magellan's Voyage*, 165.
3. Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasures in Clay*, (The Doubleday Religious Publishing Group: 1982), 292-293.
4. “Résumé of contemporaneous documents,” in *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1803*, vol. 2, eds. Emma H. Blair, James A. Robertson (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1903), 121 [Hereafter cited as *Résumé of Documents*].
5. *Résumé of Documents*, 140-141.
6. Astrid Sala-Boza, “The Contested Site of the Finding of the Holy Child: Villa San Miguel or San Nicolas (Cebu *El Viejo*),” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture Society* 34, (2006): 232. www.jstor.org/stable/29792595; Juan de Medina, OSA, “*Historia de la Orden de San Agustin de estas Islas Filipinas*,” in *The Philippine Islands 1493-1803*, vol. 23, eds. Emma H. Blair, James A. Robertson (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1903), 159 & 170 [Hereafter cited as *Medina's Historia*].
7. *Résumé of Documents*, 121.
8. *Ibid.*, 153.
9. *Medina's Historia*, 185.
10. *Résumé of Documents*, 82.
11. *Ibid.*, 81

12. *Résumé of Documents*, 33, note 5; Bartolomé de Letona, OSF, "Description of the Filipinas Islands" in *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1803*, vol. 36, eds. Emma H. Blair, James A. Robertson (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906), 210.

13. Camillus Crivelli, "Andrés Urdaneta," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 15, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912) 223.

14. Ygnacio de Paz, "Description of the Philipinas Islands," in *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1803*, vol. 36, eds. Emma H. Blair, James A. Robertson (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906), 98.

15. *Ibid.*, 99.

16. Paul VI, "Christifidelibus Insularum Philippinarum, Eucharisticum Caebuae ex universa Natione Conventum habentibus, quarto saeculo volvente ab annuiiatio in illis regionibus Evangelio", in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis - Commentarium Officiale*, vol. 57, (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1965), 530-531. See also: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19650502_philippines_en.html

17. Paul VI, "Titulus ac privilegia Basilicae Minoris ecclesiae Sanctissimo Nomini Iesu Caebuae dicatae conferuntur," in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis - Commentarium Officiale*, vol. 57, (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1965), 576. See also: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19650401_ut-clarificetur_lt.html

18. John Paul II, *Message of His Holiness John Paul II to the President and to the People of the Philippines*, Vatican Website, February 17, 1981, sec. 2, para. 2, accessed July 28, 2014, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810217_manila-presidente_en.html

19. See note 16.

20. John Paul II, *Homily for Families*, Vatican Website, February 19, 1981, sec. 1, para. 1, accessed July 18, 2014, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810217_manila-presidente_en.html

21. *Ibid.*, sec. 2, para. 3.