

BLESSED VICENTE M. SOLER, MISSIONARY IN THE PHILIPPINES, 1889-1906

Emmanuel Luis A. ROMANILLOS

Abstract

The study narrates the missionary years of Blessed Vicente Soler in Antipolo, Mindoro and Batangas. At the outbreak of the Philippine Revolution, Father Soler and his confreres travelled to Lucena in June 1898 to escape from the revolutionists' clutches and took a steamer to Borneo which berthed at Looc in Tablas Island where they opted to stay. With eleven confreres, Father Soler was soon imprisoned there. They were later taken by boat to Romblon, then to Marinduque for incarceration at Boac and later moved to Mogpog where kind parishioners and secular priest treated them well. After various sea travels, the prisoners were taken to Tayabas and hiked from one town to another. After months of captivity, evasion from American forces, transfers, exhaustion from long hikes, hunger, uncertainty and deprivation, eight Recollects and hundreds of Spanish prisoners boarded a steamer at Pires and reached Manila in March 1900. Father Soler's captivity lasted nineteen months. The lessons he learned from this captivity were applied in his apostolate with fellow prisoners at Motril, Granada before his execution on 15 August 1936. He had returned to Spain in 1906, ending his seventeen-year missionary work in the Philippines.

Resumen

Este estudio describe la actividad misionera del beato Vicente Soler en Antipolo, Mindoro y Batangas. Al estallar la Revolución filipina el padre Soler y sus compañeros viajaron a Lucena en junio de 1898 para escapar de los revolucionarios y allí embarcaron en un vapor con destino a Borneo. Pero al pasar por Looc (Tablas) optaron por permanecer en Filipinas. Muy pronto volvió a caer, junto con sus once compañeros, en manos de los revolucionarios, que los trasladaron a Romblón y, luego, a Marinduque. Durante algún tiempo fueron encarcelados en Boac y Mogpog, donde fueron bien tratados por el párroco y sus feligreses. Tras varias idas y venidas fueron trasladados a Batangas, donde caminaron de pueblo en pueblo. Tras meses de cautiverio, hambre, inseguridad y privaciones, embarcó con otros siete recoletos y centenares de prisioneros españoles en un vapor a Pires, llegando a Manila en marzo de 1900. El cautiverio del P. Soler había durado 19 meses. En él aprendió lecciones que años más tarde aplicaría a sus compañeros de prisión en Motril, Granada, donde fue ejecutado el 15 de agosto de 1936. Había vuelto a España en 1906 tras 17 años de trabajo misionero en Filipinas.

To be a missionary

An Augustinian Recollect priest once wrote a confrere, picturing for us what it meant to be a missionary in colonial Philippines:

To be a missionary in those places does not solely mean to be a father and pastor of that portion of the flock of Christ Jesus entrusted to him, to dispense the sacraments and to perform in a peaceful way the other religious duties. Most of all, it also means to seek the flock he has to civilize and Christianize in hardly accessible forest trails, in steep mountains, in the rugged rocky terrain; to be a missionary means to penetrate those lairs where human beings dwell in most abject degradation and misery, drawing them out of such pitiful predicament and bringing them to the settlement in order to teach them to live lives as rational beings; it means to set up towns, construct edifices, constitute authorities and teach those half-savage people how to duly perform the sacred duty.

To be a missionary in those places is to live in total isolation from the civilized world, cast in an unknown island, surrounded by all kinds of privations and compelled to live among those poor Indios for the sole aim of winning them for God.¹

The quote is culled from a long letter penned by Father Vicente M. Soler (1867-1936), a long-time missionary in Mindoro, prior provincial and prior general of the Order of Augustinian Recollects. Pope John Paul II elevated this Recollect prelate to the altars of the Universal Church as Blessed in 1999. Blessed Vicente Soler indeed knew whereof he spoke: he was a zealous missionary for seven years in two far-flung, sparsely inhabited parishes in Mindoro Island in the 1890s. A researcher has this to add:

To be a missionary now, with modern travel technology, entails a great spirit of sacrifice. It was much more then. It meant undertaking a long and perilous journey, to be uprooted from one's own milieu, to go through all the pains of adjusting to a new country that would often have difficult living conditions. It meant learning a new language, adjusting to local customs, changing one's personal habits. One can only understand how a man can make this effort from the perspective of the faith.²

1 CONGREGATIO PRO CAUSIS SANCTORUM, *Beatificationis seu declarationis martyrii Servorum Dei Vicentii Soler et VII Sociorum ex Ordine Augustinianorum Recollectorum Positio super Martyrio* [hereinafter *Positio*], (Rome 1990) 25, footnote 49.

2 Roberto LATORRE, *The Friars in the Philippines*, in *Documentation Service*, V (May 1992) 29.

Indeed, it was the same faith and missionary ideals that caused men to traverse oceans and rivers, to trudge mountain trails in search of souls for Christ, to live in hostile settlements in inhospitable climate. The same faith and love of God solely motivated them to abandon *the* comforts of home, the serenity of monastic life and to risk their lives and limbs for the Gospel of salvation. The same total confidence in Divine Providence and submission to His divine will that steered Father Vicente Soler through the valley of death in various towns and islands in the Philippines, through nineteen months of captivity at the hands of Filipino revolutionary forces in 1898-1900.

Martyrs of the Christian faith

Vicente M. Soler and his four confreres Vicente I. Pinilla (1870-1936), Julián Benigno M. Moreno (1871-1936), León M. Inchausti (1861-1936) and José M. Rada (1861-1936) were those types of devoted and hardworking ministers of God in Philippine mission fields. Proficient either in Tagalog or in Cebuano Visayan tongues, they spent long years of training and apostolate—the prime years of their lives as God’s ministers—at the Lord’s vineyard in Cebu, Batangas, Bohol, Banton, Romblon, Mindoro, Zambales, Antipolo and Manila, as parish priests, assistant priests, companions or conventuals.

In time these friar missionaries would be numbered among the growing list of Augustinian Recollect martyrs of the Faith. The five Servants of God were among the countless martyrs who bravely and without hesitation shed their blood for Christ Jesus and the Catholic Faith at the hands of rabid Marxist revolutionists in July-August 1936 at Motril, Granada, Spain.

Together with three more companions—Augustinian Recollect Father Degracias Palacios, Brother José Ricardo Díez and diocesan parish priest Father Manuel S. Martín—they fell victims of the fratricidal war that raged in Spain in 1936-1939. The beatification—the first step to sainthood—of seven Augustinian Recollect martyrs and the diocesan priest was approved on 8 April 1997 by the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The eight valiant martyrs of the Christian Faith, led by Blessed Vicente Soler, were beatified in solemn rites on 7 March 1999 at Saint Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican City, Rome.

Birth and childhood in Spain

Father Vicente Munárriz Soler, a native of Malón, Zaragoza in Spain and of the diocese of Tarazona, was elected to the Augustinian Recollect Order’s highest office as prior general in 1926. He was born to Luis Soler and Dominica Munárriz on 4 April 1867. The following day, the infant received the sacrament of baptism

from Father Bonifacio Toledo in the parish of Saint Vincent the Martyr. Matías Milagros and his uncle and namesake Vicente Soler were godfathers.

The biographer tells us more about the great influence of his parents on the growing child: «His parents, simple and righteous folks, gave the young boy a Christian education. In addition, they taught him love for the poor. From them, too, the young Vicente learned honesty, nobility of spirit and piety that characterized his entire life.»

Vocation to the religious life

Very near the town of Malón is the Augustinian Recollect monastery at Monteagudo in the province of Navarra. Young missionaries for the Philippines were trained at this convent since its foundation in 1828. The monastery enshrined the *Virgen del Camino* [Virgin of the Way], patroness of both town and Recollect community. The Blessed Mother had devotees from that region in Zaragoza and Navarra. People from outlying towns visit the cherished icon of the Mother of God. The young Vicente's devout parents took him to the Marian shrine.

The young boy had the chance to meet the young formands of his own age and attended their liturgical rites at the monastery chapel. Doubtless, from such contacts his missionary vocation was born and his enthusiasm for the great ideals of religious and missionary life was kindled and forged.³

At the very young age of twelve, Vicente had already made up his mind to devote himself to God in the religious life. But he needed to prepare himself by studying Spanish grammar and Latin. For that reason, he studied for three years at a seminary in Tarazona, Zaragoza.

Years of religious formation

Vicente was already fifteen years old when he returned to Monteagudo. He presented himself before the superiors of the Augustinian Recollect convent and in a simple rite donned the religious habit for the one-year novitiate training. Exactly twelve months after, on 15 May 1883, he pronounced the evangelical counsels before the superior Father Aniceto Ibáñez (1828-1892), thereby becoming a full-fledged religious with the mandatory promise to serve the missions in the Philippines. It was an event witnessed by the entire religious community. His religious appellation was Fray Vicente Soler de San Luis Gonzaga.

3 *Positio*, 23-24.

In the wake of his religious profession, he studied philosophy and the sciences for the next two more years at the same monastery. The year 1885 witnessed his transfer to the Recollect convent at San Millán de la Cogolla, La Rioja province, where he began his theological formation. At the monastery of Marcilla, Navarra, he finished another two years of his ecclesiastical courses that included moral theology, canon law and church history. On 15 June 1889 Msgr. Antonio Ruiz Cabal, bishop of Pamplona, Navarra, ordained him as deacon.

Priestly Ordination in Manila

On 18 September 1889 Soler left Marcilla with the 88th mission that comprised three priests and eleven theology students. Two days later, they boarded at Barcelona the transoceanic frigate *San Ignacio de Loyola* en route to the Philippines.⁴ The mission docked at Manila Bay on 25 October of the same year. At the now-extinct San Nicolás convent, popularly known as *Recoletos*, in the Walled City of Manila the eleven students lodged for the next eight months preparing themselves for the priestly ministry. It was on 31 May 1890 when the Spanish Dominican Fray Bernabé García Cezón, titular bishop of Biblios and retired missionary bishop of Tongking in Indochina, raised him to the holy order of presbyterate. His ordination took place at the now-extinct Gothic Santo Domingo church of the Dominican friars in Intramuros, Manila.

In Mindoro missions

After his cantamisa on 1 June 1890, the new presbyter was dispatched to *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje* parish of Antipolo in order to acquire a command of Tagalog. In this age-old pilgrimage town, he was assigned as companion of its parish priest Father Esteban Martínez (1840-1912) for nine months. On 7 March 1891 Father Soler was named assistant priest of Father Dionisio E. Gurbindo (1851-1917) in Saint Sebastian parish of Sablayan in western Mindoro. The mission with a Christian population of 860 that included Mangyan converts had been set up by Recollects in 1819.⁵ The youthful missionary remained in Sablayan for only six weeks.

4 FRANCISCO SÁDABA, *Catálogo de los Religiosos Agustinos Recoletos de la Provincia de San Nicolás de Tolentino de Filipinas desde el año 1606, en que llegó la primera misión, hasta nuestros días* (Madrid 1906) 668.

5 PATRICIO MARCELLÁN, *Provincia de S. Nicolás de Tolentino de Agustinos Descalzos de la Congregación de España e Indias* (Manila 1879) 120.

Father Soler took over the post of Father Ruperto de Blas (1863-1937) as parish priest of Mamburao [present-day capital of Occidental Mindoro], farther north of Sablayan. His confrere had been transferred to Montalban, a town known today as Rodriguez in Rizal.⁶ Father Soler was at the helm of Nuestra Señora del Pilar parish in Mamburao from 27 April 1891 to 18 April 1898. The budding parish of 462 parishioners had received its first resident minister only in February 1887 when it was finally separated from its matrix parish of Sablayan. Father Soler later reported that the population of his curacy grew to 925 in 1891 and further increased to 1,431 in 1894.⁷ Its nearest town was Paluan, 31 kilometers to the north.

Mamburao was deemed an unproductive stretch of sandy land inhabited by «people inclined to a life of crime.» The fervent efforts of the Recollect missionary turned it into a town with upright and industrious folks. Father Soler left traces of his apostolic zeal and commitment to the impoverished folks. He did not only take care of the human and spiritual development of his parishioners, but also kept himself busy with the construction of the church. The house of God was depicted as made of stone and *tabique pampango*, with a galvanized-iron roof.⁸ He did some improvements on the lowly but solid rectory made of nipa and wood.

The *kumbento* served as quarters, school and dispensary. A Recollect writer Father Javier Sesma (1868-1959) would disclose in 1933 that Filipino revolutionaries had destroyed this rectory at the height of the Philippine Revolution.⁹ He additionally tells us that the church built by Father Soler was in an advanced state of ruin.

In the vortex of the Philippine Revolution

The second phase of the Philippine Revolution (May 1898-December 1898) found the Servant of God in the Tagalog province of Batangas. It began with the resumption of the Revolution after the return of President Emilio F. Aguinaldo

6 SÁDABA, 638.

7 Gregorio Fidel DE BLAS, *Labor evangélica de los Padres Recoletos en las Islas Filipinas* (Zaragoza 1910) 30.

8 Licinio RUIZ, *Sinopsis histórica de la Provincia de San Nicolás de Tolentino de las Islas Filipinas I* (Manila 1925) 583; SÁDABA, 668.

9 Javier SESMA, *Informe sobre los convenientes e inconvenientes para tomar la provincia de Mindoro como Prefectura Apostólica*, Legajo 53, Núm. 5, ARCHIVO HISTÓRICO PROVINCIAL DE SAN NICOLÁS DE TOLENTINO DE MARCILLA, Navarre, España [APM], Legajo 53, Núm. 5, f. 7. The author had visited the place in Mamburao and learned that Father Soler's church had been demolished and no trace of it could be seen. The SVD fathers moved the new church and rectory to their present site in the 1960s.

(1869-1964) from his Hong Kong exile in May 1898. It was in the wake of the outbreak of hostilities between Spain and the United States of America that occurred a month earlier. During the predominantly Tagalog uprising, *i.e.*, the first phase of the Philippine Revolution (August 1896-December 1897), thirteen Recollect friars in Cavite and two in Bataan had perished in the hands of the Filipino revolutionaries in the ensuing killing frenzy.

The radical revolutionists had fashioned their war cry from their anti-friar sentiments, as they had imbibed from their dauntless compatriots in the Propaganda Movement in Europe. The foremost propagandists and today's acclaimed heroes—like José P. Rizal, Marcelo H. del Pilar and Graciano López Jaena—had authored fiery anti-friar literature. When the national upheaval ended in March 1901 with the capture of President Aguinaldo in Isabela, a total of thirty-four Recollect religious priests and brothers had lost their lives in the revolutionary maelstrom.¹⁰

Prisoners of the Revolution

Having set up the Dictatorial Government, Aguinaldo issued on 29 May 1898 a general proclamation ordering all Filipinos to put an end to the maltreatment of Spanish prisoners. He further commanded his military officials to respect the lives of Spaniards «who have neither directly nor indirectly contributed in the taking up of arms against us.»¹¹ Consequently, about four hundred prisoners of various religious orders were delivered from certain death during the national upheaval. Of these were eighty-four Recollects.¹² Among them were Father Vicente Soler and his two future companion martyrs in Motril, Granada in Spain: Vicente Pinilla and José Rada.

In May 1898, over 80 percent of the active members of the whole Augustinian Recollect congregation was working in the Philippines. It had been transformed into a congregation that had been closely identified with the colonial

10 The author of *Varones ilustres del Convento de Marcilla*, in BPSN 603 (1965) 532-535, fails to mention Imus curate Father José María Learte, slain in Cavite, and Father Isidoro Liberal, executed in Cebu City.

11 Pablo FERNÁNDEZ, *History of the Church in the Philippines (1521-1898)*, (Manila 1979) 335.

12 Angel MARTÍNEZ CUESTA, *Los Agustinos Recoletos: 375 años de presencia continua*, in BPSN, special issue (1981) 64. In the preceding article, the historian puts the number of captives as ninety-one, whereas in his 1988 pamphlet—published in English in Quezon City as *The Order of Augustinian Recollects: Its Charismatic Evolution* (Manila 1994)—the figure is trimmed down to eighty-four. See page 66.

Church and State in the Asian colony of Spain. Some 330 religious were living in four priories or ministering to the spiritual needs of one million and a half souls in 235 towns in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.

From Batangas to Tayabas

From his Mindoro parish, Father Vicente Soler had been transferred to the curacy of Taysan in the Tagalog province of Batangas on 18 April 1898. He had been named parish priest of Taysan four days earlier. It did not take a month before the winds of the Revolution spread like wildfire to the southern provinces of Luzon. On 29 May 1898, Father Soler went to the adjoining parish of Rosario.¹³ On 5 June at the kumbento he discussed the precarious situation of the province wracked by the revolutionary struggle with the assistant priest Father Pedro U. López (1870-1934).¹⁴

Later on the young Spanish clerics learned from a nervous carriage driver that the four Recollect confreres he had conveyed to Manila fell into the hands of the Filipino patriots in Carmona, Cavite. That same day, the alarmed duo rushed at once to San Juan de Bolbok to further inquire about the latest developments of the insurrection as well as to firm up whatever decision to take. There was an ominous event the two friars were unaware of at that time: the Spanish defenders of Lipa, the provincial seat of Batangas, had capitulated to the superior forces of the Revolution. And then the tragedy that had befallen on their Cavite Recollects in 1896 and on six confreres of Zambales in 1898 could not be easily obliterated from memory. Indeed, serious danger loomed in the horizon.

On a boat bound for Borneo

Fathers Soler and López conferred with San Juan de Bolbok parish priest Celestino S. Yoldi (1863-1935). The trio then decided to proceed to Lucena, a progressive town of Tayabas [now Quezon] province. At the port of Lucena they had the good fortune of boarding a steamship named *M/S Camiguin*. The vessel was loaded with anxiety-ridden Franciscans, Calced Augustinians and other fleeing Spanish nationals as passengers, yearning to leave the embattled colony. It

13 The old pueblo of Rosario was renamed Padre García. The present Rosario town was an old barrio created into a municipality.

14 Recollect chronicler Licinio Ruiz's chief source for the episode in Romblon and Marinduque is Pedro López's prison memoir. This friar's unpublished memoir is kept in APM, Legajo 20, no. 5. Father Soler's own diary could no longer be located, as claimed by *Positio*, 26.

had been booked to transport them to Borneo off the southern Philippine shores.¹⁵ Before long it lifted anchor and headed south.

The steamer berthed at Looc in the southwestern coast of Tablas Island. In that secluded mission post, the *Camiguin* passengers came upon the Recollect Paulino L. Jiménez (1864-1958) calmly exercising his pastoral obligations. The parish priest was busy laying the groundwork for a much bigger temple.¹⁶ When the *Camiguin* lifted anchor and set sail for its destination, Soler, Yoldi and López firmed up their decision to stay behind at Looc with Jiménez, probably believing it was a safe haven from the revolutionists.

A short while afterward, López took a boat that ferried him to the provincial capital of Romblon—only to be incarcerated there. On 30 July the three priests were taken into custody by armed revolutionary troops that landed in a boat in Looc. The long and fatiguing journey on the road to Golgotha had forthwith commenced.

Moored at Romblon

On 31 July 1898 a steamship *Francisco*, crammed with the imprisoned Recollect ministers of Romblon parishes and Revolutionary guards, sailed in the direction of Cavite.¹⁷ However, the huge waves and strong winds—brought about by a typhoon—mercilessly pounded the seacraft and forced it to seek refuge in a barrio in Romblon. The revolutionists lingered for three days before ordering the vessel commander to transport the friars back to the provincial capital. The townspeople of Romblon generously provided the prisoners with everything they

15 Apolinar PASTRANA, *A Friar's Account of the Philippine Revolution in Bicol*, (Quezon City 1980) 267-268, footnote 84.

16 *Sinopsis* I, 527.

17 A few days earlier, patriots led by Mariano Riego de Dios (1875-1935), a Revolutionary general from Maragondon, Cavite and a member of the Council of War that tried and sentenced Katipunan founder Andrés Bonifacio to death, had rounded up the Recollect parish priests of Romblon. The friars had fled to Badajoz. From there they were hauled off to the capital. From the boat, they were forced to wade through two rows of disorderly troops who subjected them to outrages. Inside the Romblon casa tribunal the Caviteño general delivered insulting philippics against the ministers. He interrogated them about their curacies, money and jewels, threatening them: «If you do not tell the truth, I'll order [my men] to hang you on that cross,» pointing to the huge cross erected near the rectory. Riego de Dios ordered his men to conduct the friars to jail and keep them detained for eight hours. To intimidate the priests no end, he warned them to be ready for outright execution. Instead, they were moved to another house—to their immense relief. All the while Romblon townsfolk showed great compassion, giving their jailed ministers something to wear and to eat. See L. RUIZ, *Sinopsis* II, 430-432.

needed. By this time, the friar parish priest of Badajoz [present-day San Agustín] in the northeastern coast of Tablas Island had been arrested and taken into custody together with his Recollect confreres.

Hunger and sneer at Looc, Tablas Island

On 7 August a steamship named *M/S Bulusan* with the same Romblon prisoners as passengers, dropped anchor at Looc where Fathers Soler, Yoldi and Jiménez were at the hands of the revolutionists. As the unkempt missionaries debarked from *M/S Bulusan*, they were exposed to ridicule and jeer by the revolutionary troops. The Spanish ministers were lodged in crumbly shanties with leaking roofs. Hence they found no shelter during the torrential downpour that drenched them by day and by night. In silence they endured the chilly condition of the night and its concomitant discomfort.

The captives suffered from recurrent hunger pangs after being unfed for hours. Unpalatable black rice was on one occasion offered by a sentry for them to boil and consume. It was an offer their famished stomachs could not refuse. The residents of Looc were, on the whole, cold and apathetic to the curates' plight. A number of Spanish prisoners-of-war and three more Augustinian Recollects soon arrived to share the ill fortune of the group.

A Caviteño's verbal tirade

The sojourn of the twelve Recollects at Looc was marked by the inexplicable behavior of an unnamed revolutionist from Cavite.¹⁸ At first, the eloquent Caviteño revolutionary heaped encomiums on the friars' significant role in the civilization task and moral progress of the Filipino people. Soon afterward, he did a bizarre turnabout: his panegyrics turned into delivering fiery perorations against the Recollect captives and against the friars in general.

He continued his tongue-lashing at them, indicting them collectively for the abuses and disasters that befell on the colony since the beginning of Spanish rule. The Caviteño orator blamed them for the colonial society's own depraved customs and even for the individual sins of Filipinos. The acrimonious diatribe was reminiscent of General Mariano Riego de Dios' verbal tirade against them

18- The twelve were Soler, Celestino Yoldi, Pedro López, Paulino Jiménez, Anselmo Ruiz, Federico Serrano, Manuel María Gómez, Julián Ortiz, Miguel García, Agustín Pérez de la Virgen de los Remedios, Félix Lacalle and Juan Calabia. Before long, Dionisio Gurbindo of Boac, Marinduque, joined them.

at the provincial capital of Romblon.¹⁹ In the face of all the invectives, the friars only kept their peace in silence. Downcast and their heads bowed in utter humiliation, they resigned to their fate, to what would befall on them in the days to come.

Ephemeral Peace at Boac, Marinduque

The odyssey to the unknown destination continued. All along, the captives never had any idea of their journey's end. On 23 August 1898 the boat slowly proceeded north and docked at Boac in the island province of Marinduque. The prisoners found its parish priest Father Dionisio Gurbindo under house arrest. Not long afterward, the Caviteño Revolutionary guards took their leave and sailed off towards Masbate and other parts of Luzon without telling their captives why.

The friars' plight turned less harsh. Both the provincial governor and the town mayor exerted effort so that the Recollect priests could communicate with their superiors in Intramuros and ask for help. It did not take long for clothing and pecuniary assistance from Manila to reach them. All along, Boac residents showed the prisoners so much compassion and respect that these manifestations of affection certainly assuaged their misfortunes and despondent spirits.

From a private house the thirteen Recollects were moved to the *casa tribunal* [municipal hall] of Boac. The lone sentry of the municipal hall soon got tired of his post and left the friar prisoners to themselves. The detainees' taste of limited freedom would go on till the end of the year.

A day in the life of an imprisoned Recollect

The ordinary day of an imprisoned Augustinian Recollect minister always began with mental prayer. He then continued with other special religious devotions: «In every moment their hearts flew to God in whom they put all their faith, all their hope.»²⁰ Never was there a day during their protracted captivity when the prisoners failed to pray the Divine Office [present-day Liturgy of the Hours]. The celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice was definitely out of the question. They were not even permitted to celebrate the Mass, nor to receive the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Communion nor to avail themselves of the spiritual benefit and consolation arising from the reception of their captivity. To while

¹⁹ L. RUIZ, *Sinopsis* II, 436-438.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 440.

away the hours and enliven their humdrum days in Boac, the prisoners organized a choir and fascinated the townsfolk with their splendid religious hymns. The pleased listeners never hesitated to chip in monetary contributions.

In December 1898 a new revolutionary commander took control of Boac and immediately led the prisoners to their next destination—Mogpog—an hour away to the north. Thus came to its abrupt end the relatively peaceful sojourn that lasted four months.

The good-hearted curate and parishioners of Mogpog

The inhabitants of Mogpog, Marinduque, who were notorious anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish, turned out to be the opposite—to their great relief. To alleviate the captives' lot, some folks even offered cigars, local wine and trifle objects to them. Most of the time, the guards allowed them to mingle with the people and to freely roam around the town. The friar prisoners were warmly greeted in their daily strolls. The display of Christian charity and respect stemmed, most probably, from the compassionate conduct and good example of their Filipino parish curate, «a worthy minister of the Lord, who thoroughly epitomized charity and love.»²¹

The local diocesan priest of Mogpog, whose name has not been recorded for posterity, frequently visited the prisoners and gave them financial assistance. He saw to it that the religious had clean clothes to wear, paying for their laundry from his own pocket. For the first time in many months, the captives were permitted to receive Holy Communion on a regular basis, thanks to the Mogpog diocesan curate's effort. For fear of incurring the Revolutionary caciques' displeasure and wrath, however, he did not permit his fellow presbyters to celebrate the Mass.

The four-month sojourn in Mogpog was obviously a life of isolation and meager means of subsistence. Yet they all enjoyed it for its peace and tranquility. They specifically recalled the rare privilege of partaking of the Eucharistic meal that nourished their long-famished souls.

High-level efforts to secure the prisoners' release

Efforts were already made to secure the freedom of Spanish prisoners as early as 2 August 1898 when Mariano Cardinal Rampolla, Pope Leo XIII's Vatican Secretary of State, wrote the papal nuncio to the United States to exhaust all measures within his reach. He sought the collaboration of James Cardinal Gib-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 441.

bons (1834-1921), Archbishop of Baltimore (Maryland), Archbishop John Ireland of Saint Paul (Minnesota) and other influential prelates. The Apostolic Vicar of Hongkong himself solicited the American cardinal's assistance on the jailed friars' behalf. In an audience with President William McKinley, Msgr. Ireland was told the US did not recognize the Aguinaldo government but would do everything possible to protect the property of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the lives of friars and priests in his orders to the commanding general.²²

On the festive occasion of the proclamation of the First Philippine Republic on 23 January 1899, President Aguinaldo had ordered the release of the Spanish prisoners.²³ He further decreed the expulsion of friars from Philippine territory. The edict, however, was not implemented. Everywhere the imprisoned regular clergy remained in bondage, including the Dominican bishop of Nueva Segovia, who would be released only in December 1899.

In a communiqué dated 17 January 1899 to the Vatican Secretary of State, the Madrid nuncio conveyed the request of Queen Regent María Cristina of Spain for the Pope to intervene in the release of Spanish hostages. In March Cardinal Rampolla wrote Archbishop Bernardino Nozaleda of Manila, voicing the Holy Father's deep concern over the imprisoned clergy's fate. He further urged the Spanish Dominican prelate to employ every possible means to have them set free.²⁴ Months later, Archbishop Nozaleda relayed Pope Leo XIII's expression of concern to President Aguinaldo and personally sought the release of the imprisoned friars. Prompted earlier by the Holy See, forty-four Filipino secular priests—in the name of the 700 priests in the Islands—followed suit: they addressed a manifesto to Aguinaldo and to the Filipino Congress, appealing their sense of magnanimity and humanity in behalf of the Spanish prisoners, the religious in particular.²⁵ The positive effects of these pleas took long in coming.

Seemingly endless hikes and sea trips

In the midst of such efforts and negotiations, the Augustinian Recollect captives continued their drawn-out Calvary in the islands off southern Luzon. On

22 Isacio RODRÍGUEZ, Jesús ÁLVAREZ, *Papeles filipinos II: La revolución filipina y los prisioneros españoles*, in *Archivo agustiniano* 199 (1997) footnotes 6 and 8, 175.

23 Pedro S. de ARCHÚTEGUI, Miguel A. BERNAD, *The Religious Coup d'État, 1898-1901: A Documentary History* (Quezon City 1971) 43-44.

24 *Ibid.*, 60-61.

25 *Ibid.*, 69-71; I. RODRÍGUEZ, J. ALVAREZ, *Papeles filipinos II*, 193-195. The Augustinian historians believed the native clergy's manifesto greatly contributed to the prisoners' release.

29 April 1899 they returned to Boac from Mogpog and from there they traveled to an outlying barrio on foot. From that inland village they retraced their steps back to Boac. Once more from the provincial capital they marched on to a village named Lupac. The ceaseless hikes were taking a toll on their haggard bodies. Before long, they hiked from Lupac to the town of Santa Cruz, in northeastern Marinduque.²⁶ Finally their worn-out bodies found their much-needed respite when they sailed to the island of Mompon.

At long last, the over two months of seemingly endless sea voyages and marches were over. On 3 July 1899 they boarded a steamer bound for Luzon. They reached the shores of the small coastal town of Pitogo in Tayabas province five days afterward. After a quick meal, they frantically rushed to Lucena where according to information relayed to them an American frigate would be waiting at Lucena River in order to convey them to Manila. Their hope of freedom was dashed to the ground when they could not find any ship at all. There was nobody to explain to them why or assigned to take care of them. The prisoners were just lucky to come across with the former Lucena curate's servant who took pity of them. He invited them to his lowly shanty and offered them shelter and food.

Malady and Misery in Tayabas

On 9 July 1899, Father Vicente Soler and his nine Recollect confreres were directed by Colonel Anastacio Maloles, the provincial military commander, to march northward to Tayabas, capital of the province of the same name. To their utter consternation, they found themselves in the company of thirteen Franciscan friars who languished in jail. That night the Recollects shared a decent meal with the spiritual sons of Saint Francis of Assisi.

The dilapidated building in Tayabas where they were lodged for five months was so unsanitary that most of the prisoners were stricken ill. Quite a number suffered from chronic dysentery. The great majority of the captives were morally and physically crestfallen, fatigued, their bodies drained of all energy and strength, brought about by those apparently unending hikes under the blistering tropical sun, sea trips, wretched quarters, hunger and thirst.

²⁶ Yoldi, Gurbindo and López were petitioned by the good-hearted diocesan priest to stay behind in Santa Cruz. Following the American occupation of Marinduque, the group of Recollects eventually gained their freedom when they boarded a boat that reached Manila Bay on 3 May 1900. Sádaba wrongly includes López as among the bigger number released on 1 March 1900. Gurbindo's liberation day was listed by Sádaba as 4 May 1900.

The friar prisoners spiked high fever that recurrently lasted weeks or even months. An imprisoned Recollect confirmed it in his own memoir as the dreaded malaria. It was the malignant febrile illness, aggravated by countless adversities suffered in confinement and general body weakness that ultimately put and end to the short life of Father Anselmo Ruiz, assistant parish priest of Romblon, on 23 July 1899.²⁷ He was only 25. Barely a week before, Ruiz and two confreres had been ordered by Colonel Maloles to report to Lucena. They were expected to do menial jobs at the stable or the kitchen of the Filipino parish priest. At length, death ended Father Ruiz's woes. For the rest of the friar captives, the road to Calvary was long and winding. Still there was no light at the end of the tunnel.

Christian work of Mercy

Like genuine believers of Christ, Tayabas folks—especially the undaunted women tertiaries—helped assuage the plight of Father Soler's group, even risking the displeasure of military authorities. Everybody—except the secular priest of Tayabas—made a concerted effort to mitigate the friars' burden. On their own initiative, the tertiaries donated food, mended their clothes and did their laundry.

Oftentimes the Filipino secular priest of Tayabas personally discouraged the tertiaries who persisted in helping the Spanish ministers. One day he rebuked a tertiary for attending to the captives. The lady could not avoid justifying her action before the diocesan priest: «If helping the prisoners is not fine with you, well, I consider it very good and very holy. So long as there are religious here, I will help them as much as I can.» His face flushed with anger, he dashed out of the detention place in a huff.²⁸ The minister of the merciful God had just been reminded about the act of Christian mercy and charity by a layperson.

Hike from Tayabas to Lucban

A squad of soldiers was posted to restrict the prisoners' movement in Tayabas. The friars were detained inside the unhealthful edifice until January 1900. By then news had reached Tayabas that United States troops had occupied the adjoining town of Tiaong three leagues away. Thereupon, the civilian members of the local revolutionary junta resolved to grant the friars their long-overdue freedom.

27 Ruiz passed away on 3 July 1899, according to SÁDABA, 729.

28 L. RUIZ, *Sinopsis* II, 445.

However, the military officers and the Catholic priest of Tayabas strongly objected to the proposal of the civilian revolutionary leaders. The officers and the secular priest would rather have the detained friars meted with the capital punishment. In fact, some Spanish *cazadores* [light infantrymen] had been shot earlier, at the instigation of the secular priest who was «completely bereft of all compassion.» Apparently, the civilians' judgment prevailed over that of the military. For it was consequently decided that the captives should be hastily withdrawn from the clutches of the approaching enemy troops.

On 15 January 1900 the Filipino patriots conducted the prisoners to Lucban. The ailing friars—two Franciscans²⁹ and the Recollect Father Agustín Pérez de la Virgen de los Remedios (1849-1900), parish priest of Odiongan in Rombon since 1894—were advised to stay behind. Chronic dysentery had been ailing the Recollect friar. His illness soon took a turn for the worse; he eventually died of the same malady in Balong-balong, a barrio of Lucban, on 4 February. «After suffering with heroic patience the harsh chastisements and tribulations arising from such prolonged confinement, Father Agustín Pérez was a victim of unimaginable suffering.»³⁰

Trek to Sampaloc and Atimonan

On 21 January the prisoners left Lucban and marched on to Sampaloc under the scorching sun. Thence they resumed their hike to Atimonan, some forty kilometers away. At this coastal town, they momentarily rested from the strenuous journey. Up to 300 Spaniards, both friars and military personnel who either capitulated or were captured in Tayabas province were converged at Atimonan.

In February 1900, hundreds of Spanish captives hiked to the distant town of Guinayangan, about sixty kilometers away. In this town along the coast of Ragay Gulf, a group of over 200 Spanish officers and prisoners-of-war from the province of Ambos Camarines joined them. Their freedom was finally negotiated at Guinayangan. To evade uninformed Filipino troops on patrol, the prisoners moved to Pires, a barrio of Guinayangan(?). Here some Spanish soldiers luckily caught the attention of a passing steamer named *Alava* that was skippered by an American. The steamship berthed at Pires to board the religious prisoners. It then proceeded to fetch the ailing troops left behind at Guinayangan and ferried them to Manila, now under the United States Occupation forces.³¹

29 A Franciscan friar, Julián López, died soon after a lingering illness.

30 SÁDABA, 567-568.

31 John N. Schumacher surmises that all friar prisoners were released in December 1899 in *Readings in Philippine Church History* (Quezon City 1987) 292, 299. Aguinaldo had issued on 1

Deliverance at long last!

The first of March 1900 was the yearned-for day of deliverance. At long last, the steamer which the eight Recollects—Vicente Soler, Paulino Jiménez, Federico Serrano, Manuel María Gómez, Julián Ortiz, Miguel García, Félix Lacalle and Juan Calabia had boarded in Bicol—docked at Manila. The nineteen months of fatigue, bondage, isolation, uncertainty and seemingly endless, nerve-racking hikes had finally come to a close.

Euphoria and tremendous sense of relief filled the cloisters of San Sebastian Convent and Recoletos Convent in Intramuros. The superiors and conventuals of both priories welcomed their confreres. The news of the death of Agustín Pérez and Anselmo Ruiz in captivity might have somewhat dampened the fraternal celebration. This situation was further aggravated by the fact that three Recollect confreres were still confined in the distant island of Marinduque.

Lessons from Captivity

The prolonged period of captivity was an extended period of deprivation, apprehension and isolation. But it likewise provided unnumbered occasions for prayer and meditation. Thus, decades later in 1918, Blessed Vicente Soler could write:

Prayer, then, my brothers, continuous and fervent prayer in order to attain that intimate and perfect union with God our Lord so that the Divine Majesty may bless our efforts and crown our undertakings. Only he who knows how to pray perfectly, knows how to live in a holy manner.³²

Father Romualdo Rodrigo, then postulator general in charge of the Causes of Saints of the Augustinian Recollect Order, tells us about some lessons the Father Vicente Soler had learned from his imprisonment:

He learned to suffer in silence and to put his total confidence in God. There he also learned to exercise his apostolate among the prisoners. The experience of his first incarceration will be of service to him later—in his final confinement in Motril in August 1936. He would lift up the spirits of his companions and encourage them to trust in God. In the meantime, he recounted to them how God had helped him during his imprisonment in the Philippines.³³

December 1899 a decree setting all Spanish prisoners free, «without distinction and unconditionally.» See S. ACHÚTEGUI-BERNAD III, 76-77.

³² *Positio*, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 26.

From San Sebastian to San Nicolás priory

Following his release from captivity in March 1900, the future martyr of the Faith was assigned to San Sebastian Convent in Quiapo, Manila.³⁴ Two months earlier, the last United States Army officers had abandoned the convent after forcibly occupying it for seventeen months. This development was welcomed by the Recollects who could now accommodate more conventuals in the priory and go about their cloistered life and their religious obligations, unhampered by American interlopers. At the start of the Spanish-American War, both church and convent of San Sebastian were requisitioned by Spanish officials as a military hospital and used for four months until the American Occupation soldiers landed on 13 August 1898. That same day US troops also occupied the Recollect convent and its all-steel church and convent as their barracks.

At the all-steel neo-Gothic house of worship constructed in 1886-1891, Father Soler balanced his time between the confessional and preaching the Word of God. The patroness of San Sebastian Church, the *Virgen del Carmen* [Our Lady of Mount Carmel], whose revered icon arrived in Manila from Mexico City in 1618 and enthroned at the church since 1621, had found a zealous advocate in Father Soler. The Marian devotees and members of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel attended lectures and sermons delivered by this tireless promoter of devotion to the Mother of God.

Secretary of the vicar provincial

On 19 July 1902 the Servant of God was transferred back to the Recoletos convent in Intramuros. He had been earlier designated secretary of the newly-appointed vicar provincial of the Philippines, Father Manuel Mateo de la Virgen del Carmen (1852-1911).³⁵ With the official seat of the Augustinian Recollect province temporarily moved to Spain,³⁶ the post of vicar provincial in the Philippines had to be created. This was in the wake of the abnormal and turbulent situation in

34 The US forces established their barracks therein till October 1899. The last three American officers finally vacated San Sebastian Convent in January 1900. See *Libro de cosas notables del convento de San Sebastián de Manila*, 28r-29r, APM Sección de *Libros* 127a.

35 In 1907 Father Manuel Mateo, Philippine missionary (1873-1907) and vicar provincial (1901-1907), was designated as the first provincial of the newly restored Hispano-American Province of Our Lady of the Pillar, later renamed Saint Thomas of Villanova Province.

36 In 1913 the seat of the Saint Nicholas provincialate was finally restored in Manila by the provincial chapter held in Marcilla. See José Javier LIZARRAGA, *El Padre Enrique Pérez, Último Vicario y Primer Prior General de la Orden de Agustinos Recoletos (1908-1914)* (Rome 1990) 203.

the Philippines that likewise occasioned the suspension of the triennial provincial chapters of Saint Nicholas Province. For that reason, the Madrid-based superior general of the Augustinian Recollect Congregation and his general council were mandated by the Constitutions to appoint the prior provincial, provincial counselors and other positions of Saint Nicholas Province.³⁷

Among Father Soler's duties as secretary were to accompany the vicar provincial in his canonical visitations to the remaining Recollect communities in the new American colony as well as to prepare and disseminate the necessary instructions and communications from the office of the vicar provincial to the Recollect subordinates through whatever means available.

Father Soler still found time to write articles in Spanish for Catholic periodicals in Manila, like *La Estrella de Antipolo* [The Star of Antipolo]. Among his works were the following: *Nuestra Señora del Carmen* [Our Lady of Mount of Carmel], *El taumaturgo de Tolentino* [The Miracle-Worker of Tolentino], and *Nuestra Señora de Antipolo y los Padres Recoletos* [Our Lady of Antipolo and the Recollect Fathers]. He employed such pseudonyms as *Taga-Quiapo*, *Manolito* and *Stock*.

Local superior of San Nicolás Convent

In September 1905 Father Soler took possession of his new office as superior of San Nicolás friary or Recoletos, for which he had been named on 17 July. He continued to promote the popular devotion to Saint Joseph. He wrote the by-laws of the archconfraternity of Saint Joseph.

Father Soler remained in office for a little more than a year. On 8 November 1906 he resigned his post. A humble man, he often refused all types of honors and prelacies and wished to live only as an ordinary conventual, a plain religious.

On 27 November 1906, Father Soler boarded a steamer bound for Spain. Thus ended his seventeen-year apostolate in the Philippines. The missionary period of his religious and priestly life had drawn to a close.³⁸

³⁷ The prior provincial of Saint Nicholas Province had been appointed since 1900 by the *comisario general*—then superior general of the Recollect Congregation—and his council and had continually resided in Spain.

³⁸ Miguel AVELLANEDA, *Continuación del Padre Sádaba o segunda parte del Catálogo de los Religiosos de la Orden de Agustinos Recoletos de Filipinas desde 1606 hasta 1936* (Rome 1938) 285.

Missionaries' exodus to Spain

The future martyr had joined hundreds of confreres who had been repatriated to Spain or had moved to South America, as the Revolution furiously raged in the colony. In such American countries as Brazil, Venezuela and Panama, they established new religious houses. There were but two Recollect convents in Manila that could accommodate a big number of friars who were constrained to relinquish the parishes.

As a Recollect historian accurately observes: «Many of the religious were men who were worn out, ill and devoid of hope: they felt that they were victims of a hate that they did not believe to deserve; some even no longer found meaning in their religious life.»³⁹ They had undergone training solely for missionary work and ministerial apostolate in the Philippines. During the religious profession, they promised to serve the people in the missions in the Philippines and the Marianas Islands. The mission land was the sole horizon in their existence. Forced by adverse circumstances to abandon it, the friars felt rudderless both psychologically and pastorally.

Epilogue

Father Soler was sent to the congested convent of Marcilla, Navarre. Subsequently, he took up residence at Puente la Reina also in Navarra and then at Motril in Granada. In 1907 the Province of Saint Thomas of Villanova was set up and it included the house in Motril. In 1912 he was designated provincial counselor of the new province. For two triennia, he was elected prior provincial of Saint Thomas of Villanova Province. In May 1926 he was raised to the highest position of the Order as prior general. But on 11 December of the same year, he tendered his resignation, citing health reasons. He then took up residence again at Motril.

Father Vicente Soler died a martyr's death on 15 August 1936, feast of Our Lady's Assumption. He had been arrested by the Communist militias on 29 July. In prison, he prayed the Marian rosary and novena and confessed his fellow inmates. He even converted into the Catholic faith a known atheist and revolutionist who was later executed.

Minutes before his own execution, according to a fortunate survivor and eyewitness, Father Soler told his eighteen companions: «Entrust yourself to

39 MARTÍNEZ CUESTA, *The Order of Augustinian Recollects*, 66.

the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the Most Blessed Virgin, and I will give you the absolution.» Almighty God's minister he was till the last breath of his life.

Emanuel Luis A. ROMANILLOS
Marikina City