

# A BRIEF NARRATIVE ON THE BIRTH OF THE PROVINCE OF SAINT EZEKIEL MORENO

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## *Resumen*

El autor reproduce en este artículo la homilía pronunciada el año 2012 durante el capítulo provincial, en la que recordaba algunas circunstancias que acompañaron el camino que condujo a la creación de la provincia Filipina de San Ezequiel en el capítulo general de 1998. A principios de este año, aprovechó el confinamiento impuesto por la difusión del Covid - 19 para añadir algunos comentarios complementarios. El autor fue testigo privilegiado de los hechos que narra.

## *Abstract*

The author reproduces in this article the homily pronounced in 2012 during the provincial Chapter, in which he recalled some of the circumstances that accompanied the path which led to the creation of the Philippine Recollect Province in the General Chapter of 1998. At the beginning of this year, he took advantage of lockdown imposed by the Covid - 19 to enrich his narrative with additional commentaries. He was a privileged witness of the whole process.

## **Introduction**

As introduction to his brief narrative, I opted to use the text of a homily I delivered to the Capitular fathers or Chapter delegates towards the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> Provincial Chapter of the Province of Saint Ezekiel Moreno which was held at the Talavera House of Prayer on February 13-27, 2012. This homily inspired me to elaborate a narrative that led to the birth of the Province, as described in the *Postscript* section.

## **Chapter homily on February 24, 2012**

Brothers:

- If I were to stick to the spirit of the liturgy of the day, first Friday of Lent, I should be talking to you about fasting and mortification as a topic.
- But with your indulgence and permission, allow me to share with you some ideas, very personal on my part, but thoughts still relevant to our

Provincial Chapter that is about to be concluded. I have the privilege to be a delegate of this particular Chapter.

- So to begin with, I remind myself that I have been in the Order of Augustinian Recollects for 49 years. One year more and I will be a golden boy. Out of these 49 years, I spent 35 years as a member of the Province of St. Nicholas of Tolentino, and only 14 years under the Province of St. Ezekiel. From that vantage point I had the opportunity to watch from the sideline the journey of the Vicariate of the Philippines on its way towards full maturity as the 8<sup>th</sup> Province of the Order.
- I estimated that the desire of becoming a Province started to burn in the hearts of some Recollects in early 1970s.
- As an eyewitness and protagonist of the whole saga, I remember very well that the first formal articulation of that desire to be autonomous province happened in 1976. During the 1976 Provincial Chapter held in Marcilla, Navarra, Spain a fourteen-point position paper of varied demands prepared by Filipino Recollects, were presented to the Chapter for deliberation. To mention a few: a petition to open a theology house here in Manila; that Filipinos should be prepared professionally and they be given bigger role in the governance of the Vicariate; that there should be a respect for the Filipinization laws of the Philippine educational institutions, etc. I had the «*mala suerte*» [bad luck] to be one of the three Filipino delegates to the Provincial Chapter. We were assigned to explain, to justify and to defend the different demands of our paper. It was embarrassing to say that not one of the 14-point manifesto ever reached the first base. The chapter rejected the articulation *punto por punto* [point by point] branding them as preposterous, ambitious and even bordering on the point of being *ingratos* [ingrates]. A joke [*bugal-bugal ba*]<sup>1</sup> had been circulated in Marcilla which said: «¡Ojo!, que vienen los filipinos con bombas» [Be careful! The Filipinos are coming with bombs]. Because of that embarrassing experience, I promised to myself that it would be the first and the last provincial chapter I would ever attend.
- After that event, we in the Vicariate accepted our defeat and we settled calmly and yielded to the authority to buy peace and not division.
- Some fifteen years later, it must be in 1990 or 1991 Fr. Javier Pipaón, the same religious I met in Marcilla, in 1976 at that time he was the outgoing

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<sup>1</sup> The word *bugalbugal* means *to ridicule, to revile, to talk without respect to elders, persons or anybody*. Cf. Jes B. TIROL, *Kapulongnan binisaya-ininglis* (Tagbilaran City 2010) 84.

Prior Provincial, came to Manila. As Prior General (1986-1992), he came to Manila as part of his duty to prepare for the 1992 General Chapter to be held on Colombia.

- I had the chance to talk to him and I reminded him that the aspiration to be an autonomous Province, although not articulated strongly, yet it was still burning in the hearts of some of our religious. That personal encounter with him happened in USJ-R Cebu City. It was a long discussion, so long that we forgot to take our *siesta*. I asked him that the 1992 General Chapter was the opportune time for us to be a Province.
- His answer was a disappointment yet enlightening when he told me: «*Buñao, you have to wait. It is not the time yet. You are too young to have it.*» I disagreed and I could not understand his refusal to give in. I argued telling him that houses and communities, we have them; number of religious, there were more than enough; formation houses we have them, and money? Yes, we have plenty of money to spend, to avail ourselves of. What more is needed?
- To paraphrase his explanation, he told me: «*The Vicariate in the Philippines is a treasure of the Order. Yes, you have stable communities, thriving parishes and missions, well-established educational institutions. All of these were the fruits of the hundred years of missionary efforts by thousands of Recollect missionaries many [of] whom were Spaniards. Prudence dictates that when the time comes for a turnover, this treasure must go to capable and responsible hands to prevent the dissipation of this treasure.*»
- With emphasis, Fr. Pipaón added: «*LLEVAR Y GOBERNAR UNA PROVINCIA NO ES FÁCIL. PARA ESTO HAY QUE TENER RELIGIOSOS BIEN ASENTADOS*»<sup>2</sup> [To carry and govern a Province is not easy. It is necessary to have religious well established for that.]
- He then went on: «*Look at the profile of the Vicariate: the average age is only 38 years old, many are still in formation houses; majority of the religious have only 3 to 4 years in the ministry. You are still too young.*»
- I saw the logic of his explanation and still I pushed harder and I asked him to create the province during the 1992 Chapter and the implementation may be delayed even to 3 or 4 years later. Our discussion ended there and I got no answer in the affirmative.

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<sup>2</sup> The Spanish dictionaries consulted (Cassell's, Collins, Larousse, Oxford) have such varied meanings as *stable, steady, settled down, well-balanced, deeply rooted, firmly held, established*.

- Later I learned that during the 1992 General Chapter an ordinance was passed ordering the Prior General and his Council to study the possibility of creating a new Province.
- We, who are members of the Province of St. Ezekiel Moreno, will always remember that on 28 November 1998 during the 52<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter the Province of St. Ezekiel was born with an overwhelming support and approval from the Capitular fathers through the initiative of Fr. Pipaón and his General Council. He was then the out-going Prior General. I asked myself: *«Was it a mere coincidence or Divine Providence that I met Fr. Pipaón in the 1976 Provincial Chapter and at that time he was strongly opposed to the idea of the Philippine Province. He was the outgoing provincial. Then in the 1998 General Chapter, again I met Fr. Pipaón and he was the outgoing Fr. General and we were together in proposing the birth of the Philippine Province: St. Ezekiel Moreno Province.»*
- This treasure of the Order is now in our hands. The Province of Saint Ezekiel Moreno is ours to cherish, to own and to manage in accordance with our charismatic identity. For many of us, it was a dream come true.
- Our Province has traveled long enough and it is now celebrating its 5<sup>th</sup> Provincial Chapter.
- All of us have heard at the Capitular Sala that there were certain disturbing concerns, like dark clouds hovering over us. Concerns of our being geographically isolated; communication break-down due to cultural and language barriers. Equally gloomy is a parochial mentality of some religious who could not see that the Order is bigger than the Province. If we allow these dark clouds to fall on our Province like a storm, then we will be soaked, cold, trembling and will become ineffective. Ordinances—even if they are beautifully crafted— will not be enough to dissipate these dark clouds. In the language of Fr. General, we need to have religious *bien asentados* who would carry our Province to greater heights.
- We must understand that no amount of ordinances and regulations can make a difference unless we have mature and truly committed religious around.
- But definitely we can assure our Fr. Prior General and his Secretary, who are here present, that the way we are, and the way we will be, this Province of St. Ezekiel Moreno will grow strong and healthy because it is now peopled with *religiosos bien asentados* who are ready to embrace the difficult and painful process of restructuring leading us towards revitalized communities and ministries.
- In conclusion and above all, let us anchor our hope of success through the intercession of St. Ezekiel our Patron. Amen.

## 2. The postscript

In November 2013, I met Fr. Javier Pipaón in Madrid. At that time he was a regular member of the community of Santa Rita Parish at Calle Gaztambide near Avenida Cea Bermúdez. With him as an ex-general and a friend, I shared pleasant moments and some observations about the progress of the Province of St. Ezekiel that was created during his term as prior general. In passing I told him about a homily that I delivered on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Provincial Chapter. I told Fr. Pipaón that in my homily I shared with the Capitular Fathers about his interest and best efforts to prepare properly the Vicariate to be a Province. He thanked me for giving him due recognition and crediting him for his role in preparing the Vicariate to become a Province.

During that short visit in Madrid and our casual conversation, I came to realize that the Province of St. Ezekiel Moreno was truly close to the heart of Fr. Pipaón. He considered the Philippine mission as the treasure of the Order of Augustinian Recollects. And for that reason he used his authority as the major superior of the Province of St. Nicholas and later as Prior General of the Order to make sure that the missionary treasure of the Augustinian Recollects stored in the country may not be dissipated.

### *A short review of History*

In May 1970 Fr. Pipaón was elected Prior Provincial of St. Nicholas of Tolentino and he held that office for six consecutive years (1970 – 1976). At that time the Vicariate of the Philippines was under the jurisdiction of the Province of St. Nicholas. By virtue of our Constitutions, the communities in the Philippines were subject to the supervision of the Prior Provincial of San Nicholas. In that score Fr. Pipaón was well-acquainted with what was the value of the Vicariate, and with what was going on in the communities in the Philippines.

I remember that during the 1976 Provincial Chapter held in Marcilla, Navarra, Spain, some Filipino Recollects articulated before the Chapter their desire and wishes to enjoy some form of autonomy in the Vicariate in the Philippines. In that occasion Fr. Pipaón, who was the Prior Provincial, used his constitutional power to block the movement on the grounds that it was not timely and the issue of creating a new province could not be done hurriedly. Rather it must be subjected to careful and profound study. Only the General Chapter was endowed with the power to create a new Province. To some of us his firm opposition was difficult to understand and even hard to accept.

But all the same we in the Philippines settled down calmly before the authority to buy peace rather than division. However, to my mind, the position

paper that was presented before the Provincial Chapter awakened the authorities of Madrid that there was an issue that needed attention. I can recall that after Filipino position paper was discussed and settled by the Chapter, Fr. Pipaon concluded by saying: «Nunca olvidaré estas cosas.» [Never shall I forget these things.]

Ten years after his term as Prior Provincial of Saint Nicholas de Tolentino, Fr. Pipaón was elected Prior General at the General Chapter held in Montegudo, Navarra in 1986. He held on to that office as Prior General for twelve consecutive years from 1986 to 1998. If I am not mistaken, he also had been a General Councilor in Rome, prior to his election as Prior General. From that long experience of being in the position of governance of the Order, first as prior Provincial, later as Prior General, he had accumulated a deeper appreciation of the value and the role of the Philippine mission in shaping the history of the Order, which he considered as a treasure of the Order.

During the 51<sup>st</sup> General Chapter held in Colombia in 1992, an ordinance was passed ordering the Prior General and his Council to conduct a study on the possibility of creating a new province. The task of carrying out that ordinance fell on the hands of Fr. Pipaón, who was re-elected as Prior General for another six years. So Fr. Pipaón, with the support of his Council, acted on that ordinance. I calculated that between 1994 to 1997, the General Council conducted the study. Among other things, the General Council ordered the Vicar Provincial in Manila to organize the so-called Vicarial Congress. Two congresses were organized. The first one was held in Baguio City in 1994. The participants of that Congress were all Filipino Recollects except Fr. General, a Spaniard, who was personally present during the whole period of the historic Congress. For some of us, the motive for convening the Congress was not thoroughly ventilated but it appeared to me that it was a dry run of a provincial chapter. The prior General was there to observe the capability and the maturity of Filipino Recollects on how to handle issues that a province may have to face in the future.

I could not remember the date, the venue and the issues discussed during the Second Congress. Later I was also informed that a survey conducted by the general curia showed that some 80% of the Filipino constituents favored to have a mission territory. In effect, Fr. General prepared an English-speaking mission for a Filipino Province. Sierra Leone in West Africa was identified as one of the possible missions. As part of the preparation of creating a province, the general curia advised the Provincial Council in Madrid and the Vicar Council in Manila to form a study group to discuss a fair and equitable distribution of the patrimony of the Province found within the Philippine jurisdiction. The Prior Provincial and another representative came to Manila and with the Vicar Pro-

vincial and his representative. They met with the Procurador general to discuss and to come up with an acceptable formula on how to handle the delicate issue of distribution of the patrimony of the Province.

In summary it can be said that Fr. Pipaón and his Council had done their homework of conducting a feasibility study leading towards the creation of a new Province of the Order as mandated in the 51<sup>st</sup> General Chapter.

History would tell us that in 1998 during the 52<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter held on Monachil, Granada, Spain the proposal to elevate the Vicariate of the Philippines to the 8<sup>th</sup> Province of the Order was presented, accepted and unanimously approved by the members of the 52<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter. The long-awaited birth of the Province of St. Ezekiel Moreno became a reality on November 28, 1998. Thanks be to God.

The memorable event of the creation of the new Province would put to rest the resentments and the complaints of some constituents in the Philippine against the authorities in Madrid and Rome for their delays in addressing the lingering aspiration of the Vicariate to be an independent Province.

### *To my reader*

You may wonder why this testimonial was ever written. For some time I have wanted to express my personal recognition and appreciation to Fr. Javier Pipaón's role and efforts in building up the Vicariate to a status of a Province. The opportunity came when I was locked down in the novitiate in Antipolo City during the Covid-19 pandemic. I had some extra time to take advantage of so I went over my old notes filed in my computer. Accidentally, I stumbled upon a homily I delivered to the participants of the 5<sup>th</sup> Provincial Chapter. That homily inspired me to elaborate and write down in the *Postscript* additional details about the role of Fr. Pipaón and his Council in preparing the Philippine mission to a Province.

I believe that we, the members of the Province, have a duty to be grateful to those authorities and other religious who took part in building up of the Province of St. Ezekiel Moreno. Actually Fr. Victor Lluch, our First Prior Provincial, immediately after the official promulgation of the birth of the Province of St. Ezekiel Moreno, stood up and asked to be recognized. With joy and highly emotional speech he thanked the Capitular fathers for their generosity, and in particular he thanked Fr. Pipaón and his General Council for sponsoring the creation of the Province. I love to think that he spoke with gratitude for and in behalf of all the constituents of the new Province.

But I wonder if we have kept a copy of his heartfelt thanksgiving address at the close of the General Chapter of 1998. Now if this piece of paper I have written would echo the sentiments of Fr. Victor Lluch, our First Prior Provincial, then I am glad to have done it.

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