

Philippines—“Reports Prepared After my First Visit

I left Hong Kong and the white clergy suit on May 31 in the early 1960s. I was heading for the land of the white Soutana. I know that you have heard much about the Philippines from the various returning missionaries, but I can assure you that seeing is believing. And when you go yourself, the bug hits you. The previous year I spent only one week visiting all five schools. The next year I explained that I was not interested in houses or in pupils, but that I wanted to devote all of my time to the Brothers.

Brother James and his big smile met me at the Manila airport. He had already arranged a meeting for me with His Eminence the Cardinal for the next day. Meeting with Cardinals was getting to be a habit ... well, almost. I had met Cardinals in Boston, New York, Tokyo, and Manila. I had met the Cardinal of the Philippines before and knew that he was efficient, a diplomat and businessperson, so we were not strangers. He could also be very gracious and we had already corresponded. He liked to have things right on line and had an offer for us for a school in Manila at Pandarcan. I had visited the land already so we talked over the terms of the contract. We discussed the plans in detail. His offer was attractive, and it would give us a footing in Manila, this nerve center of the Philippines, a central hub from which to radiate. We had been waiting for something like this. I sent a report back and prayed that it would not be long before our Marist Manila became a fact.

The following evening there was a dinner with the alumni of our Chinese Brothers living in Manila, and they appreciated firsthand news about their former teachers and news about our Chinese Marists. At a dinner we had a Chinese Jesuit, also an alumnus of our Brothers, speak the praises of the Marist Brothers to the point of embarrassment. The good Father almost put us ahead of the Society in his enthusiasm.

My visit to the schools of the Province was pleasant and it allowed me time to chat with the men I knew and to see some Marist College alumni once again. Home news had top priority, of course. What amazed me about our schools is that the remarkable mass of cement blocks that make up the buildings of our holdings in the Philippines were made by the Brothers, who taught their students how to make these blocks. And bingo—“yes, Marist bingo!”—provided the funds, and each school was able to put up an entirely new plant with convents built with the cement blocks made possible by Marist bingo. All of our constructions were done by the Brothers with the help of their students. Our schools, our convents, the close union with the clergy, and the closeness with the people were in evidence everywhere I went. And as for education, our Brother Visitor is the Supervisor of well over thirty Notre Dame schools in the Diocese. It was a well-planned, dedicated organization.

The gem of all buildings is our little Novitiate, where I enjoyed my stay most. Tamontaka is far enough from civilization to be guaranteed quiet. It is a beautiful, isolated hilltop, completely surrounded by fertile land that, with time and hard work, yielded the fruit and vegetables we needed in any training center. The Novitiate was inaugurated on May 1, the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker. At the time there were four Novices, the first in the Philippines, and also five Postulants. They followed the strict routine of the Novitiate as if there were 100 Novices in a large city. Maybe the outstanding joy of the Brothers on May 1 was to have the three Filipino Brothers make their Perpetual Profession. The ceremony took place at the cathedral.

Later as I went around and saw the six schools and convents, made from cement blocks, and looked at the school desks and equipment of all kinds, I thought to myself how many bingo games they represented. They are a credit to the zealous workers in the States, both Brothers and laymen, who worked hard for our mission. It is almost incredible that in eighteen months three complete new buildings were realized simultaneously at Kidapawan, Dadiangas, and Tamontaka. It is a real feat of administrative acumen for Brother James, the Visitor, to keep all three going to a happy completion. Three of these schools now have colleges offering degrees in many subjects. It is a big operation!

With this good start, the question became, why couldn’t the mission become an autonomous District like others in the congregation? The question was studied in the States, in the mission, and at the General Council in Rome; we hoped to have a very favorable reply to this problem. If the Philippines remains a mission, its need for men and money will continue, but autonomy will facilitate administration. Mission life is a rough life in a hot climate, but the good being done is consoling and urges one on. The crops are everything for our schools, which depend on them. If the crops are good, our schools will be filled; if not, students cannot come because they are too poor.

This was my first visit to Jolo, and it was the only school where I did get to meet some of the pupils, as they were all out at the airport to greet me that Friday noon just before dismissal. The Notre Dame Band was there as were the boys and girls standing at attention, the lay teachers, priests, nuns and Brothers. The hostess on the plane said, “Father, I think there is someone here to meet you!” We had been in Jolo one year only, and there had been ten converts and one Postulant for our Novitiate.

Jolo is in Moroland. The Moros make periodic raids into town and there is usually bloodshed. Our house is on the edge of their territory, but we have no trouble. In fact the Brothers, "Padres," the men in white, are about the only ones brave enough to go into their territory unarmed. We went for a ride to the Moros' sandy beach and watched them use their bob knives to cut up sharks. They were quite cooperative when we asked questions and they respected the religious. It baffled them that we should come to their territory unarmed except for the crucifix on our breast, which also baffled them.

Before ending the visit, we held a three-day meeting for all the Directors. It was a kind of summit meeting, educational with conferences and recollection all wrapped in one. It gave the Directors a chance to discuss mutual problems such as autonomy, expenses, Chapter adaptations, and studies of the growth of the District. It gave them the chance to enjoy the peace and serenity of the artistic Novitiate chapel and place all their cares at the feet of our Ordinary Resource.

I will not forget the meeting with his Eminence and his good cigars. I can still remember the muddy climb from church to the comfortable convent at Kidapawan and uncrating the U.S. boxes at the Novitiate; the fiesta bells and the parish singing during the get-together at Marbel; the striking beauty of the chapel at Dadiangas; the turkeys at Lagao; the send-off at the airport that early morning; the all-night mourning of a family for a Mobamedan deceased at Tamontaka; the giggling girls at Jolo putting leis around my neck; Bro. James Butch; and, oh yes, the best shoeshine I ever had in all my years from the expert houseboy at Cotobato. If there were Nobel Prizes for shoeshines, he'd get it!

Twelve years of mission work in the Philippines and what is the tally? Six schools and convents, a new Novitiate, and three colleges. We had 205 First Communions and thirty-six converts. Besides those twelve years, there have been two vocations to the priesthood and twenty-one to the Marist Brotherhood. Surely, we can say with our blessed Founder that our Lady has done everything here!

Now that it is celebrating its 50th anniversary as a Marist activity, we must thank the Lord that there are thirty-nine Marists active in the Philippines, all but two native-born. Now there are six colleges, one of them a university, and we are ministering to 26,087 students. The seed sown fifty years ago has produced abundantly. The beautiful little cemetery at Tanontaka is proud of its dozen Marists who have that sacred spot.