

Philippines

There had been a special club at St. Ann's Academy for the students, teachers, and former graduates of the Marist Brothers school who were dedicated to helping us in the spirit of Blessed Marcellin Champagnat to collect funds for the Marist missions all over the globe. This was the true Marist spirit, of course, and I remembered enjoying that spirit of dedication when I was teaching there at St. Ann's some years before. The Mission Club had just about burst with pleasure and new life when they found out that the funds would be for a new foundation to be started by the American Marists. The Brothers had decided to go to the Philippines and work there with and for the Oblate Fathers. We had been working with the Oblates for years in Lowell, Massachusetts, and our Provincial was also from that area. It was exciting that we would be working with them in the same foreign country. The decision had been reached to start that mission and to get there June 20, 1948. I recalled how seriously the alumni had taken the task of collecting funds and running special evenings for the benefit of the Marist mission of Cotobato.

Four Marist Brothers were selected to go to Cotobato in the Mindanao area of the Philippines, and the entire U.S. Province was fully behind them with their prayers and financial help. We never had a special foreign mission of our own, yet this seemed to be very much like home. The first four candidates to start our Marist work there were Bro. Maurus James, Bro. Herbert Daniel, Bro. Joseph Teston, and Bro. Peter Leonard. These were four stalwart young men determined to make this mission a real success. I remember reading that one night, after our men were there and had been working hard, someone managed to get to the room where the Brothers were sleeping and took off with the money that was kept under the pillow of the Director, who was sleeping soundly. It was a blessing that the Brothers had been working hard, and that their sleep was profound enough for them to miss that money only the next day.

One characteristic of schools was the fact that they ended up all having the same name, which was the characteristic name that the Oblates had started off with. Every place we went was called Notre Dame of ... and the name of the city it was in. Now most of our schools started with kindergarten, went through grammar and then to high school. It was only after we had worked there for a good while that we dared to also continue into the various high schools. But all of these were in the same city and thus we covered all the various levels of teaching. At the present time at least two or three of our many schools now have a college and one of these has even become a university. It is incredible how fast and how thoroughly they grew. Our schools were called Notre Dame of Cotobato, Notre Dame of Kidapawan, and so on for Dandiangas, Marbel, Koronadal, and Jolo. Then, in the city of Cotobato, or rather on the outskirts of that city, we started our Novitiate very close to the training house of the Oblate Fathers. Somehow the new school in the area of the capital of the country became known as the boys' department. It would be much later that a part of our huge property in the Manila area was shared with what is now known as the Marist Asian Center, which is dedicated to the training of young Brothers of the many mission countries of the area. The faculties of these schools and colleges were carefully chosen, and the Marist family spirit that reigned in each school was a great help for us in getting vocations from our schools.

What was remarkable in all these schools was the close family spirit of working together that had been brought here by the Oblate Fathers and continued by our Marist Brothers. Some of the early Filipinos had trained in Poughkeepsie at Marist College, and the strong bond that they had had with us in Poughkeepsie was transported to the actual mission. The furthest of all our schools was Notre Dame of Jolo, which had a low percentage of Catholics and a far greater percentage of Muslims. But here also the Oblate Fathers, and especially their Bishop, were real friends to the Muslims.

I remember when I went to make the first visitation to the mission. As the Superior of the house was busy with classes, the Bishop told him to prepare a feast for the visitor coming to see them. Upon my arrival, all the students, boys and girls, were lined up at the airport with the Brothers, Sisters, and teacher Fathers along with the governor of the island, the mayor of the city, and the school bands all pitching in for a first-class reception. It was the last thing I had expected from a small mission like this one! The Bishop told the Director that he would take care of showing me around the next day, which was a school day. Then I would have the weekend with the Brothers when they were free. This was the kind of person that Bishop McSorley was, a man I will never forget.

It had been a great joy for me on one of my last trips to find one of my old friends, Father Emile Bolduc, who had been my pastor in Lowell when I taught the seventh grade there in 1936, when I had sixty-three in the seventh grade. Now, in the Philippines, I had several fine long talks with this deeply spiritual man of God who was still active in the Philippines with his Oblate fathers and our Marist Brothers. No one can ever speak of the Philippine mission without calling to mind the saintly Father Bolduc. He had been a classmate of our Brother Provincial, Bro. Louis Omer, better known to everyone as "Bimbo." It was a great blessing indeed.