

THE IMPLANTATION OF THE SALESIAN CHARISM IN THE PHILIPPINES IN THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS (1951-1981)

*Remo Bati**

Introduction

In discussing the implantation of the Salesian charism in the Philippines, being a story-teller rather than a historian, reference must be made to my book on the Salesian pioneers in the Philippines.¹ It is, however, not a strictly scientific or systematic history of the origin of the Salesian Congregation in the Philippines, rather a *compilation of interviews* consisting of personal impressions, memoirs and experiences of individuals who had known, lived with and loved our Salesian pioneers. As such it would fall into the category of what is known as “oral history”. The book is based on the testimony of a total of 150 interviewees.

The scope of my work was to remember our founding fathers and to help preserve their legacy by keeping a record of the Salesian charism transmitted by the pioneers to our Filipinos, so that it may serve as one of our constant references for a “return to Don Bosco.”

The book revolves around the great figure of Don Bosco and his famous dream of the Ten Diamonds in 1881. The book contains principally the testimonies of people who shared from their own personal experiences how those pioneers “caught” the meaning of the dream, projected it so magnificently in their lives and “passed on the brilliance of Don Bosco’s charism and spirit” to their successors and to the younger generation of Filipino youth. That is why the book is entitled “*Passing on his Brilliance*”.

* Salesian, is Rector and Parish Priest of San Ildefonso, Makati, Manila.

¹ Remo Bati, *Passing on his Brilliance. Salesian Pioneers in the Philippines 1951-1963*, [Makati City, Don Bosco Press Inc. 2008].

Therefore the present paper is a blending of (a) historical events, based mostly on the books written by our two Filipino Salesian historians, Fr Nestor Impelido and Fr Gregorio Bicomong on the origin of the Salesian work in the Philippines, and (b) oral history, based on personal testimonies of confreres, members of the Salesian family and people who had been in contact with the pioneers right from the very beginning when they started their mission in the Philippines in 1951, among them also the present author, who was then 13 year of age and old enough to remember.

1. **Origin of the Salesian Work in the Philippines**

It was a common belief that Salesian pioneers came to the Philippines in 1951 only by force of circumstances. These foreign missionaries were expelled from China and were believed to have found the Philippines as the nearest destination to continue their work for the young. However, recent documented historical research done by our confrere Fr Gregorio Bicomong proved otherwise. It took sixty long years from the first request for the Salesians in 1891² to their arrival in the Philippines in 1951. Divine Providence had it already in its plan throughout the years of preparation and dedicated labour of the congregation before the seed of Salesianity was actually implanted on Philippine soil.

Fr Nestor Impelido, another historian, who also made an in-depth study on the beginnings of the Salesian mission in the Philippines, has corroborated these data. It is nonetheless true that the majority of Salesians who were pioneers in this country were former foreign missionaries from China who were expelled by the communists. Their expulsion was an overriding factor for the arrival of the Salesians to the Philippines.³ It is a fact that the China Province has contributed

² Cf. Gregorio BICOMONG, *The Arrival of Don Bosco in the Philippines (1891-1951)*, Makati City, Don Bosco Press Inc. 2001, pp.1-11.

³ Cf. Nestor IMPELIDO, *Salesians in the Philippines (1949-1963): Historical Notes*, in Nestor C. IMPELIDO (ed.), *The Beginning of the Salesian Presence in East Asia*. Vol. I. (= ACSSA - Varia, 2). Hong Kong, [no publisher] 2006, pp. 139-163.

much to the establishment of Salesian work in the Philippines. For seven years the Philippines were, as a Delegation, in direct dependence on China Province based in Hong Kong. The “Chinese experience” was something that the first Salesians brought with them to the country.

2. Challenges and Corresponding Answers

2.1. *Socio-Political Situation*

The Salesians came to the Philippines in a post-war era. The country was still in the process of recovery after the devastation caused by the Second World War. At the same time the Philippines were striving little by little to keep in tune with the growing industrialization in the Asian region as well as in the whole world. The Philippines needed much help from outside, from any sector that could meet the demands for workers and technicians in the industrialized field.⁴

The Salesians, majority of them from the industrialized West, were challenged to make the Filipino young “industrially capable”. In response to the prevalent need of the country, the Salesians concentrated on putting up schools. The Salesian Society and its members were, in fact, known to be teachers and educators of the young, following the charism of their Father and Teacher, Don Bosco. They were good in “running” schools, particularly technical schools. This was a benchmark of theirs in China. Their schools offering courses in mechanics, electricals, electro-mechanics answered the call of the times for the nation to be industrially equipped. Further, tailoring, shoemaking and carpentry courses provided the necessary training for the young to find some employment, thus providing them the means of livelihood, particularly for the low income families and the poor Filipino youth.

In fact, the Salesian technical schools in Victorias (1952), followed by Mandaluyong (1953), Makati and Cebu (1954) were considered to be the best technical high schools in the Philippines, not

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

only because of their very well equipped workshops and laboratories but also on account of very well qualified and hard working Salesian lay brothers, who imparted their expertise in their own field of work. Their response to the needs of the time was highly appreciated and publicly recognized by government and Church authorities.

Many witnesses, among them myself, testify to the dedication, expertise and typical Salesian traits of our pioneering lay brothers, such as assistance, cheerfulness, religiosity, simple lifestyle and modesty. Among those frequently mentioned in my interviews as exemplifying those attributes were: Bro. Andrew Bragion in the Machine Shop, Bro. Mario Rossi in the Electrical Shop, Bro. Thomas Orsolin and Bro. John de Reggi in the Carpentry Shop, Bro. Rafael Mrzel and Bro. Lorenzo Nardin in the Tailoring Shop, Bro. Salvatore Massi and Bro. Romildo Gamba in the Shoemaking Shop. Their presence made history. Men of their caliber seem to be getting very scarce nowadays. Witnesses are full of praise for them.⁵

2.2. *Educational Situation*

At the time of the arrival of the Salesians the Philippines were prevalently agricultural with some accent on mechanization. There was still much to be done then, with regards to the situation of education in the country. Quality education was still in the hands of the private sector, dominated by religious orders, whose schools were still the more prominent and sought after ones. Obviously, only the economically affluent or stable were capable of studying in such exclusive schools.⁶

In response to this educational situation, the Salesians provided good education for the economically capable as well as those financially deprived and unable. Their opening technical schools was very timely and in harmony with the government's ideal of meeting the current

⁵ Cf. R. BATI, *Passing on his Brilliance...*, pp.189-223.

⁶ Agoncillo GUERRERO, *History of the Filipino People*, Manila, Manila Press 1950, pp. 555-558.

need for technical education and the training of skilled craftsmen. It was also an answer to the Philippine Church's call on behalf of deprived and economically emarginated youth, in terms of education and future.

The pioneering Salesians, faithful to Don Bosco's charism and having brought the newness of technical education to the Filipino youth, particularly to the poor, contributed another novelty by opening oratories or youth centers, some of which were festive and some daily. It was always high on the agenda after that of the school, for every foundation they started. The schools were also available for Oratory apostolate on weekends. Among the many activities in these youth centers, the young were given wholesome sports and religious instruction.⁷ It had become one of the distinguishing marks of a Salesian school.

Quite a good number of us Filipino Salesians of the "first hour" were members of a Youth Center before being attracted to enter the seminary by their idolized Salesians. It was really something new for the Filipino youth to see for the first time men wearing cassocks playing football, joking, telling a lot of stories about Don Bosco, happily mixing with everyone, particularly with the poor. They loved what we, the young people at that time loved; so we could not help loving them in return. It was only later on that we discovered that it was Don Bosco's secret way to attract the young to follow him. It was a revelation for us! During my interviews Salesians like Fr Charles Braga, Fr Luigi Ferrari, Fr John Clifford, Fr Maurillo Candusso, Fr Jose Bosch, Fr John Righetti, Bro. Nicholas Tambascia, Bro. Rafael Mrzel, Bro. John de Reggi were among those most remembered as the life and animators of the oratories or youth centers. How much good was done and how many vocations were fished out in that big net called the Oratory, where prayer and games were blended in an atmosphere of the family. Sad to say, we have lost much of it at present.

⁷ Nestor C. IMPELIDO, *Salesians in the Philippines. Establishment and Development from Delegation to Province (1951-1963)*. (= Istituto Storico Salesiano – Studi, 24). Roma, LAS 2007, p. 239.

2.3. *Ecclesiastical Situation*

One of the realities confronted by the religious orders at the time of the arrival of the Salesians was the religious pluralism and aberrations which resulted with the coming of the Americans at the beginning of the 20th century. With the Americans came Protestantism with its various ramifications and variations. Among the local religious sects were the Aglipayans and the “Iglesia ni Kristo”, which were more diffused and more active in the work of proselytism.

The Salesians, inspired by Don Bosco’s example as a catechist of the young since his tender years, gave utmost importance to the teaching of catechism in their schools, oratories or youth centers to protect the young from being proselytized by other religions around. The sacramental and Marian devotions of Don Bosco were deeply inculcated into the minds and hearts of the young “Bosconians” so as to make of these devotions a way of life rather than mere pious practices – another typical Salesian characteristic!

In fairness to all our Salesian pioneers both dead and those still alive, it must be said that most of them were zealous catechists both in the classrooms and in youth centers, untiring confessors and great Eucharistic and Marian devotees, real men of deep interior life, whereby the glow of the Ten Diamonds could really be felt in their daily encounter with the young. Among the 150 people interviewed the names of Fr Peter Garbero and Fr John Benna excelled as catechists – men who were on fire to talk of our Christian faith in season and out of season. Fr Peter, for example, despite his old age, tried to learn Filipino and Ilonggo dialects in order to catechize the young wherever he met them, whether on the playground, on beaches, in schools, in youth centers or anywhere else.

Among those considered to be “martyrs of confession” – for they loved to hear confessions even for hours and hours – were Fr Maurillo Candusso, Fr Jose Bosch, Fr John Rizzato, Fr Peter Garbero, Fr George Schwarz and Fr Adolf Faroni (still living). As for Eucharistic and Marian devotion, Fr Charles Braga, Fr Luis Carreno,

Fr Rizzato, Fr Quaranta and Fr Godfrey Roozen were, with their words and examples, among the great propagators of these devotions.⁸

There had also been requests from various Bishops for the Salesians to take care of their parishes. In fact, already in the fourth year after their arrival (1955) the parish of San Ildefonso was entrusted to the Salesians, followed by Lourdes Parish in Cebu in 1957 and St. Joseph Parish in Victorias in 1979. Others followed soon. These parishes could easily be recognized as Salesian because of the priority given to the evangelization of the young and of their "preferential option for the poor". Some, though not parish priests, were indirectly involved in our parochial activities, especially for the poor.

The pioneering parish priests who were most cherished by their parishioners as their "Good Shepherd" with a typical Salesian heart were Fr Jose Bosch, Fr Godfrey Roozen, Fr John Rizzato and Fr John Benna (still living). Others, who were considered "champions of the poor" were Fr John Monchiero, Fr Maurillo Candusso and Fr Joseph Guarino.⁹

The reminiscences I have gathered about these Salesians are so edifying that one would almost be inclined to start the process of canonization of some of them like Fr Maurillo Candusso and Fr John Monchiero. That of Fr Charles Braga, as you well know, was launched last July at Sondrio, his native place in northern Italy.

When I had the occasion to hand over personally to the Rector Major at the Generalate a copy of the volume *Passing on his Brilliance*, browsing through it he remarked that the testimonies mentioned in the book about Fr Charles Braga could help much to know him better and serve as our contribution towards the process of his beatification/canonization.

⁸ R. BATI, *Passing on His Brilliance* ..., pp. 162-177.

⁹ R. BATI, *Passing on His Brilliance* ..., pp. 284-294.

3. Development and Expansion in the First Thirty Years

From 1930 up to 1952 the Provincial of the Mary Help of Christians Province of China was Fr Charles Braga. He was succeeded by Fr Mario Aquistapace (1952-1968). When the Philippines were canonically erected as a Vice-Province (*Visitatoria*) in 1958, Fr Charles Braga was sent by Fr Acquistapace as Provincial Delegate to the Philippines. In general, there was a good and close rapport between the pioneers and the Superiors in Turin. The latter would often be consulted for guidance and help.¹⁰

The first decade of their presence was a time of expansion with foundations taking place almost in rapid succession: Tarlac (1951), Victorias (1951), Mandaluyong (1953), Makati (1954), Cebu (1954), San Ildefonso (1955), Pampanga (1958), Tondo (1968), Paranaque (1972), Theologate (1974), Our Lady of Lourdes (1976), Santa Cruz (1978), St. John Bosco Parish (1976), Lawaan (1978).

This rapid expansion of the Salesian presence could be attributed to the extraordinary and daring zeal of Fr Charles Braga's leadership. Behind him were years of experience as missionary and as Provincial in China (23 years Superior in China and 7 years in the Philippines – a total of 30 years). It was during his Provincialship that the past pupils were initially organized in Tarlac, Mandaluyong and Victorias (1959-1960).

It was also during Fr Braga's term that the aspirantate was started in Mandaluyong (1954) and then transferred to Victorias for seven years (1955-1962). Later, Don Bosco Juniorate was opened in Pampanga to accommodate more aspirants (1962-1991). The Novitiate started in Mandaluyong (1955) also underwent several transfers: from Mandaluyong to Victorias (1955), then to Muntinlupa (1956-1961), afterwards to San Fernando (1962) and finally to Canlubang (1963).¹¹

When Fr Alfred Cogliandro assumed the Provincialship in October 1963, he concentrated more on consolidation and personnel

¹⁰ N.C. IMPELIDO, *Salesians in the Philippines ...*, pp. 31-39.

¹¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-126.

building. It was during his first year as Provincial that the Seminary College of Canlubang was opened (1963) through the initiative of another daring and ingenious Spanish missionary from India, Fr Jose Carreño. He stopped sending clerics to Hong Kong for philosophy and let them continue their philosophical and college studies in the Philippines instead.

Fr Alfred Cogliandro was succeeded by Fr Aloysius Ferrari (1969-1975). As Provincial, he made it a point that in every Salesian House there was an oratory or youth center. He insisted on Salesian assistance in the playground. The Salesian Cooperators and Volunteers of Don Bosco were organized. It was also during his term that the Manpower Training Program for the out of school youth was introduced in Tondo, from where it developed and expanded to almost all Salesian settings.

Fr Jose Carbonell from Alcoy, Spain, was the third Provincial (1975-1981). He continued the existing programs, guiding and strengthening the young and nurturing the Philippine Province with his words and example. He was an authentic Salesian, ever faithful to Don Bosco's spirit and charisma, to whom the confreres looked up, especially as an indefatigable worker.

4. Results

Within thirty years Don Bosco schools became so popular and so prestigious in the Philippines that civic and government authorities came to visit our humble schools and praise them through the media. The Department of Education and Culture exalted the Salesian schools along with few others in a national congress for schools "as the only ones which answer the needs of the nation". The Salesian lay brothers were mainly responsible for the technical schools for which the Salesians became well known. They were generally in charge of the shops of the schools, which through their expertise became technical and innovative.¹²

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-304.

Some alumni of the first hours, educated and formed by the Salesian pioneers, became outstanding servant-leaders in the field of business, politics, sports, art and media at the national level.¹³

Vocations to the Salesian life, both to the priesthood and to the brotherhood had flourished during those first thirty years, so much so that there were 48 Filipino priests, 15 lay brothers, 111 clerics and 24 novices – a total of 198. If we include the 59 foreigners, there were 257 confreres altogether in the Philippine Province at the end of 1981. The first missionary expedition of four Filipinos and 2 foreigners to Papua New Guinea took place in 1980.¹⁴

Conclusion

The Salesians' specific contribution to evangelization is Don Bosco's charismatic touch and spirit, clearly manifested in almost all Salesian settings, whether schools, oratories, youth centers, training centers or hostels. Many poor youth found jobs through technical training. Salesian parishes have a variety of social and charitable services for the "poorest of the poor" in the respective areas.

The implantation of the Salesian charism in the Philippines during the first thirty years was so obvious and so tangible that we attribute it most to our valiant and zealous Salesian pioneers, who lived the Salesian ideals and passed on to the next generation the rich Salesian heritage.

¹³ R. BATI, *Passing on his Brilliance ...*, pp. 350-363.

¹⁴ Cf. Charles MANLANGIT, *The Salesian Family Directory 1980-1981*, Makati City, Don Bosco Press 1981.