

# **THE OUR LADY OF THE PHILIPPINES (OLP) TRAPPIST ABBEY: ITS CONTRIBUTION TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Our Lady of the Philippines (OLP) Trappist Abbey was founded by the United States Region in 1972 and is the only men's monastery in the country located on the small island of Guimaras. A 75hectare land was donated by the then Senator and Ambassador to the USA, Don Oscar Ledesma through the then Archbishop of Jaro, Iloilo, Jaime Cardinal Sin for the establishment of a monastery to the six Trappist monks coming from the different monasteries with Filipino monk, Bro. Pedro Lazo. This study aimed to determine the contribution of the OLP Trappist Abbey to community development. Anchored on the grounded theory, observation and interview with the Trappist monk, personnel, and suppliers were made. The Trappist monks divided their contemplative life into religious(prayer) and work-life practices(hora et labora). The contribution of the Trappist Abbey to community development included accommodation and food servicing for guests to spend for prayer, meditation, and retreats, livelihood and employment generation involving agriculture, vegetable production, mango orchard, food manufacturing, including bakery products and marketing. Among others, the education system for the Aeta community was established, produced several professionals for employing part-time workers, and has become a tourist destination.

**Keywords:** monastery, monks, contemplative life, products, Guimaras, Philippines

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Study**

The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (also known as –Trappists|) is a Roman Catholic contemplative religious order, consisting of monasteries of monks and monasteries of nuns. (Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, Accessed, 6/4/2017). The order takes the name of –Trappists| from La Trappe Abbey or –La Grande Trappe| in Normandy, France, where it began as a reform movement in 1664, in reaction to the relaxation of practices in many Cistercian monasteries. The life of the Trappist monks is guided by the Rule of St. Benedict, written in the sixth century (Salvador, 2011).

Monks of this Cistercian Order live a life dedicated to the contemplative search for God. Very early men of great natural talent and of culture were attracted to seek God in these monasteries which radiated a spirit of simplicity, and where there was evident austerity, manual labor, and prayer characterized the Order at its most flourishing periods. The quality of many of its abbots and monks resulted in the rapid spread of its monasteries throughout Europe where they often played important roles in the spiritual and cultural lives of their regions (Our Lady of the Philippines Trappist Abbey, Accessed, May 12, 2017). Their increase has never ceased, and by the late 20th century there were abbeys worldwide (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed May 12, 2017) such as in Europe, North Central and South America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Asia.

The only men's monastery in the Philippines is run by the Cistercian Order of Strict Observance and was established in 1972. This place is always open to those who seek the solace and self-examination through meditation and retreat from taxing endeavors of the materialistic world (<https://www.vigattintourism.com>, accessed, May 15, 2017). The monastery is home to the Contemplative Trappist Catholic Christian Monks of the Philippines and a popular retreat house. It holds the distinction of being the only Trappist monastery in the country. To tourists, it is a popular destination because of its gift shop that sells what many consider as the best among Guimaras' products – aside from fresh mangoes, that is. These include mango-flavored otap, piaya, barquillos, pastry bars, etc. ([thoughtstalesandwhatnot.com](http://thoughtstalesandwhatnot.com), accessed May 15, 2017).

Strategically, the monastery situates itself on the small island of Guimaras which is considered one of the exotic islands in the Philippines and was once a sub-province of Iloilo, but by R.A. 7160 it was proclaimed a regular province on May 22, 1992. Guimaras is Southwest of Panay Island and Northwest of Negros Island in Western Visayas with a total land area of 60,465 hectares or 604.65 square kilometers. The island province of Guimaras is composed of five towns: Buenavista (36 barangays), Nueva Valencia (22 barangays), Jordan (14 barangays), San Lorenzo (12 barangays), and Sibunag (12 barangays) (<http://www.tourism.gov.ph>, May 15, 2017).

## **Objectives**

This study aimed to determine the contribution of the OLP Trappist Abbey in Guimaras to community development. Specifically, it sought to: (1) trace the foundation of the Trappist monastery in Guimaras; (2) Identify motivating factors that led to the entrepreneurial undertakings of the Trappist monks; and (3) determine its contribution to community development.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a descriptive research design. Anchored on the grounded theory, observation, interview with the Trappist monks, personnel, and suppliers and study of written documents were done. Accordingly, grounded theory takes a case rather than variable perspective, although the distinction is nearly impossible to draw. This means in part that the researcher takes different cases to be wholes, in which the variables interact as a unit to produce certain outcomes. As introduced by Glaser & Strauss in 1967, this is to legitimize qualitative research. (<http://www.statisticshowto.com>. Accessed May 15, 2017)

Shared experiences of the respondents including data taken from written documents were jotted down, grouped and coded to come up with abstract categories. These were organized and documented following the objectives of the study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Foundation of the Trappist monastery in Guimaras**

The primary role of Cistercian life is to seek union with God and to witness to His holiness and His desire for the salvation and sanctification of all persons and to unite all people in their adherence to Him through their faith in Christ and his Catholic Church. The means of fulfilling this role in the world and the Church is primarily by prayer, both public and private ([www.ourladyofnewmelleray.com](http://www.ourladyofnewmelleray.com), May 5, 2017). Accordingly, the Trappist Abbey in Guimaras began when sometime in 1970 to 1971 six (6) monks from different monasteries came to the Philippines in search of a place where they could establish a monastery. The former Archbishop of Jaro, Iloilo, named Jaime Cardinal Sin contacted Don Oscar Ledesma the former Senator and US Ambassador, and upon knowing their very purpose of coming, that was to find a place open to those who seek the solace and self-examination through meditation and retreat from the taxing endeavors of the materialistic world. He thought of Guimaras as the best place for them, donated his 75-hectare land in Barangay San Miguel, Jordan, Guimaras.

That was in 1972 when the Trappist monastery started in Guimaras island composed of the six monks with Brother Pedro Lazo, the only Filipino monk at that time. The Trappist Monastery ground is a peaceful and sacred enclave in Guimaras run by the Monks of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance. These Monks follow the rule of St. Benedict and are best known for the extreme austerity or strictness that characterizes their discipline. They follow the rule of life which emphasizes community life lived under a superior known as the Abbot. It was in the 1980s when Trappist Monastery had its first Abbot, named Father Joseph Chu-Cong, a Vietnamese monk from the St. Joseph Abbey. The Abbot governs not in his name but as a representative of Christ so that it is his task to discern the will of the Father in all things, after the example of Jesus in his life and death on earth. At present, there are 23 monks including the Abbot, Father Gerard N. Ingusan.

### **Motivating factors that led to the entrepreneurial undertakings of the Trappist monks**

Within the Trappist monastery grounds, a larger church was built and a modern guest house way back in 1997 for a weekend or some days or even weeks to be with the monks in prayer and meditation, joining in prayer at the office and mass along with the monastic community.

For the monks to be free to dedicate themselves more fully to prayer, holy reading and study, they are to labor with their own hands as well as to administer the monastery buildings and the grounds. Daily routine lives of the Trappist monks only focused on prayer and work or what they call, "Hora et labora." Such that, a morning prayer or –lauds| at 5:30 in the morning, at exactly 6:00 o'clock a mass is held and which could be attended by the community people. Productive work starts at 7:30 until 11:00 in the morning, where monks perform their respective assignments at the monastery. At 11:30, all monks gathered together at the Trappist church for a sext prayer and at 11:45, lunch break and short siesta until 1:45 in the afternoon where they have gathered again at the church for a 15-minute prayer. "Hora et labora" in the afternoon is from 2:00-4:00. By 5:00 p.m. they gathered again at the church for a vesper or –sunset prayer," then each works in silence until 5:45 for supper, after which, a private prayer until 6:45 in the evening for a complaint or "evening prayer. The monks end the day at 7:00 pm, and they go to sleep individually in their respective rooms.

Working hours of the Trappist monks were from 7:45 to 11:00 in the morning and from 1:45 to 4:00 in the afternoon, while that of the workers are from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon and from 1:00-5:00. Their livelihood involves agriculture, growing vegetables for their own and guests' consumption, mango orchard, processing plant for mango, pineapple, guava fruit into jelly, jam, juice, dried, piaya, cookies, among others.

Native guavas grew abundantly in Guimaras, and the monks thought of producing guava jelly as the first product, hence started to experiment way back in 1981. However, the procedure did not run that smooth for them because processing was done manually. The production went along, not in the demand of the customers nor of the Monks, but rather, in the demand of fate that the monastery could start helping the Aetas as well as the poor people of the community.

In fact, Bro. Peter Patiño, in 1983, started to experiment the production of cashew since the raw material of this only cost at P3.00 per kilo from the Aetas and for which their income had been enough to buy their food, clothing, utensils, and other basic needs at home. At that time until early 2000, Bro. Peter was assigned to take charge of the food manufacturing of the monastery. For almost two decades (1984-2004), Bro. Peter continued to experiment of producing other products. Religious institutions like the Sagrado Corazon de Jesus and St Pauls in Iloilo City patronized the Trappist products because of the very objectives of helping the poor especially the Aeta community. From then on, in 1990s Trappist monks started to expand their market in Manila like guava jelly, guava jam, calamansi marmalade, among others, and later on, they started to produce bakery products.

In 2003, food products at the Food Manufacturing (FM) building were processed using automatic machines and equipment with funding assistance coming from the European monastery. From then on, workers increased from 2 to 4 and later on 40 to 45 male workers including maintenance workers. Some of the workers hired were high school students on a part-time basis, aside from the out-of-school youth and adult men workers. Other female workers were assigned to the office and the gift shop. For six months, they were on contract, after that, they were hired as regular workers while others remained as contractual, especially those working on part-time jobs. Following the labor law, workers were from ages 18 years old and older, mostly TESDA trained and were paid P300.00 daily. They were also given uniforms, benefits, and insurances for security purposes.

Also, every 25th of December the Trappist monks celebrate foundation day what they call "Religious Enterprise," where sumptuous meal is served, relief goods (groceries and clothing) including medicines are given. Indeed, the Rule of St. Benedict calls Monks to manual labor as an essential part of the monastic experience –*hora et labora*||- to pray is to work is a principle that the new Monks quickly learn at Mepkin.

### **Contribution to Community Development.**

Trappist Monastery in Guimaras contributes a lot not only to community development but also to every Guimaras in particular, especially those whose very lives have been touched by the Trappist monks either through prayers or in communion with them. Also, those who have been employed at the monastery, as well as, those who in one way or the other had been part of the existence of the OLP Trappist Abbey in Guimaras Island.

During the late 1990s, the Trappist Abbey had initiated the Contemplative Outreach Project (COP) for the poor and to continue helping the Aeta community, constructed a school building at the –Kati-Katil| where the natives or the Aeta families in Jordan are living. Qualified teachers were hired to teach in the elementary and later on in high school. Other livelihood projects initiated, included the coconut shell craft and water refilling station.

They established not only an institution for education but also hope for the native community, to be partakers of the development in the educational system, and that had changed their aspirations in life. The Trappist Monastery also provides benefits for their workers by making sure that all of them received equal benefits including free medicines, food, uniforms and accommodation facilities especially for outside Guimaras personnel. Relief goods such as food, clothing, and medicines are made available for the families of the workers and other people of the community. This way, they can pay back the blessings that the Lord God Almighty hath provided to the monastery.

The Trappist monastery has become one of the tourist destinations and is included in the tourism circuit of the province of Guimaras. Visits to Guimaras Island by tourists either local or foreign would not be complete without dropping by at the Trappist monastery church for solemn prayer and moment with the Lord and at the Trappist gift shop for souvenir items and Trappist made food products, also, a blessing for safe travel from the Trappist monks. In terms of higher education from 1985, there were a total of 44 male part-time workers who graduated from different degrees and are successfully reaping the fruits of hard work as doctors, seamen, elementary, educators, engineers, nurses, medical technologists, police officers, among others.

## **CONCLUSION**

The OLP Trappist Abbey in Guimaras, being the only monastery in the Philippines leads Guimaras to be one of the tourist destinations in the country. So with the influx of tourists and guests every year, the demand for the supply of goods and services also increases of which the Trappist monastery had been a part of making Guimaras take its pride and be known in the country and to the whole world.

Success always starts from a small and simple endeavor of "hora et labora," and, through faith, perseverance and hard work, for the OLP Trappist Abbey, greater heights and economic impact are achieved. Thus, sustained collaboration between and among stakeholders especially the Local Government Units, and other institutions, the community people and the Trappist monks including its management has to be considered, but not to neglect the main objective why the OLP Trappist Abbey was founded in Guimaras island that is to find solace in union with the Lord and in communion with the community.

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