

TRAPPIST MONASTERY (ABBEY OF NORMANDY): THEIR JOURNEY IN GUIMARAS

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ABSTRACT Cistercian monasticism is a form of Benedictine monastic life based on the Rule of St. Benedict as interpreted by the twelfth-century monks in Citeaux, France. The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance is a Roman Catholic contemplative religious order and takes the name of "Trappist" from La Trappe Abbey or "La Grande Trappe" in Normandy, France, where it began as a reform movement in 1664. The Our Lady of the Philippines 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, separated from Panay and Negros islands. A 75-hectare land was donated formerly owned by the then Senator and Ambassador to the USA, Don Oscar Ledesma through the Archbishop of Jaro, Iloilo, Jaime Cardinal Sin for the establishment of a monastery to the six foreign monks from different monasteries and a Filipino monk, Bro. Pedro Lazo. In the 1980's the first Abbot was Father Joseph Chu-Cong, a Vietnamese monk from the St. Joseph Abbey. Three priests and 23 monks composed the Trappist monastery at present. The Trappist monks divided their contemplative life into religious and work-life practices between prayer and work "Ora et labora". Prayer focuses on the Divine Office, Lectio Divina and various other forms of meditative and contemplative prayers. Productive work assignments are scheduled and mostly done manually. The burial tradition is a one day wake and inclusion in seven times prayer a day, in white cowl cloth, and covered with a white blanket then placed on a hand-made bamboo or wood on the top, and wrapped in the quilt's embrace before lowering into the grave. The contribution of the Trappist monastery to community development included accommodation of guests to spend for prayer, meditation, and retreats, livelihood, and employment generation involving agriculture, vegetable production, mango orchard, food manufacturing, and others.

Keywords: Monastery, monks, abbey, Guimaras, Philippines

Objectives of the Study

This paper seeks to present the journey of the Cistercian Order to Our Lady of the Philippines (OLP). It specifically, 1) traces the humble beginning of the Trappist Monastery in Guimaras; 2) describes the religious and work life practices of the Trappist monks; and 3) assesses its contribution to community development.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the 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 (Glen, 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. Photo documentations were taken and presented as part of the findings of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Humble Beginning and today of the OLP-Trappist Abbey

The Philippines is one of the world's largest archipelago nations. It is situated in Southeast Asia in the Western Pacific Ocean. Its islands are classified into three main geographical areas- Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. The Philippine country was known as one Christian country in the whole world.

The monastery is strategically located 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 virtue of R.A. 7160, it was proclaimed a regular province on May 22, 1992. Guimaras is located 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).



Fig.1. Home of the Contemplative Trappist Catholic Christian Monks of the Philippines.

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 in the Church is primarily by prayer, both public and private.

Accordingly, the Trappist Abbey in Guimaras began 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 then 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 taxing endeavours of the materialistic world. He thought of Guimaras as the best place and donated his 75-hectare land in Barangay San Miguel, Jordan, Guimaras.

In 1972, the Trappist Monastery was started in Guimaras Island composed of the six monks and 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.



Fig 2. Photo of the six monks with Brother Pedro Lazo in 1972

They follow the rule of life, which emphasizes community life lived under a superior known as the Abbot. In the 1980s, Trappist Monastery had its first Abbot, named Father Joseph Chu-Cong, a Vietnamese monk from St. Joseph Abbey. The abbot governs not in his own 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.



Fig. 3. Father Joseph Chu-Cong, the first Vietnamese abbot of the monastery in 1980.

By early 2000, there were a total of 33 monks at the Trappist monastery. Most of them were Filipino of varied professions coming from different parts of the country because of the calling to serve the Lord.



Fig. 5. Trappist Monks in early 2000.

However, after the death of the last foreign monk, the Abbey at present has three (3) Priests including the Abbot, Father Gerard N. Ingusan and the twenty three (23) monks.

Trappist monks strive to "prefer nothing to Christ." They follow a lifestyle marked by simplicity and prayer. They treated death as a natural part of life. They do not hide what happens to the body at death or interfere with the natural process of returning it to the earth. They took care of their dead following their burial tradition of a one-day wake and inclusion in seven times prayer a day. The remain is dressed in white cowl cloth, placed on a hand-made bamboo or wooden open casket and laid down inside the Trappist church within the day. Their family, relatives, friends and other people in the community attend in vigil and prayer. Before the 24th hour, a mass is offered then the body is wrapped with a white blanket before lowering into the grave.



Fig. 6. The Burial Practices of the Trappist Monks in Guimaras.

On the other end, Guimaras has its share of amazing destinations where people can renew their faith or devote themselves to prayer. What is unique, is that, the Our Lady of the Philippines Trappist Abbey, is a place where one can catch a glimpse and perhaps experience how to live simply and humbly, with God and nature in mind.

Within the Trappist monastery grounds, a larger church was built and a modern guest house way back in 1997 for 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.

In order for the monks to be free to dedicate themselves more fully to prayer, holy reading and study, they are to labour with their own hands as well to administer the monastery buildings and the grounds. Daily routine lives of the Trappist monks are only focused on prayer and work or what they call "Ora et labora." Such as that, a morning prayer or "laudes" at 5:30 in the morning, at exactly 6:00 o'clock a mass is being held and 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 AM, all monks gathered together at the Trappist church for a "sexta" prayer at 11:45 AM, lunch break and short siesta until 1:45 PM in the afternoon where they were gathered again at the church for a 15 minute prayer. Ora et labora in the afternoon is from 2:00 PM-4:00 PM, and by 5:00 PM they were again gathered at the church for a "visper" or "sunset prayer," then each works in silence until 5:45 PM for supper, after which, a private prayer until 6:45 in the evening for a compline or "evening prayer. The monks end the day at 7:00 PM, and they go to sleep individually in their respective rooms.



Fig. 7 Trappist Monastery grounds.

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 in the afternoon. Their livelihood involves agriculture, growing vegetables for their own and guests' consumption, mango orchard, processing plant for mango, pineapple, and guava fruits into jelly, jam, juice, dried, piaya, cookies and others. Monks, but rather, in the demand of fate that the monastery could start helping the Aetas, who were the first suppliers of native guava, as well as the poor people in the community. Even up to the present, Aetas and other micro entrepreneurs continue to supply their products to the Trappist gift shop for other products not produced by the Trappist monks. All products are displayed in their gift shop at Guimaras Trade and Information Center (GTIC) Pasalubong Center. Any guest or one can write a petition/intention and drop it in the box located at the entrance of the church. Religious items purchased may be blessed by the monks upon request. The monks earn a living by selling their products. The income of the gift shop has never been trimmed into Two Hundred Thousand (Php 200,000.00) to Three Hundred Thousand (Php 300,000.00) Pesos weekly. Lastly the Monks are very proud to say that the sales of their products today are impressive. They could earn higher than Ninety five thousand pesos (Php 95, 000.00) per month for the stores which they had agreed for consignment located at the Central Market of Alibhon in San Miguel, Jordan.



Fig. 8. The rice fields

In fact, Bro. Peter Patiño, in 1983, started to experiment the production of cashew since the raw material of this only costed at P3.00 per kilo from the Aetas of 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 1990's 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.



Fig. 9. Production of Cashew of the Trappist Monastery in 1993.

In 2003, food products at the FM building were produced using automatic machines and equipment with a 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 part-time basis, aside from the out-of-school youth and adult men workers. Other female workers were assigned at the office and at the gift shop. For six month they were on contract, thereafter, they were hired as regular workers while

others remained on contractual basis, especially those working on part time basis. Following the labor law, workers were from ages 18 years old and older, mostly TESDA trained and were paid P 300.00 daily. They were also given uniforms, benefits and insurances for security purposes. In addition, every 25th of December the Trappist monks celebrate foundation day what they call "Religious Enterprise", sumptuous meal is served, relief goods (groceries and clothing) including medicines were given.



Fig. 10. Workers of the Trappist Monastery.

Indeed, the Rule of St. Benedict calls Monks to manual labor as an essential part of the monastic experience "Ora 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 Guimarasnon in particular, especially those whose very lives have been touched by the Trappist monks either through prayers or in communion with them and 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 1990's, 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-Kati" 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 a hope for the native community, to be part-takers of the development in the educational system, and that had changed their aspirations in life.



Fig. 11. Immaculate Heart of Mary Academy of Guimaras, INC.

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. In addition, 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.

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 a safe travel from the Trappist monks. Being the only Trappist monastery in the country, it leads Guimaras to be one of the tourist destinations in the country. With the influx of tourists and guests in Guimaras 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 to take its pride and be known in the country and to the whole world.



Fig. 12. The Trappist Monastery Church in Guimaras Island.

Success always starts from a small and simple endeavors of "Ora et labora", and, though faith, perseverance and hard work, for the OLP Trappist Monastery, greater heights and economic impact is achieved

CONCLUSION

The Our Lady of the Philippines 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, separated from Panay and Negros islands. In the 1980's the first Abbot was Father Joseph Chu-Cong, a Vietnamese monk from the St. Joseph Abbey. Three priests and 23 monks composed the Trappist monastery at present. The Trappist monks divided their contemplative life into religious and work-life practices between prayer and work "Ora et labora". The contribution of the Trappist monastery to community development included accommodation of guests to spend for prayer, meditation, and retreats, livelihood and employment generation involving agriculture, vegetable production, mango orchard, food manufacturing and others. Moreover, 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.

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