



The Rise of Christianity in Guimaras Island, Philippines

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ABSTRACT The rise of Christianization in Guimaras happened simultaneously with the different islands in the Philippine archipelago. This research uses historical approach utilizing primary data, i.e., one on one in-depth interview among elders of the municipality as key informants to established validity of the secondary data gathered. Findings showed that the Christianization of the island was brought first by the Augustinian Friars followed by the Jesuits. The Augustinians influenced their expression of faith until the Jesuits took control of the island. A controversy between these two groups of missionaries broke out and there was a time that only a few faithful remained due to lack of priests to guide them who eventually affiliated themselves in several religious sects that established churches in the province. The spread of Christianity in the island goes hand in hand with the establishments of the municipalities in the Province.

Keywords: Christianity, Guimaras, Augustinians, Jesuit

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

Guimaras is an island province in the Philippines located in the region of Western Visayas. Among the smallest provinces, its capital is Jordan. The province is situated in the Panay Gulf, between the islands of Panay and Negros.

About 1581, Gonzalo Ronquillo de Peñalosa, Spanish governor and Captain-General of the Philippine Islands, established a settlement in Guimaras for the purpose of the Christianising the island's natives. He and his subordinates organized the *publicitos* or villages of Nayup under the patronage of Saint Peter the Apostle, and Igang with Saint Anne as patroness.

Evangelization of Guimaras occurred around the same time the friars were making inroads in Panay. The Augustinians established the *visitas* (chapelries) of Nayup and Igang as subordinate to Oton, Iloilo. Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas, the 7th Spanish Governor-General, noted in a 20 June 1591 report to King Philip II that the friars of Oton made regular visits to the island.

In 1742, the island came under the jurisdiction of Dumangas – now known as Iloilo, until 1751 when the Augustinian Order was replaced by the Jesuits, after which the Dominican order took over Guimaras. The Jesuits, who had established a school in Iloilo and had missions in Molo and Arevalo, took charge of the island. By 1755, it was organized into a regular parish. When the population increased considerably, the island was given its municipal status with a seat of government at Tilad (today Buenavista).

The Christian faith in the island cannot be separated from its historical and political beginnings. Knowing how the different Christian Religion rise into being in the island needs thorough study so that many of the younger generations may have the ideas on how their respective religions came in the island of Guimaras.

Objective of the Study

This research work aimed to determine how the different Christian Religions began their journey in the island of Guimaras, Philippines.

The Growth of the Catholic Parishes of Buenavista, Guimaras

Since the establishment of the government in Buenavista, Catholicism was also considered as its first religion. The political government in the municipality existed hand-in-hand with the religious because during the Spanish period there was no separation between the church and the state.



Looking back into the history of Buenavista, the old Roman Catholic Church was founded in Navalas and was followed by the construction of the Old Poblacion Church in Old Poblacion, Buenavista in 1844.

a. The Parish of St. Isidore in Navalas, Buenavista

Fr. Juan Fernandez, in his "Apuntes Historicos de la Isla de Panay" wrote a brief descriptive account or background of Guimaras and its topography. This account is also contained in the Archivo Historico Hispano Agustino y Boletin Oficial". Fr. Fernandez wrote that since the early days of evangelization of the island of Panay, small villages were formed in HIMAL-US (Guimaras). These consisted of Nayup with St. Peter the Apostle as Titular Head/Saint, Nabilhan, with St. John the Baptist as patron saint and Igang with St. Anne as patron saint. These small villages were included in the pastoral visits of "Ogtong (Oton) until the 18th century when they were annexed to Irong-Irong (Iloilo).

In years (1772 to 1778) Fr. Benito Lamas and Fr. Diego Maza (1731) were mentioned by Fr. Juan Fernandez as the two Augustinian priests who served the church in Guimaras. In 1742 Guimaras was placed under the jurisdiction of Dumangas until 1751 when the Augustinian ceded it to the Jesuits. In 1768, the Dominican took over until 1775 when it was formed into a parish with Iloilo. In 1776, the religious had departed from all villages for reason that the Bishop of Cebu had no secular priest capable of replacing the Jesuits who are administering the island of Negros and the province of Iloilo. Subsequently, the Dominican religious begun to administer in the villages of Iloilo, Himaras, Mandurriao, and Molog in the island of Panay. The bishop of Cebu undertook the transfer of their administration to the secular priest. When the Island had a minister of its own, the three settlements (namely: Nayup, Nabilhan, and Igang) formed themselves into one parish. In 1854, the town became independent as it was formed by the ministers into two parishes: Buenavista with 5,007 inhabitants and Nagaba with 5,964 inhabitants. Buenavista's coast is full of coral reefs, sandy, and battered by waves especially in the part which is embraced by the visita of Navalas.

Furthermore, according to de la Cavada Mendez, the Muslims "Sali and Silungan, leaders of the expedition against Panay, combined their forces at 1,600 until they reached 6,000 strong and throw their strength against the island of Panay. They stated that the neighboring island of Guimaras became the Muslim refugee after the forces of Arevalo Mayor Juan Garcia Sierra succeeded in driving the Muslims from the island of Panay. Old folks (now deceased), recall that a temporary church preceded the present site of the coral belfry and the ancient acacia trees. It was mentioned that a former priest of the church was captured and enslaved by the Moro (Muslims) raiders. As a punishment hot rice gruel was poured over his palm before he was carried away to Mindanao. Most of his church members/followers fled from the Muslim pirates to the nearby Mt. Kasarig which could be viewed on the Western part of the present church site. It is a sad recollection among the old folks, that the desertion of the faithful of the church in his hour of need, the priest reportedly cursed the incident and struck his hand on the wall of the church which is said to have left its mark.

A Muslim pirate named Dallan Bakang made Guimaras his base and made a habit to invade Dumangas every Friday. In 1763, a courageous woman named Petra or Pitay engaged the Muslim pirate in battle and won, forcing the survivors to sail back to Guimaras. Dallan Bakang and his pirates raided the town again but were defeated. In 1825, the Muslim raided the town again and failed and there were no more attempts made since then.

Built as early as 17th century, the Navalas Church was made of wooden materials with nipa shingles as roofing where Catholics gathered during Sundays to attend the Holy Mass and a weeklong Holy Week celebration bringing with them sufficient provisions especially for those faithful coming from distant barangays. One of the proofs that the Navalas Church was built as early as the 17th century was the inscription "El Fundador/ Para Mayor honor y Gloria de Dios edifice/ a su cota Don Miguel Jayme el Nuevo de Julio del año 1880 y termino en 1885". The other physical evidence is the bell which was kept at the archbishop palace for safekeeping bears the following inscription: "D Miguel Jayme/ Nueva Descubierta/ 1882" (New Discovery). The third physical evidence is the appearance of the front wall made of coral rocks which is a testimonial of the age of the church.

The permanent Catholic church of Navalas was constructed sometime during the year 1880 – 1885 under the guidance of Miguel Jayme, a prosperous merchant of Navalas at that time for the great honor and glory of God. The present church was constructed by the village people through "bayanihan" system. Miguel Jayme and his wife Agapita Javelona was the prime benefactor in the construction of the church. He was also the one who chose the patron saint of the church who is St. Isidore the Worker.



According to some stories, the church called its faithful through a bell reportedly made of silver and gold alloy with a diameter of one meter long. This bell rang so loud and clear that it can be heard in far-flung barangays which signaled them to attend to their religious duties. The bell was used to warn the inhabitants of the approaching pirates such that they made every effort to take away the bell. The bell that served its purpose for the faithful to listen to the word of God and as a warning for the coming of the enemies was forcibly grabbed by the Muslim pirates sailing for Mindanao. Since it was too heavy and inconvenient for them, they threw the bell to the sea, near the vicinity of seven islands (Islas Siete de Pecados).

b. The Most Holy Name of Jesus and Holy Rosary Parish, Buenavista, Guimaras

The church in Buenavista was established in 1854 when the town was established in Old Poblacion. The ruins of the church can still be seen in the place just adjacent to the Old Poblacion Elementary School. However, the church was damaged during the revolution of the Filipinos against the Spanish rule and subsequently during the Second World War.

Catholicism in Buenavista, except for the parish of Navalas, had its dark period. Buenavista was without a parish priest for quite a long period of time. No records were available as to the exact period for other religious sects to preach their doctrine and to cater to the spiritual needs of the populace. There came a time when only a small percentage of the population remained in the Catholic faith, a great majority satisfied their spiritual hunger through other means of worship prevailing at that time.

The property of the Roman Catholic Church was recorded in a survey of 1928 which reflected two parcels of land. On one of these lots stood the Spanish era church and the other lot was the Old Catholic cemetery.

It was sometime in the 1940s when Rev. Ireneo Jontillano was assigned in Buenavista. He had no parish church then because the old church at the old Poblacion was too big to be repaired by a handful of Catholic parishioners. What remained was no longer complete and no longer fit to be called the house of the Lord. Before and during World War II the seat of the parish was in Barangay Supang. A chapel made from local materials was built there but the parish priest had to live with his parishioners.

After the war, there was still no permanent place for worship. For a brief period in 1947, the Ortiz family of Sto. Rosario offered their place for a temporary chapel. This was located at the mountainside of the Ortiz residence. Catholic churchgoers at this time could be counted through the fingers. This was really a hard time for the priest. With very few parishioners who were left impoverished by the war, finances for church construction were difficult to put up.

In 1948, a church made from war-damaged materials was built on a lot at the back of the Sto. Rosario public market. This was big enough to accommodate churchgoers at that time and for the first time, the parish priest had his official residence. Later, this lot by which the church stood was sold by the owner and so there was a need again to look for another site on which to build a church.

During this time the Catholic populace of the town was at a dilemma. Barangay Sto. Rosario was fast becoming a commercial center and it seemed as if there was nowhere to build a church. Parish priests came and go. It was during Rev. Fr. Mansueto Calasara's time that a lot was donated on the top of a mountain. Through his able leadership and initiative, the first Catholic Church was built in 1967. This was realized with the efforts and assistance of the church leaders. Rev. Fr. Quirino Palma improved the rectory and made it livable.

c. Mclain Catholic Church (The Most Holy Name of Jesus Parish)

The Catholic Parish in Buenavista at present is composed of two churches, the Sto. Rosario Church in Sto. Rosario and the Most Holy Name of Jesus in Mclain. However, prior to the construction of the old church, the Catholics used as a chapel the shed of cattle and horses in Mclain owned by Atty. Juan Salvador, owner of the vast tracks of land in Mclain, Supang, and part of New Poblacion. This is where they hold holy masses attended by more or less five (5) to 10 churchgoers. The people did not mind that the church was a shed of cattle because they just wanted to form a community of believers. Sometimes in 1968-1969, Atty. Juan Salvador constructed a permanent building made of galvanized iron sheets, concrete, and wood. Durable benches were also made. The total land area where the church was constructed was 1,800 square meters found at Las Palmas Subdivision.



Sometime in 1987, the parish priest of Buenavista transferred his residence at Barangay McLain where Atty. Juan Salvador and his family constructed a church building. The image of the Risen Christ was requested by the family Salvador to be given colorful celebration during the feast day. As a manifestation of gratefulness of the people, the image was placed at the altar in Mclain church. This image was engraved by Mr. Juanito Castro.

In the same year, a kindergarten school was established under the direction of Fr. Rolando Haguisan and was continued by Fr. Rabindranath Catalan when Fr. Haguisan was transferred to other parishes in Panay. The school operated with the technical assistance provided by the then Dep. Ed. Supervisor Adoracion Alzate. The school provided Christian education to the children of Buenavista during their formative years which enabled them to excel during their elementary years. This was the forerunner school of now Sto. Niño Catholic School in Mclain.

SeventhDay Adventist

The pioneer work of the Seventh Day Adventist (A Protestant Religion) was started in Iloilo province in 1912 by Elder E. Adams who was succeeded by Pastor Fausto Jornada in 1914. The first Adventist church was also established about this time. This was followed by the formal organization of the West Visayan Mission with headquarters in La Paz, Iloilo City. Parochial education was started with the establishment of the West Visayan Academy situated in Guimaras, in 1928 – 1930, until it was transferred to its present location in Bongco, Pototan.

The church started with only three (3) members in 1912; in 1967, its members had reached 7,489. The Seventh Day Adventist headquarters in Iloilo City reported a yearly average baptism of 600 persons and a total annual collection from tithes was close to Php 200,000.00, directly obtained from the income of the individual members. The Adventists consistently ranked near the top of all church denominations in per capita contribution to the church.

East Valencia Fundamental Baptist Church

The oldest Baptist Church in Buenavista is found in East Valencia. It was founded in 1928 by Pastor Salvador Gaitano. The lot of the church was primarily donated by the family of Pastor Salvador Gaitano with the small portion donated by the Javellana Family. This church is under the Western Visayas Fellowship of Fundamental Baptist Churches (WVFFBC). At present, the church has no regular pastor instead there are visiting pastors coming from Doanne Baptist Church in Iloilo City.

The church offered the preschool program to the kids of East Valencia and the surrounding communities with Ms. Catalina Gabayeron as a program facilitator. There are more or less 35 pupils enrolled in the school.

Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI)

In the year 1904, in Sto. Rosario, Buenavista was popularly known as Gibuangan, Alejandro Damian saw an image along the seashore of the Virgin Mary holding a child. He was so happy and amazed in finding such image of the Virgin with the Child. Then he gave the image to Mr. Federico "Tiyo Ikong" Zaragosa known as the founder of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente in Buenavista, Guimaras.

Tiyo Ikong erected a chapel adjacent to the old market at the left of the road when going to Old Poblacion which already marked its 100 years of existence. Pedro Zaldivar (1904 – 1905), was the gobernadorcillo at that time. Tiyo Ikong financed the construction of the chapel. After nine (9) days of prayer (Novena) the first mass was held on October 23, 1904, with the first IFI Parish Priest Fr. Francisco Obsiana of Antique who celebrated the Holy Mass in honor of Sto. Rosario as Patron Saint. With the charisma and spiritual gift and experiences of some residents of the



place who grew up as Catholics and of Tiyo Ikong, they were able to influence and convert more than 50% of the Catholic faithful in Sto. Rosario to become their members.

The families of former gobernadorcillo Pablo Gabutin, Silverio, Consing, Timoteo, Dionecia Galecia and many others joined the IFI sect. With the spiritual knowledge of Fr. Francisco Obsiana, he was able to quench the spiritual hunger of the people for the word of God resulting in the rapid growth of the faithful. A church to accommodate a great number of worshippers was constructed in the lot donated by the Consing family. The first parish church was in old Poblacion close to the municipal hall which is more or less 100 meters away.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, one can be gleaned that Christianity on the island goes hand in hand with the establishment of the political government. Roman Catholic was the first Christian religion to be established, followed by the Aglipayanism, and the Protestant group.

The Catholic religion has suffered some set back after it has suffered from the hands of the Japanese invaders during second world war but despite this, it was able to circumvent all the odds and was able to regain its glory and the multitude believers today showed the strength of the Catholic faith.



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