

Recto's everlasting credit that he saw these contradictions earlier than his colleagues and that unlike the occasional nationalism of most of his contemporaries, his nationalism became a constant and growing ideal.

THE RIZAL LAW AND THE CATHOLIC HIERARCHY

Recto's next big fight was over the Rizal bill. Though this did not directly affect our colonial relations with America, his championship of this measure was an integral part of his nationalism. It was his belief that the reading of Rizal's novels would strengthen the Filipinism of the youth and foster patriotism.

Recto was the original author of the bill which would make Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* compulsory reading in all universities and colleges. Reported out by the committee on education, it was sponsored by Senator Laurel, committee chairman. The measure immediately ran into determined opposition from the Catholic hierarchy spearheaded in the Senate by Senators Decoroso Rosales, brother of Archbishop, now Cardinal Rosales; Mariano J. Cuenco, brother of Archbishop Cuenco; and Francisco Rodrigo, former president of Catholic Action. Their argument was that the bill would violate freedom of conscience and religion. The Catholic hierarchy even issued a pastoral letter detailing its objections to the bill and enjoining Catholics to oppose it. Despite the fact that public hearings had already been conducted, Rodrigo proposed that the education committee hold a closed-door conference with the Catholic hierarchy to search for a solution to the dispute.

Laurel and the other supporters of the bill rejected the proposal inasmuch as the public hearing had already afforded the church the opportunity to be heard fully. Recto said that Father Jesus Cavanna of the Paulist Fathers, who had written the pastoral letter, had himself testified against the bill during the public hearing. A closed-door conference was obviously one of the means by which the hierarchy hoped to exert pressure against the bill. Lobbies from various Catholic organizations as well as the clerics themselves were very active in the Senate throughout the discussion of the Rizal bill. These clerics, many of them foreigners, were seeking conferences with senators to convince them to oppose the Rizal bill.²

A more organized campaign against the bill was launched under the auspices of the Catholic Action of Manila. Its first activity was a symposium and open forum in which two announcements were made: first, that the *Sentinel*, official organ of Philippine Catholic Action, would henceforth be published daily instead of weekly, and second, that Filipino Catholics would be urged to write their congressmen and senators asking them to "kill" the Rizal bill. Speakers at the symposium offered a variety of objections to the measure. Fr. Jesus Cavanna, introduced as an authority on Rizal, said that the novels "belong to the past" and it would be "harmful" to read them because they presented a "false picture" of conditions in the country at that time. He described the *Noli Me Tangere* as "an attack on the clergy" and said its object was to "put to ridicule the Catholic Faith." He alleged that the novel was not really patriotic because out of 333 pages only 25 contained patriotic passages while 120 were devoted to anti-Catholic attacks. Jesus Paredes, a radio commentator, declared that since some parts of the novels had been declared "objectionable matter" by the hierarchy, Catholics had the right to refuse to read them so as not to "endanger their salvation." Narciso Pimentel, Jr., another radio commentator, offered the interesting speculation that the bill was Recto's revenge against the Catholic voters who, together with Magsaysay, were responsible for his poor showing in the 1955 senatorial elections.³

Against this background of bitter opposition, one can more fully appreciate the integrity and courage of Recto in championing the bill. He stubbornly persisted in his defense, unmindful of the fact that he was antagonizing a vital electoral element.

In a three-hour speech on the Senate floor, he attacked the hierarchy of the Catholic church for its pastoral letter. He declared that the pastoral letter had been "more severe" in its condemnation of the novels than a committee of Spanish Dominican priests whose findings had resulted in Rizal's execution. In support of his contention, he brought up the fact that the pastoral letter had cited 170 passages from the *Noli* and 50 from the *Fili* which it regarded as attacks on the doctrines and dogmas of the Catholic church. He said he could understand the foreign clergy taking such a position but he found it difficult to understand how Filipino

bishops "who will not be bishops now were it not for Rizal" could adopt such a stand when Rizal exalted the Filipino clergy in his novels.⁴

Rodrigo interpellated the speaker and in the process found himself the butt of Recto's sallies, to the delight of the gallery. Rodrigo said he had read the books at twenty after securing special dispensation from church authorities. Having taken advanced scholastic philosophy and religion, he declared his faith was then firm enough. "But I cannot allow my son who is now 16 to read the *Noli Me Tangere* and the *El Filibusterismo* lest he lose his faith," Rodrigo said. He proposed instead compulsory reading of footnoted editions of the novels.⁵

Commenting on the opening paragraph of the pastoral letter which praised Rizal as our greatest hero, Recto charged that these laudatory phrases were being used "to hide the real intentions of the pastoral which is to separate the people from Rizal." When Rodrigo agreed to his appeal to the people to scrutinize the pastoral letter, Rodrigo said this would arouse the people to oppose the measure. Recto retorted that on the contrary the reading of the hierarchy's letter "should open the eyes of the people to the real enemies of Rizal and true nationalism."⁶

While others were beginning to yield to pressure, no threats could frighten Recto. In reply to a threat that Catholic schools would close should the Rizal bill pass, Recto went on record in favor of the nationalization of all schools. He contended that nationalization might be just the step needed to foster a more vibrant nationalism among Filipinos.⁷ He did not really believe the threat. "They are making too much profit which they can ill-afford to give up," he said.⁸

Tempers flared during the continuous debates and opponents attacked each other with greater virulence. Recto was in the thick of the fight, his tirades against the church growing ever more bitter. On May 3, in a privilege speech, he recalled that during the days of Rizal, religious orders dominated the government. "Is this a new attempt to deliver the State to the Church?" he asked. Reacting to a *Philippine News Service* report that Bishop Manuel Yap had warned that legislators who voted for the Rizal bill would be "punished" in the next election, Recto took the floor for the seventh time to warn against church interference in state affairs. He branded Yap as "the modern-day Torquemada."¹⁰

Finally, on May 12, the month-old controversy ended with unanimous approval of a substitute measure authored by Senator Laurel and based on the proposals of Senators Roseller T. Lim and Emmanuel Pelaez. The bill as passed was clearly an accommodation to the objections of the Catholic hierarchy and Laurel said as much. Though it still provided that the basic texts in the collegiate courses should be the unexpurgated editions of the two novels, it was now possible for students to be exempted from using the unexpurgated editions on grounds of religious belief. Opponents of the original Recto version jubilantly claimed a "complete victory." Proponents felt they had at least gained something.

THE BASES QUESTION

On July 4, 1956, Richard M. Nixon on a visit here issued a joint statement with Magsaysay affirming Philippine title to American lands in the country. Recto immediately sought a redefinition of the sovereignty pronouncement of Nixon. He said:

I hope what Mr. Nixon said about sovereignty is not any different from our concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty can only be expressed through the operation of our laws and courts.¹¹

It will be recalled that Attorney-General Brownell had propounded the dictum of American ownership of these bases. Recto was the foremost opponent of this thinking. The Supreme Court ended the controversy with its decision in the case of *Sun Life vs. Brownell*. The joint statement was an affirmation of the court opinion.

Romulo, taking advantage of the situation, tried to claim credit for getting the American affirmation. At the same time, he blamed nationalist agitators for having delayed the American decision by their belligerence. Recto could not let this pass. In an article entitled "The Smallness of a Little Man," he expressed his belief that "it was the belligerence of those to whom he (Romulo) refers as 'outside the Administration' that really brought about the recognition of our sovereignty over and our ownership of American bases." That Romulo who was "fence-sitting" in Washington all along should now play the hero was too much for Recto to take. He put Romulo in his place.