

## **THE TRIALS OF THE RIZAL BILL**

**Jose B. Laurel, Jr.**<sup>34</sup>

Few legislative measures have elicited as much interest or provoked as much discussion as Republic Act No. 1425, otherwise known as the Rizal Law. The heated disputes that raged around this legislation, the bitterness and recrimination that attended its enactment, are almost unparalleled in the annals of Congress.

When it was filed by the Committee on Education on April 3, 1956, Senate Bill No. 438 was supported by all but 3 of the members of the Upper House and seemed, to all appearances, a non-controversial measure. But when on April 17, 1956, Senator Jose P. Laurel, as Chairman of the Committee on Education, began his sponsorship of the measure the rumbles of the gathering storm sounded an ominous warning. This was to mark the start of the long-drawn disputations, both enlightened and acrimonious, that would engross and divide the nation for three tense weeks.

The original version of Senate Bill No. 438 reads as follows:

AN ACT TO MAKE NOLI ME TANGERE AND EL FILIBUSTERISMO COMPULSORY READING MATTER IN ALL PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

SECTION 1. Jose Rizal's Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo are hereby declared compulsory reading matter in all public and private schools, colleges and universities in the Philippines.

SECTION 2. The works mentioned in Section 1 of this Act shall be in the original editions or in their unexpurgated English and Natural Language versions.

SECTION 3. The Department of Education shall take steps to promulgate rules and regulations for the immediate implementation of the provisions of this Act.

SECTION 4. No provision of this Act shall be constructed as prohibiting or limiting the study of the works of other Filipino heroes.

SECTION 5. Any public or private college or university found violating, failing to comply with, or circumventing the provisions of this Act shall be punished accordingly:

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<sup>34</sup> Former Speaker, House of Representatives.

- a. The Head of any public college or university charged with implementing the provisions of this Act, who shall have been found guilty of violating, failing to comply with, or circumventing the provisions thereof, shall be dismissed immediately from the service and shall be disqualified from teaching in any public or government recognized private school, college or university.
- b. Government recognition of any private college or university found violating or circumventing the provisions of this Act shall be immediately withdrawn, and the responsible Head and professor or professors concerned shall be disqualified from teaching in any Government-recognized college or university.

SECTION 6. This Act shall take effect upon its approval.

According to Senator Laurel, the object of the measure was to disseminate the ideas and ideals of the great Filipino patriot through the reading of his works, particularly "Noli Me Tangere" and "El Filibusterismo." In the course of his three-day sponsorship speech, he said:

*"Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo must be read by all Filipinos. They must be taken to heart, for in their pages we see ourselves as in a mirror; our defects as well as our strength, our virtues as well as our vices. Only then would we become conscious as a people, and so learn to prepare ourselves for painful sacrifices that ultimately lead to self-reliance, self-respect and freedom."*

The Catholic elements in and outside Congress, however, were quick to assail the measure as an attempt to discredit their religion. Claiming that the two novels contained views inimical to the tenets of their faith, they particularly challenged the compulsory nature of the bill as violative of religious freedom. Principal basis of their opposition was an alleged Pastoral Letter which, while praising Rizal, practically branded his novels as heretical and impious. The authenticity of this letter was much suspected and never definitely established, but there is no question that it added fuel to the fires of discord that had already inflamed the passions of the people.

Debates on Senate Bill No. 438 began on April 23, 1956. Senator Laurel was supported by a prestigious colleague and ardent nationalist, the formidable Senator Claro M. Recto. In the other camp were Senators Mariano J. Cuenco, Francisco Rodrigo and Decoroso Rosales, all of them identified as rabid Catholics. Although the rest of the senators also participated at times in the discussion, interest was focused on the principal protagonists of the controversy whose masterly exchange of logic and law held the nation spellbound.

Senator Recto proved his usual brilliance as a parliamentarian and his vast erudition in history and law, including Canon Law. There was no doubt also that he was an authority on the life and works of Rizal. The gist of his arguments was that, under the police power and Art. XIV (5) of the Constitution, it was competent for the State to require the reading of "Noli Me Tangere" and "El Filibusterismo" in our public and private schools. The sole object of the bill, he said, was to foster the better



appreciation of Rizal's times and of the role he played in combating Spanish tyranny in this country. Denying that the novels had any religious motivation, he declared:

*"Rizal did not pretend to teach religion or theology when he wrote those books. He aimed at inculcating civic consciousness in the Filipinos, national dignity, personal pride, and patriotism, and if references were made by him in the course of his narration to certain religious practices in the Philippines in those days and to the conduct and behavior of erring ministers of the church, it was because he portrayed faithfully the general situation in the Philippines as it then existed. Nobody can dispute that the situation described by Rizal in those days, political, social and religious, was the one actually obtaining in the Philippines; but while he criticized and ridiculed the unworthy behavior of certain ministers of the Church, he made exceptions in favor of the worthy ones, like the Dominican friar, Padre Fernandez, and the virtuous native priest, Padre Florentino, and the Jesuits in general."*

On the other hand, Senators Rodrigo, Rosales and Cuenco derived much support from the Catholic Church itself and from its hundreds of thousands of adherents throughout the country. Their principal argument was no less impressive, to wit: that compulsion to read something against one's religious convictions was no different from a requirement to salute the flag, which, according to the latest decision on the matter by the U.S. Supreme Court, was an impairment both of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. In addition, they invoked the need for unity, which they said would be imperiled if the bill were approved. Contending that they were no less lovers of their country because they were devout children of their church, Senator Rodrigo remarked:

*"A vast majority of our people are at the same time Catholics and Filipino citizens. As such, they have two great loves: their country and their faith. These two loves are not conflicting loves. They are harmonious affections, like the love for his father and for his mother."*

*"This is the basis of my stand. Let us not create a conflict between nationalism and religion; between the government and the church."*

The conflict reached the House of Representatives on April 19, 1956, when Congressman Jacobo Z. Gonzales introduced House Bill No. 5561, which was an identical copy Senate Bill No. 438. Debates started on May 9, 1956, following the report of the Committee on Education, dated May 2, 1956, recommending approval without amendment. The discussions also revolved on the constitutionality and the propriety of the measure, but although proceedings were definitely livelier and more impassioned here than in the Upper Chamber (at one time there was even an abortive fist fight on the floor), it was the mighty battle in the Senate that drew more public attention. Notable defenders of the bill in the House, besides the author, were Congressmen Emilio Cortez, Mario Bengzon, Joaquin R. Roces, and W. Rancap Lagumbay. Among the outspoken opponents were Congressmen Ramon Durano, Jose Nuguid, Marciano Lim, Manuel Zosa, Lucas Paredes, Godofredo Ramos, Miguel Cuenco, and Congresswomen Carmen D. Consing and Tecla San Andres Ziga.

As the daily debates wore on in Congress and throughout the country, it became more and more apparent that no agreement could be reached on the original

version of the bill. Already, more than two weeks had elapsed since the measure was called on the floor, and the conflict was becoming increasingly bitter. On May 9, 1956, however, the controversy took a new though not quite unexpected turn that stirred new hope for a final resolution of the issue. This came about when Senator Laurel, sensing the futility of further strife on the matter, rose to propose in his own name an amendment by substitution which read in full as follows:

An Act to include in the curricula of all public and private schools, colleges and universities courses on the life, works and writings of Jose Rizal, particularly his novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, authorizing the printing and distribution thereof, and for other purposes.

Whereas, today, more than in any other period of our history, there is a need for a re-dedication to the ideals of freedom and nationalism for which our  
Whereas, it is meet that in honoring them, particularly the national hero and patriot, Jose Rizal, we remember with special fondness and devotion their lives and works that have shaped the national character;

Whereas, the life, works and writings of Jose Rizal, particularly his novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, are a constant and inspiring source of patriotism with which the minds of the youth, especially during their formative and decisive years in school, should be suffused;

Whereas, all educational institutions are under the supervision of, and subject to regulation by the State, and all schools are enjoined to develop moral character, personal discipline, civic conscience and to teach the duties of citizenship; Now therefore,

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

SECTION 1. Courses on the life, works and writings of Jose Rizal, particularly his novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* or their English translation shall be used as basic texts.

The Board of National Education is hereby authorized and directed to adopt forthwith measures to implement and carry out the provisions of this Section, including the writing and printing of appropriate primers, readers and textbooks. The Board shall, within sixty (60) days from the effectivity of this Act promulgate rules and regulations, including those of a disciplinary nature, to carry out and enforce the provisions of this Act. Said rules and regulations shall take effect thirty (30) days after their publication in the official Gazette.

SECTION 2. It shall be obligatory on all schools, colleges and universities to keep copies of the original and unexpurgated editions of the *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, as well as of Rizal's other works and biography. The said unexpurgated editions of the *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* or their translation in English as well as other writings of Rizal shall be included in the list of approved books for required reading in all public or private schools, colleges and universities.



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The Board of National Education shall determine the adequacy of the number of books, depending upon the enrollment of the school, college or university.

SECTION 3. The Board of National Education shall cause the translation of the *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, as well as other writings of Jose Rizal into English, Tagalog and the principal dialects; cause them to be printed in cheap, popular editions; and cause them to be distributed, free of charge, to persons desiring to read them, through the Purok organizations and Barrio Councils throughout the country.

SECTION 4. Nothing on this Act shall be construed as amending or repealing Section 927 of the Administrative Code, prohibiting the discussion of religious doctrines by public school teachers and other persons engaged in any public school.

SECTION 5. The sum of three hundred thousand pesos is hereby authorized to be appropriated in the National Treasury to carry out the purposes of this Act.

SECTION 6. This Act shall take effect upon its approval.

Explaining this amendment, Senator Laurel said tersely:

*"In my substitute bill, I have included not only the Noli and the Fili but all the works and writings of Rizal and even those written by other people about him. I eliminated the compulsion idea, although deep in myself, considering my own information, my own knowledge of the history of mankind, however poor and however incomplete, notwithstanding my own personal conviction that the state can properly require, in the case of Filipinos, the compulsory reading of the Fili and the Noli. After consulting my own religious conscience as one belonging to my own church, I removed the idea of compulsion. You will no longer find the word 'compulsory' or 'compulsion' in the substitute bill that I have filed. But there is one thing on which there could be no compromise so far as I am concerned. I have reached the saturation point. I have reached the dead end of a blind alley. I can go no farther; and this I say: If Rizal was a hero, and on that there could be no debate, if Rizal is a national hero, these books that he has written, whenever read, must be read in the unexpurgated, original form. Otherwise, I would prefer to have this bill defeated, defeated ignominiously if you wish, but then I shall have fulfilled my duty."*

The new measure was also debated in the Chamber, but with less heat this time, the discussion centering on the first paragraph of Section 1 and on the powers of implementation of the Board of National Education. Several members spoke on the substitute bill, among them Senators Locsin, Pelaez, Briones, Sabido, Puyat and Cuenco. Still vigorously opposed, Senator Rodrigo suggested the deletion of the proviso in Section 1, but this change was rejected by the sponsor. Senator Lim then proposed the exemption of students from the requirements of the bill, on certain conditions, and the Senate seemed headed again for another lengthy disputation. Then, quite abruptly, the following proceedings took place:

## ENMIENDA A LA ENMIENDA POR SUSTITUCION

Senator Primicias. I now, Mr. President, in the name of many members of this body, present this amendment to the amendment: On page 2, line 6, after the period (1) following the word "act," insert the following:

"THE BOARD SHALL PROMULGATE RULES AND REGULATIONS PROVIDING FOR THE EXEMPTION OF STUDENTS FOR REASONS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF STATED IN A SWORN WRITTEN STATEMENT FROM THE REQUIREMENT OF THE PROVISION CONTAINED IN THE SECOND PART OF THE FIRST PARAGRAPH OF THIS SECTION; BUT NOT FROM TAKING THE COURSE PROVIDED FOR IN THE FIRST PART OF THE SAID PARAGRAPH."

The President. Those who are in favor of the amendment will please say aye. (Several senators: Aye.) Those who are against the will say nay. (Silence.) The amendment is unanimously approved.

As thus amended the substitute bill was on the same day, May 12, 1956, unanimously approved on second reading.

This development was quite propitious for, owing to the impasse among its members on the original Gonzales Bill, the House of Representatives was also casting about for some kind of compromise. The Senate solution seemed acceptable enough, so, on May 14, 1956, Congressman Tolentino, the brilliant House Majority Floor Leader, sponsored an amendment by substitution identical to Senator Laurel's substitute bill as amended and approved on second reading in the Upper House. There was spirited resistance from several diehards, notably Congressman Miguel Cuenco, who insisted in a scholarly speech that the measure was unconstitutional, and Congressman Bengzon, one of the strongest supporters of the original version, who claimed that the substitute bill represented a "complete triumph of the Church hierarchy." Nevertheless, with no less than 51 congressmen appearing as its co-authors, including the majority and minority leadership in the Chamber, the measure was approved on second reading the same day.

The anti-climax was dramatic. Congress was to adjourn *sine die* in a few days and, since the President had declined to certify to the necessity of the immediate enactment of the measure, there was a need of complying with the constitutional requirement that printed copies thereof be distributed among the Congressmen at least three calendar days prior to its final approval by the House. The opponents of the measure sought to take advantage of this technicality to defeat the measure. Pressed for time, the Speaker, with the help mainly of Congressman Gonzales, requested the Bureau of Printing which handled the printing of the Laurel substitute bill. Not to destroy the printing molds of said bill and ordered enough copies for the members of the House, changing only the number of the bill and the Chamber of origin. Copies of the measure were distributed in the House even before the Senate bill was approved on third reading. While the House bill was being discussed on second reading, the Speaker maneuvered to prevent the insertion of any amendment to avoid its reprinting and redistribution. The Senate version was accepted *in toto* punctuation marks and



all. The Speaker refused to adjourn the House until the bill could finally be approved and, on the very same day Senate Bill No. 438 was approved on the third reading, with 23 votes in favor (Senator Briones was absent.) house Bill No. 5561 was also approved on the third reading, with 71 votes in favor (6 were against, 2 abstained, and 17 were absent) and sent to the Senate the same day. This bill was passed by the latter Chamber without amendment, also on May 17, 1956, provided that the number of the Senate bill should also appear in the enrolled copies.

Malacañang took some time in the consideration of the measure, and there were some who clung to the flimsy hope that it would not be approved. But that hope was to be denied, for on June 12, 1956, the bill was signed into law by President Ramon Magsaysay and became Republic Act No. 1425. Thus, it would seem, were partly fulfilled the words of Rizal himself who, speaking through Filosofo Tasio in "Noli Me Tangere," said:

"I am writing for the generations of Filipinos yet to come, a generation that will be enlightened and educated, a generation without condemning me as a heretic."

*"Every country has its morals like its climate and its infirmities." — J. Rizal*

*"Open your children's eyes so that they may jealously guard their honor, love their fellowmen and their native land, and do their duty. Always impress upon them that it is better to die with honor than to live in dishonor." — J. Rizal*