

PADRE FEDERICO FAURA AND PHILIPPINE ASTRONOMY

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Before his arrival in Manila in June 1866, the twenty five years old Federico Faura, because of his scientific promise, was selected by his superiors to take charge of the already started Manila Observatory. His ability to organize the work, his effecting the general recognition of the institution and his scientific service won for him the deserved title of founder of the Manila Observatory. The special area of scientific service in the early years was meteorological. With meteorology internationally a young science, Padre Faura issued the first typhoon warning to the public on July 7, 1879. His interests were not exclusive; he had astronomical, among other scientific, ambitions for the Observatory.

Perhaps the first scientific expedition to go abroad from the Philippines was occasioned by the solar eclipse of August 18, 1868. Federico, Faura, with Jaime Nonell and Juan Ricart along with the enthusiastic approval of the government organized the expedition to the region of eclipse totality. Many hardships both in obtaining support and in travel were encountered, but these were ultimately surmounted and the party arrived, if not at the pre-arranged place, at least at an adequate location for successful achievement. The scientific results were published in Rome and in Manila and were noted in other scientific literature.

For sometime after his theological studies in 1877, Padre Faura worked with each of two astronomers well known to solar scientists: Father Perry in Stonyhurst, England and Father Angelo Secchi in Rome. These associations show that Padre Faura had firm plans for having the Manila Observatory do work in Astronomy and even, perhaps, in Solar Astronomy.

A complete astronomical section in the Manila Observatory was his earnest desire. His successes were met with counter checks. In 1882-83 funds were collected for astronomy by a devoted friend but the funds were largely lost for the time in a bank failure. Later, plans were drawn up for an astronomical pier but, for reasons not now apparent, the work was not completed. An 18-inch objective lens manufactured by Merz in Germany became available in 1890. The purchase was made and Padre Faura approved in 1891 construction plans for the telescope building in Manila. Construction was slow and the dome specially was delayed. It was the successor of Padre Faura, Padre Jose Algue, who while studying Astronomy at Georgetown arranged for the construction of the telescope mounting. This arrived in Manila in 1894 but the dome only later in 1897. Ultimately the first night of observation with the 18-inch equatorial telescope came on February 16, 1899. Padre Faura who had planned well, had organized the scientific work in Meteorology, Geomagnetism, Seismology and Astronomy and had made definite personal contributions to these sciences, had died on January 23, 1897. Never enjoying the fruition of his toil and planning he missed the special telescopic view of the heavens over Manila, but he had given a new vision to four and a half decades of astronomers and others for exploring the wonders of creation.