

The Events of 1872: The Cavite Mutiny and the Execution of Fathers Gomez, Burgos, and Zamora

It was a dark and overcast day on February 17, 1872. The residents of Manila gathered to watch an execution, that of three native secular priests and their alleged accomplice. Earlier a month before on January 20 a mutiny by soldiers and workers of the Cavite arsenal broke out. It was caused by the slashing of their salaries which were eaten up by taxes. The workers who previously exempted from *polo* or community labor found themselves required to do the task just like ordinary natives. What was then a strike by workers of the arsenal became a mutiny when it was joined by soldiers. The mutineers who were led by a Sergeant Lamadrid expected the soldiers in Manila to join them in their uprising. The fiesta in the *arrabal* of Sampaloc on the evening of January 20 made Lamadrid and his fellow mutineers believe that the Manila garrison had joined them. They rose up and killed their Spanish superiors. It was too late when they learned that their comrades in Manila will not join them.

In the following morning, troops from Manila crushed the mutiny and the surviving ringleaders were immediately executed. Spanish authorities suspected that there might be more involved in a bigger conspiracy to overthrow Spanish rule in the Philippines. This suspicion fell on a group of Filipinos who were campaigning for greater political and religious freedom. Their eyes fixed on native priests seeking the secularization of the parishes and the laymen who were fighting for free speech and association. These Filipinos were already identified on orders of the former Governor General, Carlos Ma. de la Torre.

A raid resulted in an incriminating note which said "Meeting tonight, bring powder and shot." ("*Reunion esta noche, Traiga pulbura y bala.*") The author of this note was Fr. Jacinto Zamora, an examiner of priests at the Manila Cathedral and one of those campaigning for reforms in the Catholic Church of the Philippines. It so happened that Fr. Zamora along with Fr. Jose Burgos, one of the prominent members of the secularization movement and Fr. Mariano Gomez, the parish priest of Bacoor, Cavite, had the habit of playing a card game called *panguinge*. The "meeting" to be held that night was supposed to be a gambling session while the "powder and shot" were code names for money to be used in gambling. The note made by Fr. Zamora was enough to incriminate the three priests. They were immediately faced a military court.

During the trial, a star witness Bicolano soldier named Francisco Zaldua implicated the three priest in an alleged plot to overthrow Spanish rule. Fr. Burgos was to become king or emperor of the new independent Philippines. During the trial Fr. Burgos' counsel Jose Arrieta said that his client has confessed his guilt and was asking for mercy. Burgos shouted "I am innocent

and this man, instead of acting in my defense, had joined my accusers!" The court found the three priests guilty and were sentenced to be executed by strangulation by the garrotte on February 17, 1872.

On that day, the priests stood before the gallows. With them was Zaldua who was also sentenced to death. Unlike Fr. Burgos who was weeping, Zaldua stood straight and proud, confident that a pardon would be forthcoming from the Governor General. He grew nervous as was the first to be executed and had to be held by the arms to take his place at the garrotte chair.

The first priest to be executed was Fr. Gomez, then aged 73. Upon climbing the platform, his glasses fell to the floor. As he stooped down to pick up his lenses, the executioner knelt before him and said "Father, forgive me, for I am going to kill you." Fr. Gomez then replied, "It is alright my son, do your duty." He then spoke the words, "I am going to a place where the leaves of the trees never moves without the will of God." After executing Fr. Gomez, it was Fr. Zamora's turn, he showed no emotion and he was pale. He calmly sat on the execution chair. He was in this state because his mind had left him. He had become insane.

The last to be executed was Fr. Burgos who was crying. Upon being made to sit on the execution chair, he rose up and shouted, "But I am innocent!" "So was Christ!" said the priest beside him. "Accept your fate!" As the executioner was tightening the screws to squeeze out the life of Fr. Burgos, Fr. Burgos was praying "Lord, take this soul of our inno..." Death had cut short his prayer.

Upon finishing the execution of the three priests, the bells of the Manila Cathedral rang low and sonorous tones in their honor. This was the instruction of the Archbishop of Manila, Meliton Martinez. The Governor General, Rafael de Izquierdo had ordered Martinez to defrock the priest but Martinez refused to do so believing that the priests were innocent.

As the sound of the bells began to fade, the natives among the crowd of spectators began to kneel down as a sign of respect. The Spaniards fled in fear as they thought that this was a signal to attack. They remained within the walls of Intramuros for one week.

The execution of the three priests called GOM-BUR-ZA, marked the beginning of Filipino nationalism as the native which were so divided by regional differences began to consider themselves as one people. For future reformists and revolutionists the execution of the priests was invoked as a reason for their campaign to fight for social and political change for the Philippines. Their martyrdom inspired Rizal to dedicate his second novel *El Filibusterismo* in their memory. The memory of the three Filipino priests was also invoked by some Katipuneros who were said to be in possession of a piece of cloth which formed part of one of the priests' soutanes. Before this relic they swore to avenge their unjust deaths. The execution of the GOM-BUR-ZA priests was mentioned in the Philippine Declaration of Independence which was read on June 12, 1898.