

**“Make Her known”:  
How the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help flourished in the Philippines**

**Trizer Dale Mansueto, MA Hist.**

**Theotokos**

Next to Jesus himself, there is no other figure in Christianity who is most revered other than the Blessed Virgin Mary. Although there is not much verifiable information on the life of Mary, other than those that were written in the Gospels but she is the most popular of all the saints simply because she was the chosen vessel of the Incarnate Word. Because of her great role in the history of salvation, Mary is thus accorded the title “Theotokos,” or the “God-bearer.” Mary is accorded with great veneration in the Church that she is commemorated as the Mother of God every January 1<sup>st</sup> of the year.

The veneration of Mary dates back to the early Christians but the title Theotokos, the highest of all her titles, was approved only in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD in response to the Nestorian controversy in the Council of Ephesus which defined that “Mary was not only the mother of Christ in his human nature, but also of Christ as a divine Person.”<sup>1</sup> The ratification of this teaching by the Church was the one which gave further impetus for the spread of the veneration of Mary through the following centuries. “After Ephesus, however, Marian feasts began to multiply and churches were dedicated to her in all major cities.”<sup>2</sup>

**The Cult of Our Lady in Europe**

One of the greatest shrines dedicated to her is the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome which was established by Pope Sixtus III (432-440) in celebration of the definition of the Theotokos title. This basilica houses a revered ancient image of Mary bearing the Christ Child in her arms which reputedly dates back to 352 AD. Popularly known as the Protectress of the Roman People, Pope St. Gregory the Great made supplications here to the Mother of God in behalf of the citizens of Rome so that they may be delivered from a great plague. Many Romans also visit this basilica for certain favors.<sup>3</sup>

Many other churches were dedicated to her thereafter and these became great pilgrimage sites in Europe. In Italy alone, there is the Virgin of Oropa from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, the 5<sup>th</sup> century Madonna of Consolation in Turin, Our Lady of Monte Virgine in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and so on. There are also famous shrines found in Chatillon which dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the Virgin of Miracles in Pas-des-Calais in France in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Germany’s most famous Marian shrine is found in Altotting in Bavaria in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Spain has the Virgin of the Pillar in Zaragoza which supposedly houses a jasper column given by Our Lady herself to St. James the

---

<sup>1</sup> McBrien, Richard P. *Lives of the Saints*, pp. 56-57

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Cruz, Joan Carroll. *Miraculous Images of Our Lady*, pp. 139-141

Apostle during the first days of the Christian faith in Spain, not to mention the Virgin of Guadalupe in Caceres which dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Czestochowa in Poland is also another pilgrimage site which is said to possess an image of the Virgin which is thought to have been painted by St. Luke. Switzerland also has a famous shrine in honor of Our Lady of Einsiedeln which dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. There are countless other Marian shrines in Europe some of which dates back earlier than the proclamation of the Theotokos in Ephesus.

The devotion to Mary never waned through the ages so that more Marian shrines are being established in the different parts of the world today. While many of these shrines venerate images of Mary in-the-round type sculpture, quite a few have it in painting. Although relatively new since the image itself was only enthroned in its church in Via Merulana, in Rome in 1866, the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is one of the more popular representations of the Virgin Mary in different parts of the world today. Although enthroned exclusively in the Redemptorist mother-church in Rome only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the said icon of the Virgin enfolding her son in her arms, is said to be even older. According to tradition, the image came from the island of Crete in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Christianization of the Philippines**

With the colonization of the Philippine archipelago, the Spaniards also introduced Christianity in the islands. When the Magellan expedition first came in 1521, the queen of Cebu was presented with an image of the Child Jesus. It is thought that there were two other images that the expedition brought to our shores. One was an image of the Ecce Homo and an unknown image of Our Lady. But there soon occurred a hiatus in the colonization of the islands when Magellan was slain at Mactan. There were other expeditions sent thereafter but only the Legazpi expedition in 1565 succeeded in re-claiming the islands in the name of Spain. Legazpi, of course, took the rediscovery of the image of the Santo Nino, a representation of the Child Jesus which is said to have originated in Flanders, in one of the Cebuanos' burnt hut as a sign of undertaking where Magellan had previously failed.

With the colonization of the islands, the Spaniards also began its spiritual conquest in order to Christianize the natives of the archipelago. The Spanish friars, with the aid of the soldiers, toiled in order to convert the natives into the Christian faith. Missionaries from the different religious orders like the Augustinians, Dominicans, Recollects and Franciscans carved Luzon and the Visayas into territories where each religious order proselytized.

In order to carry out the tedious process of Christianization, the Spanish missionaries employed certain tactics to attract the Filipinos to embrace the faith. They first resettled the natives in fixed hamlets *bajo dela campana* or within the earshot of the bell. Although they had a difficulty in keeping the natives in the reduction because of the nature of their source of livelihood "the Spaniards appealed to the strong tactile and sensuous imagination of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Ceballos, Francisco et al. Our Lady of Perpetual Help: The Icon Favours and Shrines, p. 8

Filipinos and their innate love of spectacles.”<sup>5</sup> The Spanish missionaries, therefore, employed fiestas and processions which paralleled what the natives did in their animist religious rituals. Thus, in due time, Filipinos embraced the Christian faith.

### Mary in the Philippines

The Filipinos were not alien to having religious images since before the conquest, our ancestors worshipped wooden images known as *likha* or *tao-tao*. Since the Spaniards employed religious acts and practices that paralleled those of the natives, Fernando claims that this is nowhere best expressed by the natives than toward the Virgin of Antipolo. In order to have good fortune, the image of the Virgin made ten voyages to and from Acapulco on board galleons between 1641 and 1748. Due to the good fortune that the Virgin supposedly caused, “devotees expressed their affection by showering her with jewelry and other rich ornaments.” This is besides the other spectacles performed by the Spaniards in welcoming the image.<sup>6</sup> Having been used to the practices demonstrated by the Spaniards, the Filipinos also copied these themselves and this eventually started the great cult of the Virgin of Antipolo.

Filipinos have always shown their great affection towards Mary for the very reason that she is herself a mother. Our natural inclination towards Mary isn’t because we are a problematic lot but because we Filipinos adore mothers, in general, and find a natural affinity for Mary, as if she too, is our own mother.

It is for this reason that Mary is very popular among the Filipinos so that there is almost always a famous Marian image venerated in every Christian part of the Philippines. Hence, this is the reason why we are called *Pueblo Amante de Maria (Mary’s beloved people)*. It was the Spaniards themselves who introduced most of these cults which persist even to the present.

In Manila alone, there is the Virgin of the Holy Rosary of La Naval which was introduced by the Dominicans in 1593. There is Our Lady of Charity in Agoo, La Union, the Virgin of Penafancia in Bicol, Our Lady of Manaoag in Pangasinan, and Our Lady of Sorrows in Cavite, among others, all in the island of Luzon. Fort Del Pilar in Zamboanga, in the predominantly Muslim island of Mindanao, also possesses a Marian image venerated by Christians coming from the area. The Visayan islands, too, have its share of Marian devotions like Our Lady of the Candles in Iloilo and the Virgin of the Rule in Opon, Cebu.<sup>7</sup>

But probably among all her titles, the most popular Marian devotion in the country which was introduced by the Spaniards is no other than the Immaculate Conception which was named as the principal patroness of the Philippine Islands in 1578 when Manila was created as a diocese

---

<sup>5</sup> Fernando, Gilda C. A Heritage of Saints, p. 20

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 42

<sup>7</sup> Cebu Chronicles, p. 34. Even in 1906, the first Redemptorist missionaries were able to witness how thousands from the Visayan region converged in Opon in order to undertake a pilgrimage to the black image of the Virgen dela Regla.

by Pope Gregory XII.<sup>8</sup> Majority of the Spanish-era established parishes today continue to honor Mary in this title. Despite these, there are still so many titles of the Virgin both popular and unknown ones being venerated in the different parts of Christian Philippines which just proves the popularity of Mary among Filipinos.

### **Bishop Hendrick appeals for missionaries**

After more than 300 years in the Philippines, the Spaniards soon turned over the control and administration of the archipelago under the Americans in the Treaty of Paris in 1898. Although predominantly Protestant, the Americans were never really able to stamp out the faith that the Spaniards had planted in the Philippines. While there were efforts to proselytize the Filipinos with their own faith, the American administration tried its best not to disturb the status quo. One of the first acts of the Americans was to request Rome to send American church leaders over to the country in order to administer the dioceses which had been left vacant by the Spanish hierarchy upon their departure back to Spain. One of the earliest to be appointed to the Philippines was Msgr. Thomas Augustine Hendrick of New York on August 18, 1903 to the See of Cebu.<sup>9</sup>

Before coming to the country, Bishop Hendrick was already aware that one of the problems he had to face was the lack of priests to look after the welfare of the faithful in the different towns of his diocese. Not having many secular priests to administer the parishes which had also been vacated by the Spanish friars, Hendrick wrote to the various missionary orders in America and in Europe to appeal for help. Hendrick's role was difficult since he had to look after the spiritual needs of some 500,000 people in his diocese, which was one of the biggest in the country.

Prior to his coming to the Philippines to take over the administration of his diocese, Hendrick went to Europe in order to ask for help personally. In a lecture in Ireland, he likened his mission "to a man entrusted with the task of removing a mountain with a teaspoon."

### **The Redemptorists arrive in Opon**

Although he had already been refused by other orders, the good bishop nonetheless persisted in his appeal for help. In his despair, Hendrick asked the help of two Irish Bishops, Msgr. Finley of Cashel and Msgr. Cleary of Elphin to intercede for him and to request the Redemptorist provincial of Ireland, on his behalf, to send missionaries to his diocese. Fr. Andrew Boylan, the Irish provincial at that time did not delay and as early as March 1904 had already notified Rome of his acceptance.<sup>10</sup>

As Boylan was to go Australia on visitation, he thought of seizing the opportunity to come to Cebu to have a look for himself. Fr. Boylan eventually arrived in the Philippines in December

---

<sup>8</sup> Fernando, p. 52

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bhendrick.html>

<sup>10</sup> Baily, Michael CSSR. *Small Net in a Big Sea: The Redemptorists in the Philippines (1905-1929)*, p. 6

1905 accompanied by Fr. O'Farrell and came to Cebu on January 1, 1906 in order to confer with the bishop. In that meeting, the bishop offered a parish with no income and that was all. It was not a very attractive offer but being awed by the people's show of faith, Boylan accepted the idea of establishing a house in the Philippines thinking that the Filipino people were "worth saving".<sup>11</sup>

Bishop Hendrick then wrote to the Superior General of the Redemptorists in Rome to apply for a foundation and on March 17, 1906, Fr. Boylan took possession of Opon, Cebu. On June 30, other Redemptorists from Ireland arrived to join Fr. Boylan in Opon.

Before the missionaries left their original monastery in Limerick, Ireland, their fellow Redemptorists, together with their relatives and friends gave them a send-off, where after the celebration of the Holy Mass, they were given a copy of the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help to be brought to their new mission assignment. At their arrival in Opon, the experience of the first set of missionaries was far from encouraging. The Filipino parish priest assigned there in the person of Fr. Vicente Roa refused to welcome them in the rectory. This happened because apparently Bishop Hendrick failed to notify the priest beforehand about the Redemptorists' taking over the parish. Fr. Roa eventually yielded the parish to the missionaries but not after removing all the furniture including "quite a number of statues... which used to be carried in the processions."<sup>12</sup>

The people of Opon who sympathized with Fr. Roa refused to cooperate with the Redemptorists. The coming of the new batch of missionaries was also bad timing since anti-friar sentiments were also running high in the Philippines then. It has only been a few years since the hated Spanish friars left the country and now they thought that another batch of friars in black soutane had come to take over those they have previously expelled. They boycotted the new missionaries. Part of the boycott was not attending religious services in church.<sup>13</sup> Almost a month in Opon, the Redemptorists suffered at the lukewarm attitude shown by the people but they continued to trust God that it would still change.

### **"Make her known"**

Due to the continued boycott, left without any recourse, Fr. Patrick Leo, the superior, after much prayer, remembered the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. As Redemptorists, they have been previously commissioned by the Holy Father to make her known wherever they would go. The Redemptorists came into the possession of the Perpetual Help icon, which is said to be originally from the island of Crete. The icon had previously attracted a great number of devotees when it was still in the Augustinian Church of St. Matthew. Unfortunately, the church was destroyed in 1798 during the Napoleonic wars. Having bought the property in order to build their own church, the Redemptorists, who learned about the famous icon of Our Lady

---

<sup>11</sup> Catholicity in the Philippines... Interesting Lecture by Most Rev. Dr. Hendrick, Bishop of Cebu.

<sup>12</sup> Opon House Chronicles 1906-1923, np.

<sup>13</sup> Baily, p. 9

previously venerated in the fallen shrine would later petition the Holy See to grant them the icon so that it could be placed in the church which they were constructing in honor of the Holy Redeemer and their founder St. Alphonsus de Ligouri. The Holy See obliged but on the condition that they replace the Augustinians with “another adequate picture.” Later 1865, at an audience with the Pope, the Redemptorist Father General Nicholas Mauron was commissioned by Pius IX to “make her known throughout the world.”<sup>14</sup>

### **A remarkable day**

Almost in despair, Fr. Leo erected the picture they brought from Limerick in the tribune of the Church of Opon, the same Church which had already been made famous by the Virgen dela Regla, an image of Our Lady which was said to be a devotion of St. Augustine. It is in this ancient stone church, previously run by the Augustinian padres that thousands of people from the Visayan region would come in pilgrimage every November. The day was unforgettable – July 24, 1906 – because according to the chronista: “It is remarkable that on this day, the people became notably more-friendly.”<sup>15</sup> It was indeed, the very first intervention of Our Lady and how could she not intervene for her sons, when she was their mother – a mother ever ready to succor her children – the Mother of Perpetual Help.

We could only surmise the curiosity of the people the first time they saw the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. It was not one of the usual Marian images that they have been exposed to. Although they have painted images of the Virgin with Child, it was a strange depiction for them – it did not portray the innocence of the Child Jesus like the one cradled by their own Virgen dela Regla -- but it was gazing on the representation of the Archangel Gabriel bearing the Cross that would later in his life be the cause of his death and bring forth the eventual salvation of mankind. The said representation of Our Lady and Christ Child wasn't in the usual regal Spanish iconography but one belonging to the Byzantine style or more appropriately to the Creto-Venezian school of painting known as the Virgin of the Passion.<sup>16</sup> The faithful of Opon could have milled around the picture of Our Lady and touched it as a way of venerating it. That historic day would have served as an epiphany of sorts for the picture which, in five decades , would become the most familiar picture of our heavenly Mother in almost every church and every home in the Philippines.

As the days went, the people began to cautiously approach the Church and the Redemptorist padres. Despite the other problems that they were facing, the Redemptorists nonetheless continued to do what they were expected to do – to serve the parish of Opon and to undertake missions within the parish's jurisdiction. The difficulties that the padres faced didn't cease though, but they tried their best to reach out to their parishioners. From time to time, they were appalled at the spiritual condition of the people and one of these was the people's refusal to call for a priest to anoint their sick family members due to their wrong notion of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Ceballos, pp. 10-14

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 43

<sup>16</sup> Hechanova, Luis G. The Baclaran Story, pp 98-99

Sacrament of Extreme Unction. The people thought that by receiving an anointing, the sick is already doomed to die and this was besides the fact that calling for a priest in the past was very cumbersome for people because they had to fetch the priest in a sedan and have him carried on some men's shoulders all the way to the house of the patient to be given the sacrament.

Despite the softening of the people's stance on them, the Redemptorist community still had to face certain difficulties and for this, they began on March 17, 1907, a novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help and to St. Gerard Majella, at the suggestion of Father General John Magnier "for the success of the foundation and the clearing away of difficulties".<sup>17</sup>

### **Compostela, Cebu: The first mission**

After many months of stay in the Philippines, the Redemptorists had their first mission in Compostela town. Located some 30 kilometers from the city of Cebu, the town had been without a priest since 1898. As part of their duty, the first thing that the missionaries did when they reached the town was to place a picture of Our Lady on the high altar of the parish. It had been the practice of the Redemptorists that wherever they would go in order to conduct missions they would first find a prominent place where to place the picture.<sup>18</sup> The missions would usually take place for several days to several weeks depending on the population of the place where it is to be conducted. The missionaries usually visited individual homes to invite the faithful to the village chapel or to the local church. While there, the faithful are taught Catechism, prayers and religious songs. The people were then made to receive various sacraments. Couples who had cohabited together without the benefit of a wedding were given the Sacrament of Matrimony. Children without baptism were baptized and the missionaries also heard people's confessions. Part of the program followed by the missionaries was to introduce the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. The Redemptorists also explained the symbols of the picture, which, of course, served as a visual catechism.

Compostela was unlike Opon when they first arrived. The people were very cooperative such that their first mission was highly successful. On April 15, the chronista wrote of this victorious mission: "The people were very generous towards the fathers during the week." Out of gratitude to the missionaries for visiting them, they were given "presents of fowl, eggs, bananas and other things." The people even invited them to administer their parish instead because, they claimed, "they did not want a native priest."<sup>19</sup> "So began the patronage," Fr. Baily succinctly puts it "of the Redemptorist apostolate in the Philippines by Our Mother of Perpetual Help that was to bear much fruit in missions and retreats..." in the years to come.<sup>20</sup>

The band of Redemptorists in Cebu noticed a slight improvement on people's attitude towards them since the picture was first placed in the sanctuary, although it didn't immediately

---

<sup>17</sup> Chronicles, np.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Rev. Frs. Boni Flordeliza, Willie Jesena and Ernie Garcia, Lipa, Batangas. (Date) Interview with Fr. David Clancy, Baclaran, Paranaque City.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, np.

<sup>20</sup> Bailey, p. 30

dissipate the hostility shown towards them but nonetheless almost a year after they stayed in Opon things had certainly improved so that on June 23, 1907, a Sunday, they were surprised to see a huge number of people coming to church to the extent that many people had to hear mass outside since the church was packed. But for certain, it could have been one of Our Lady's intervention since the said day was also her feast day – the first feast day of her title as Mother of Perpetual Help in the Philippines.<sup>21</sup>

### **A reprieve**

If the Redemptorists were having a problem with people, they themselves were facing a division within their ranks. While they were effectively doing missions wherever they were requested to go, some were also uncomfortable with the idea of taking charge of the parish of Opon reasoning that this was against their rule since it distracted them from their quasi-monastic way-of-life.<sup>22</sup> Having heard of such complaints, an irritated Bishop Hendrick was said to have said: "The Holy Rule is the greatest enemy of religion!"<sup>23</sup>

Although the people of Opon had already warmed up to the Redemptorists a few years later, some of the missionaries still opted to leave Opon. Fr. Leo, the superior himself, wanted to surrender Opon but this fortunately didn't happen. One member of the little band of missionaries of Opon in the person of Fr. Thomas Cassin was opposed to the idea and it was through the quiet interventions of the elderly Irish Redemptorist between his superiors and the church hierarchy in the Philippines that a reprieve was soon obtained. One day in March 1911, in a visit to the community in Opon, Msgr. Agius, the Apostolic Delegate at that time simply told them to drop the issue and give Opon five more years.<sup>24</sup>

The Apostolic Delegate's decision was providential. Had he bowed down to the grumblings, what Fr. Boylan had planted on Philippine soil would not have grown sturdy after some decades. As they say, God works in mysterious ways – it surely had been the hand of God at work. Had it not been for the "reprieve" Fr. Lynch, the superior who succeeded Fr. Leo, would not have explored Manila and the near-miraculous fame of Baclaran would not have happened later. In 1912, the Archbishop of Manila, Msgr. Jeremias Harty, applied for a foundation and offered the Redemptorists to take charge of Malate. With Fr. Lynch's recommendation, the offer was accepted by the Redemptorist Superior General Fr. Murray and the rest was history.

Malate then became the second Redemptorist house in the Philippines. Opon was later revitalized with the return of Fr. Matthew O'Callaghan. Fr. O'Callaghan was sympathetic to the people and thus earned their respects. He was also ably assisted by Fr. Tom Cassin who did missions in Bohol towns, some of which have not seen a priest for 15 years.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Chronicles, p. 95

<sup>22</sup> Bailey, pp. 21-22

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 24

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp. 43-44

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 56-57

## The missions

Conducting missions to far flung areas was a tradition started by St. Alphonsus himself which was carried on by his spiritual sons. St. Alphonsus, a devoted son of Mary, never probably expected that one day the congregation that he founded would become a religious order which would become propagators of a great Marian devotion. So great was the saint's veneration for the Mother of God that he wrote one of the spiritual classic works, the "Glories of Mary", for her. This is made more obvious in a dedicatory prayer he wrote: "My most loving Redeemer and Lord, Jesus Christ, I, your unworthy servant, know how much pleasure we give you when we praise and glorify your holy Mother. You love her so tenderly and you desire to see her known and loved by everyone. And so I have resolved to publish this book which treats of her glories..."<sup>26</sup> It seems that Our Lord had indeed favored the saintly founder such that his spiritual sons had been entrusted with the picture of His own Mother, which is truly a great honor for the saint and for all Redemptorists all around the world. But the Redemptorists themselves also venerated and loved her in return by inviting people to contemplate on her picture and ask her graces through it.

One day in June 1917 in southwestern Cebu, the missionaries themselves showed great affection to her that at the end of their mission, the people of Malabuyoc town themselves also showed their great devotion so that they asked for copies to be given them and furthermore, they also requested the missionaries to leave them the picture they brought with them. With that, missionaries had no choice but to oblige to the request.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note how people obtained pictures of Our Lady. As part of their catechetical program and also in order to have some money to support the missions, the Redemptorists brought with them and sold some devotional objects. These devotional items included books, novenas, scapulars, rosaries and pictures of Our Mother of Perpetual Help so this was one reason why the picture became very popular, even in households in far flung areas.<sup>28</sup> Residents who had been mission- recipients eagerly bought pictures of Our Lady as mementoes of the mission. These pictures were also sought-after since these were of exquisite print, having been obtained abroad.

## In other mission areas

The missionaries further explored other Visayan islands like Negros, Leyte, Iloilo, Samar, Biliran, Bohol and even Cagayan and Gingoog in Mindanao. Missionaries from Cebu went outside of the Philippines to conduct missions like those in Malacca on June 14, in Singapore on June 14-

---

<sup>26</sup> Perpetual Help in the Philippines, pp. 16-17

<sup>27</sup> Chronicles, p. 234

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Fr. Allen O'Brien, Davao City.

21, back in Malacca on June 23-28 and in Kuala Lumpur on June 30 to July 8, 1930.<sup>29</sup> Wherever they went, the missionaries introduced the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help. The mission method was still the same as in the earlier years. We can get a glimpse of how the mission was done:

“Tabuelan, Cebu: May 12-20, 1929. Population 8,000. Barrio church of St. John the Baptist, part of Tuburan. Aglipayan priest first came to the place in 1923. Tabuelan is a stronghold of the Aglipayans... The fathers heard 70 confessions & 1250 communions were distributed... Thank God some returned to the True Church. Our fathers would have brought back nearly all if there was sufficient time for at least 2 week’s mission. There was a special altar erected to Our Lady of Perpetual Help...”<sup>30</sup>

The devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help thus took its roots in Cebu with the efforts of the first missionaries who conducted various missions. Although unmentioned it can be safely deduced that the spread of the devotion to Our Lady was parcel to the missions they have undertaken. In fact, we can positively claim that out of the 213 missions that the Redemptorists did in the Visayas alone from 1914 to 1928, part of those was the introduction of Our Lady to the Visayans.<sup>31</sup>

### **Baclaran**

From Opon, some Redemptorists went to Manila in order to establish a convent there. Taking Archbishop Harty’s offer, Fr. Patrick Lynch came to Manila in June 1913 to take over the parish of Malate. The devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Manila and the outlying provinces had its start from this ancient church which, in the past, was a famous pilgrimage site for the Virgin of the Remedies.

Overtaken by the developments of the new house in Malate, the five-year reprieve in 1911 was eventually forgotten. More than a decade later, too, the Redemptorists gave up Opon in order to establish a house of their own in Cebu City. A third house was opened in Iloilo City in 1929. The devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Iloilo immediately started with the arrival of the missionaries there. The devotion immediately caught up with the Ilonggos such that not too long thereafter on June 30, 1930, the Chronicles of Iloilo reported that the feast day of Our Lady was celebrated in Janiway town, the first time it was held outside of the Redemptorist chapel in Iloilo.<sup>32</sup>

From Malate, the Redemptorists soon resettled on a three hectare property in Baclaran. On September 13, 1931, the laying of the corner stone of the house and church primarily in honor of St. Therese of the Child Jesus was made. It was Fr. Denis Grogan’s decision to dedicate these

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp. 260-261

<sup>30</sup> Chronicles, p. 227.

<sup>31</sup> Baily, p. 65

<sup>32</sup> Iloilo Chronicles, p.

to the Little Flower, a Carmelite nun from Lisieux, France, who had been recently canonized. A wooden church was eventually erected a few months later. Mass was celebrated in this new church for the first time on December 27, 1931 by Fr. Patrick Kelly in a private ceremony. A statue of the Little Flower, its patroness, done by renowned *santero* Maximo Vicente donated by one Sra. Ganson from Angeles graced the altar.<sup>33</sup>

It may have been ordained by Divine plan that the Mother of God would reign in Baclaran. Although Archbishop O'Doherty didn't want the Redemptorists to leave Malate, they ultimately did with the coming of the Columbans to take over the parish that they vacated.

According to a story, the piece of land where the shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help stands in Baclaran today had been bequeathed by a certain lady only remembered as Anastacia "to the Blessed Virgin." When the Redemptorists left Malate, Archbishop O'Doherty offered them the place so that they may be freed from parochial duties and concentrate on their work in conducting missions and retreats.<sup>34</sup>

### **An altar for Our Lady**

When the Redemptorists from Australia were about to formally settle in Baclaran, it so happened that an altar dedicated to Our Mother of Perpetual Help previously promised by a faithful benefactor, Sra Ynchausti in August 1931, had also arrived. This benefactor had earlier insisted that her altar, one dedicated to Our Mother of Perpetual Help be made as the high altar. The Redemptorists soon found themselves in a quandary as to who should be made the patroness of the new church. In order to resolve the issue, meanwhile, they referred the matter to Australia. Since Australia's response took sometime, the missionaries soon decided just to make the Ynchausti altar smaller so that it would fit the aisle but while they were about to do it one day in order to rush with the opening of both the monastery and church to the public, the awaited letter eventually arrived advising them to give the Virgin the high altar with St. Therese at her right and St. Gerard Majella on the opposite side.<sup>35</sup> Sra. Ynchausti's choice of Our Mother of Perpetual Help underscores the growing devotion to the Marian title in the Philippines then.

### **The Perpetual Novena**

With three houses in the Philippines, the Redemptorists could now reach as many people in the different provinces and towns all over the archipelago. Missions continued and with it, also the propagation of the devotion to the Mother of God. Prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War, in fact, Cebu and Iloilo had already organized confraternities dedicated to Our Lady. Every June of each year, the three monasteries also honored the Virgin with the traditional nine-day novena and a feast day that was celebrated with great solemnity.

---

<sup>33</sup> Baclaran Chronicles, p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> Hechanova, p. 60

<sup>35</sup> Baclaran, p. 76

Thrust into mayhem and confusion, and confident in the Maternal protection of their patroness, the Iloilo Redemptorists together with the members of the confraternity began on April 25, 1944, what was then termed as the Perpetual Supplication to Our Mother of Perpetual Help, upon the advice of their rector in order to restore peace in the Visayas and for the attainment of harmony in the entire Asia itself.<sup>36</sup> The Perpetual Supplication was led by Fr. John Hogan.

Despite the war, the people of Iloilo tried to maintain normalcy so that they were still able to carry out their devotions to the Mother of God. In fact, in June 1944, while some people in some parts of the country were in hiding, the people of Iloilo were still managed to celebrate the annual fiesta which was capped by a “nice procession” participated in by the men’s and children’s confraternities.<sup>37</sup>

In the annals of the history of the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help, Iloilo certainly holds an important part because of the people’s unwavering veneration for Mary despite the difficulties being encountered then. Not that there weren’t any tragedies that happened in Iloilo since the city itself also suffered heavy intermittent bombings, but the Ilonggos, led by the Redemptorists continued their devotion to the Virgin by constantly calling upon her. It is in this regard that the now popular Perpetual Novena was began in Iloilo City. Supposedly done upon the prodding of American GIs who were familiar with the novena back home, Fr. Patrick Nulty began the famous Marian devotion on May 13, 1946.<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note that before the devotion began, the Redemptorists, through Fr. Tom O’Connor had first asked Archbishop Cuenco of Jaro for its approbation that April. The archbishop, an old Redemptorist friend since the days in Opon, positively gave his blessings to the effort.

The devotion had become an instant hit such that by October 21, 1946, the chronista recorded that the number of devotees attending the novena had climbed to 500 which further doubled in August of the succeeding year.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Novena’s attraction**

On September 15, 1946, the Redemptorists of Cebu copied the novena devotions for the Cebuano populace. The first novena session in Cebu was led by its own rector Fr. McHugh.<sup>40</sup> Having visited Iloilo, the rector of Lipa also started the devotions on June 13, 1947 and from Lipa, it was brought to Baclaran. The first Perpetual Novena in Baclaran began on June 23, 1948, led by Fr. Leo English.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Iloilo Chronicles, p. 267

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pp. 270-271

<sup>38</sup> Hechanova, p. 5

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>40</sup> Cebu Chronicles II, p. 22

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 6

While the number of devotees were rising steadily in Cebu, Lipa and in Iloilo where it originally started, it was in Baclaran, however, where it had its rapid rise in popularity.

Why did the Perpetual Novena suddenly become very popular? Thus, we inquire. Was it because Filipinos had just experienced great hardships in life, especially when they were still trying to cope with the aftermath of the war that attracted them to the devotion? Not necessarily so. For most Redemptorist missionaries, especially those who had been in the congregation for many decades, it was not the difficulties but because of Our Lady herself, especially her being a mother ever ready to help or to comfort her children, that attracted many to approach her. This, the missionaries said, was because Filipinos were naturally drawn more to their own mothers.<sup>42</sup>

The rapid rise of the number of devotees, on the other hand, as in the case of Baclaran happened one day when “one of the altar boys... named Tony de Leon was one day poking around the grounds where someone had thrown out some roses.” With the news of the shower of roses in the Carmel of Lipa all over the papers then, “a journalist happened to get curious and asked him what he was looking for.” “Rose petals,” the sexton answered. “Next day, the daily bulletin reported that petals had fallen in Baclaran!” That was also one reason why people started arriving in Baclaran.<sup>43</sup>

The popularity of the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help soared higher when the novena was broadcasted in radio and TV stations. This was the case not only in Baclaran but also in Cebu, Lipa and Iloilo and other Redemptorist houses. That was what made the devotion a national phenomenon in the Philippines.<sup>44</sup>

### **50 years after Opon**

Our Mother of Perpetual Help and her Perpetual Novena had become so popular so that when other Redemptorist houses were established such as those in Legazpi, Davao, Bacolod, Dumaguete, Iligan and Tacloban, the Wednesday devotion was already flourishing in the nearby parishes which were run by the secular clergy. Due to this, families and individuals had devotions to the Mother of God. To some extent, certain families even had chapels built in her honor.

The devotion was already flourishing in Davao when the missionaries arrived there in June 1952. In fact, the Redemptorists would have wanted to dedicate the Davao foundation to St. Joseph but instead the bishop requested them to place it under the patronage of Our Lady whose Perpetual Novena was very popular in the city.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Statement from Fr. Gartlan of Cebu, Frs. Flordeliza, Jesena and Garcia of Lipa, Fr. Purcell of Dumaguete, Fr. O'Brien of Davao and Fr. Clancy of Baclaran on different occasions when the author visited them.

<sup>43</sup> Hechanova, p. 9

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>45</sup> Davao Chronicles, p. 7

The situation was similar in Legazpi in 1954 when the Redemptorist house was established there. In his recollections, Fr. David Clancy who was assigned in Legazpi described what he had witnessed there: “Our chapel was small in Legazpi but a big novena existed in the parish church, as well as in other parishes. The novena might have been introduced in Legazpi before the Redemptorists had arrived. Many priests imitated it after Baclaran.”<sup>46</sup>

We also see this ardent devotion in the case of Dumaguete. Bishop Epifanio Surban, had always cherished for Redemptorist presence in his diocese. One time, in December 1957, while on a visit to the Archbishop of Cebu, the bishop caught up with the Redemptorist provincial there. The bishop invited the provincial to visit his diocese and true enough the provincial paid the bishop a visit on January 3, 1958. They immediately went to search for a prospective place for the proposed foundation. To cut a long story short, the provincial would later end up to say mass in a hospital chapel that was built by the Teves family in honor of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. Impressed with the chapel the provincial “thought that it would be a wonderful place for the temporary foundation...”<sup>47</sup> The first batch of Redemptorist missionaries subsequently obtained permission to use the said chapel so that the nine-day devotions were held there for the eventual first feast day of Our Lady on June 27, 1958.

This was also the same case in Iligan. The Redemptorists arrived there only on October 5, 1959 and immediately found a place to serve as their temporary church. Their temporary house of worship was no other than the chapel of St. Mary’s College which was also dedicated to Our Mother of Perpetual Help. Thereafter, the first Perpetual Novena session was started by the missionaries on Nov. 4 but the novena by then was already established at the nearby St. Michael’s parish.<sup>48</sup>

After only 50 years since the first Redemptorists introduced the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Opon, the picture had already become very popular and in short a time, the Perpetual Novena which was introduced in Iloilo in 1946 also had a great following among Filipinos from all walks of life.

In retrospect, we see how the devotion to Our Lady spread in the entire Philippine archipelago in how it flourished in the Bicol region in the 50s in the recollections of one missionary to the area: “The early Redemptorists used to enthrone the picture of the Our Mother of Perpetual Help to the people... After which they were introducing the meaning of the picture but most people were quite familiar with it... In the Bicol region, they did missions in several provinces, namely Sorsogon, Camarines, Masbate, Albay, etc.. Besides, they used to go on home visitations and there they have observed the picture venerated in almost every altar.”<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Fr. Clancy, Baclaran.

<sup>47</sup> Dumaguete Chronicles, p. 1

<sup>48</sup> Iligan Chronicles, p.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Fr. Clancy, Baclaran.

This is the story of how the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help was made known and eventually flourished in the Philippines.