

## **How the Bible Came to the Philippines**

by Frank C. Laubach

Most of the early Spanish friars in the Philippines were saintly men, but their successors for the most part degenerated until, during the last two centuries, they were like spiders, holding both Filipinos and Spanish officials in a web of ignorance. They prevented the Filipinos from learning Spanish, and they saw to it that any Spanish official who learned a Filipino dialect was sent away. Because the friars were the only interpreters, they held both governors and governed at their mercy. They allowed no Bibles or other dangerous literature to fall into the hands of laymen. Even Filipino priests at that time were given only small "safe" portions of the Scriptures, which they were told to allow the people to hear but never to see.

Meanwhile, just across the China Sea in Singapore, the British Bible Society "prayed and pondered long over such impenetrable regions as Tibet, Persia and the Philippines." In their employ was a young German Bible seller named Heinrich Hoffenden. One day – it was in 1870 – he came into the office of the society full of excitement, and exclaimed, "Spain is a republic, and has sent a liberal governor to the Philippines. He has promised religious liberty, and the people have gone wild. Our prayers are answered. Give me some Bibles and let me go! "

So they sent him off on the next boat to Manila with a thousand Spanish Bibles. They left off the usual front pages and covers of these books so that nobody would recognize that they were Bibles, and called them sacred history. However, Hoffenden soon found that this precaution was needless. Everybody who could read Spanish bought the book all the more eagerly just because it was Protestant. But suddenly the short Spanish republic ended. The friars came back into power in the Philippines, and Hoffenden was lucky to escape with his life.

At every mass, the friars announced: "An agent of the devil has been selling false Bibles. All who deliver the books to us and do penance will be absolved, otherwise they will reap the swift vengeance of God."

A terrified penitent in the town of Manawag, Pangasinan, turned in his Bible to a Dominican named Manrique Alonzo Lallave, one of the few remaining friars of the heroic fifteenth-century type. From a sense of duty he read this "work of the devil" which Hoffenden had sold. As he followed the life of Jesus through the Gospels, the friar had a week of terrible struggle with his conscience. The next Sunday he stood before his astonished people and said, "My children, I have read the book which I condemned last week, and find I was grievously mistaken. It is the purest spring of eternal truth. I may never see you again after today, but if God gives me life I shall somewhere, some day, atone by putting this Bible into your own language so that you may read it for yourselves."

Father Lallave was summoned at once to Manila and excommunicated that same week. Some friends led him at midnight down dark back streets to

the seashore, rowed him out to an English ship in the harbor, and saw him sail off to safety. He went to England, where he became an Episcopal minister. Ten years later he went on to Spain, and became a warm friend of a missionary named Eric Lund.

One day he told Lund of a plan for carrying the Bible into the Philippines, translated into the dialects. In the room as they talked was a Spanish youth named Felipe P. Castells, twenty years of age. He had been such a bad boy and so unmanageable that his parents had sent him away from home. He had accepted an invitation to live with the Lunds, and had become an intense Christian, eager to do something heroic. As he listened to the plan of Lallave his eyes flashed and he exclaimed, "Please take me – I must go with you!"

Father Lallave finished his translation of the Gospels into Pangasinan and had it printed. Then he and his young friend fixed a false bottom in their trunk and placed under it seven Spanish Bibles, a Spanish Testament, and a Chinese Bible. The Pangasinan Gospels they carried with them in boxes, hoping that the government officials could not read the language and would let them by for a few coins.

As secretly as possible they steamed out of Barcelona, passing through the Suez Canal. They left two of their boxes of Singapore, and ventured on to Manila. This was in the year 1888. Their trunk arrived safely, but not the box of Pangasinan Gospels. Within a week both men were violently ill. An English doctor saved Castells' life, but old Father Lallave died.

The daring youth rose from his bed, weak and grief-stricken as he was, tore the false bottom out of his trunk, went out on the street, approached passers-by, and sold his nine Bibles one by one until he was arrested. But the mysterious death of the old priest and the courage of the young man aroused a wave of sympathy and admiration. Some powerful Spaniards in Manila succeeded in persuading the governor general to place the young Spaniard on a boat and send him away, with strict orders never to return. Thus his life was saved. But the enraged friars not only drove out the governor, but sent many of those who had helped the young man to death or to exile. It would be interesting to know the fate of each of the nine volumes Castells sold, but we can trace only one of them down to this day.

Don Luis Yangco, a wealthy Filipino, passed a pale young Spaniard leaning against the wall. The youth asked in a low voice, "Senor, do you wish this book?"

"What is it?" asked the old man, taking it in his hands.

"The Bible! In Spanish! Three pesos."

"The Bible!" exclaimed the Filipino, turning pale and looking in every direction. "Yes. Here is the money."

Don Luis thrust the book under his coat and hurried on. At night he read

secretly, hiding the book in the nipa roof of his house by day. Nobody knew he had it except his son Teodoro. In 1896 Don Luis was thrown into the dungeons of Fort Santiago, and was one of the eleven hundred whom the American troops saved when they entered Manila. But Teodoro had saved the Bible and read it every day. As soon as they heard of the Evangelical meetings, father and son attended. When asked to tell his experience, Don Luis held up a very old, much used Spanish Bible and said, "So far as I know, my son and I were the first Protestants in the Philippines. We have been reading this book since 1888."

We now pick up another dramatic thread. Three Filipino priests were killed by the Spanish *garrote* just before José Rizal's mother was arrested in 1872. One of these priests was Father Jacinto Zamora. There never was a more innocent man, and all the Zamora family knew it. They chafed for some opportunity to break away from the control of the friars. Paulino Zamora, a nephew of Jacinto, approached an old sea captain and said, "I will give you a hundred pesos if you will smuggle a Spanish Bible into this country for me." Three months later he had his Bible.

Knowing that it was dangerous to own this book in Manila, Paulino Zamora moved to Bulacan. There, behind closed doors every night, he read the precious book to his family by the dim light of a torch. The tensest face of all was that of his brilliant son Nicolas. The boy's mother was dead, and his father meant everything in the world to him. As the words came earnestly from the father's lips, Nicolas stored them in his memory and spent the next day repeating them. They set a fire burning in his young veins. With tremendous sacrifice his father saved enough money to hire a private tutor for Nicolas, who later attended the Santo Tomás University, where he took a degree in law. Then Rizal was shot, and the revolution was on. The Zamora house was surrounded, and the father was exiled to the Cheferina Islands. The son escaped and joined the revolution. He carried the precious Bible with him, and spent his spare moments reading it aloud to the soldiers, translating from Spanish to Tagalog as he read.

The war ended. Paulino Zamora returned from exile. "Father," said the son, after the first glad welcome, "these Americans are holding religious services, and I have been attending. Five of us asked them to open a Filipino service, and they are beginning tonight. "

"Thank God!" exclaimed the frail old exile. "The very thought of it makes me feel fifty years younger." So when Arthur Prutch opened his meeting that night, these two, father and son, sat on the front seat beside Luis and Teodoro Yangco. When Mr. Prutch asked Paulino Zamora if he had any suggestions, he replied, "I am not a public speaker, but I think my son Nicolas will say something."

The youth arose. Suddenly Arthur Prutch looked up in amazement. This young stranger, in perfect Spanish, with a voice like music, was telling of the garroting of his uncle; of the Bible his father had read, and entire books which he had himself memorized; of hundreds of others who he knew had

read the precious book for years; and suddenly he broke into prayer: "Blessed God, we thank Thee that the lock is off this book, which has so often before been the magna charta of freedom. Praise God, it is no longer a crime to read the Bible." And the Filipinos, forgetting it was a prayer, broke out into applause.

Nicolas Zamora became the first and, until his death in 1914, the greatest Filipino preacher. His work largely explains why Bishop Thoburn in 1899 could write back to America: "What was my amazement to find six hundred and sixty-two men, women, and children asking for baptism, and when I questioned them I found them better acquainted with the Bible than any group I ever examined. When I asked the young preacher to read the scripture lesson he did not use the Bible, for he knew the chapter by heart."

Old Father Lallave and Felipe Castells had left two boxes of Pangasinan Gospels in Singapore before their fatal but fruitful trip to Manila. The British Bible Society kept these for ten years, hoping for another better chance. The surrender of Manila to General Merritt flashed through the cables, and the very next boat brought Charles Randall from Singapore with these Gospels, now yellow with age, and a big supply of Spanish Bibles. One of them Randall presented to General Aguinaldo, whose face, wrote Randall, "was radiant as he thanked us over and over, and assured us he would begin reading at once."

Then Charlie Glunz and Frank Jackson, the men who held that first Protestant meeting in a tent, went with Charlie Randall to Dagupan, the parish of Father Lallave, to sell the Pangasinan Gospels which he had translated. "Tell the people," Randall said to an interpreter, "that old Father Lallave would have brought them himself if poison had not stopped him."

The news spread like wildfire. The three Americans were nearly mobbed to death. A Chinese merchant, seeing the situation, called, "Come inside!" So they retreated into the store, locked the door behind them, and passed the Gospels out through the iron bars of the windows. An hour later the boxes were empty.

The Filipino exiles who had escaped to Spain and there planned the liberation of their country, determined that the Bible should be unlocked to their people. Pascual Poblete in Madrid started to translate it into Tagalog. Cayatano Lukban started it in Bicol. Braulio Manikan, who lived with Eric Lund, started it in Visayan. Isabelo de los Reyes started it in Ilocano, and it brought out something in him which illustrates what dynamic energy is latent in the book.

Reyes had lain in prison until America defeated Spain. When released, he had wandered through the streets of Barcelona in destitution, and had been picked up by an anarchists' club which soon made him a desperate foe of government and religion. He had been thrown into prison again for blowing up a building. There Raymond Walker, of the British and Foreign Bible Society, found him and gave him a New Testament, and the young Filipino caught a

vision of Christ. When he was released from prison he translated the New Testament into Ilocano.

Many thousands of fathers and mothers who had never gone to school learned the alphabet from their children so that they might read the sacred book. Old Feliza Malahay, of Guijulngan, when she was past ninety was taught to read by her eleven-year-old great-great-granddaughter, because, as she said, she "had to see the story of Jesus for herself."

Thus, did many factors work together to bring the Bible to the people of the Philippines: the spirit of liberty, the effort of the public schools, teaching millions to read; the toil of translators and of printers; and above all, the courage of all those who labored under persecution to give the Bible to the nation.

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