The First Encounter: An Idyll of Innocence

When on Saturday, the 16th of March 1521, the ships of Hernando Magallanes stumbled upon a group of islands at the southern tip of Samar, the event may be interpreted as an accident of history. Certainly, neither Magellan nor anyone else in his expedition had intended to land here, for they had never heard of the islands which we now call the Philippines. They were looking for the Moluccas, where the coveted spices were grown. His coming here was therefore, from a secularist point of view, entirely accidental. But from another point of view — in the light of a philosophy (or better still a theology) of history that acknowledges the workings of Providence — Magellans coming was not an accident: he was guided here.

To the students of Philippine culture, it was fortunate that Magellan had with him a perceptive and conscientious chronicler — Antonio Pigafetta — who has given to the world a fascinating account not only of the voyage but also of the people whom they found in these islands.¹ This is how he describes that first encounter at the uninhabited island where the Spaniards had pitched their tents for the sick:

On Monday afternoon, March 18, we saw a boat coming toward us with nine men in it... When those men reached the shore, their chief went immediately to the captain-general [Magellan] giving signs of joy because of our arrival. Five of the most ornately adorned among them remained with us, while the rest went to get some others who were fishing, and so they all came. The captain-general, seeing that they were reasonable men, ordered food to be set before them, and gave them red caps, mirrors, bells, ivory... When they saw the captain’s courtesy they presented fish, a jar of palm wine which they call uraca [arak or alak] figs more than a palm long [bananas] and

¹For bibliographical data on works cited in (or used in the preparation of) this volume, see the Bibliographical Appendix., below, beginning page 349.
others which were smaller and more delicate, and two coconuts. They had nothing else then, but made signs with their hands that they would bring umay or rice and coconuts and many other articles of food within four days.

The Visayans. — That was the first encounter between the natives of these Islands and the white men from Europe. It was clear that the Visayans were not a primitive people. Unlike savages, they were not timid or fearful: they approached the strangers of their own accord. They were friendly, hospitable. Nor were they mendicants: they accepted hospitality and gifts, but they also offered gifts in return. Also they were courteous: "When they were about to retire they took their leave very gracefully and neatly, saying they would return according to their promise."

They were as good as their word. At noon on Friday, March 22, the men came back in two boats, bringing with them coconuts, sweet oranges, a jar of palm-wine, and a cock. "They exhibited great pleasure in seeing us," says Pigafetta; "We purchased all those articles from them."

From this small islet on the outskirts of the archipelago, Magellan's fleet sailed to another island which Pigafetta calls Mazaua — Limasawa on our maps — off the southern coast of Leyte. There they encountered a flourishing community. As soon as the fleet had anchored near the island, a small canoe with eight men paddled towards the ship but remained some distance away, uncertain whether the ships were friend or enemy. The Samaran interpreter on board the Spanish vessel shouted some friendly words to them: reassured, they came alongside Magellan's ship. A red cap and some trinkets tied to a piece of wood were thrown down to them. The natives in the boat accepted the gifts and then paddled away to inform their leader, whom they called rajah (king). About two hours later two large boats called balanghai (barangay) came, filled with people. In one of them sat the king under an awning of woven mats. The king ordered some of his men to go aboard the Spanish vessel, but he himself kept his dignity and remained in his balanghai until his men returned. Magellan "showed great honor to the men who had boarded his vessel and gave them some presents"; the rajah, when he saw the presents, offered to pay for them by giving the Spaniards a large bar of gold and a basketful of ginger. Magellan thanked the rajah but declined the presents.
But the next day, Magellan sent his interpreter ashore to ask the king to sell them foodstuffs. The response could not have been more cordial. The rajah gathered foodstuffs and brought them in person. This time he boarded Magellan’s ship and embraced the captain-general. The gifts which he brought with him were substantial. They included three porcelain jars covered with leaves and filled with rice grain. There were two “dorados,” a kind of fish which Pigafetta described as “very large.” And there were “other things” — probably foodstuffs.

It is interesting to note the quality of the gifts that the Visayans had brought to Magellan. How paltry in comparison were most of the “gifts” that the Spaniards had brought along with them! Magellan’s original cargo had included 1,000 small mirrors and 20,000 little bells. There were 500 pounds in weight of little bits of colored glass, and 200 colored caps. To these trinkets were added some articles of real value: knives; some expensive pieces of clothing intended for chiefs and rulers; and some 10,000 fishing hooks. Since the Visayans did not possess much iron or steel, the fishing hooks and the knives must have been very desirable. But for the most part, the “gifts” were baubles intended to catch the eye of primitive peoples. How was Magellan to know, when he was laying in this cargo of trinkets, that in the remote Islands of the West (“las Islas del Poniente”) of whose existence he did not yet dream, he would encounter a people whose gifts of porcelain and gold would far surpass in value the trinkets he was bringing with him from Europe?

At Magellan’s request the chief of Limasawa named Rajah Awi agreed to take two of the foreigners with him to his island. They were to be (to use the modern idiom) this house guests for one night. Pigafetta, who was one of the two thus chosen, was impressed by the quaint but civilized manners of his native hosts. They drank heavily but with ceremony, toasting each other before every draught. They ate plain food, but out of porcelain platters. They slept on a hard bed: a bamboo mat with a pillow of leaves; but what they lacked in comfort was made up in friendliness; and the following day, when Pigafetta and his companion were about to take their leave to return to the ships, the king made an extraordinary gesture of reverence and affection: “He kissed our hands with great joy, and we his.” No wonder that in subsequent expeditions — notably those of Villalobos and
Legazpi — the Spaniards would make it a point to revisit the island of Limasawa.

Mass Conversion

Perhaps Magellan and the priests with him had an additional basis for their decision to baptize these people. The Europeans had obviously been impressed by the fact that the inhabitants of Cebu were not a primitive tribe of barbarians but a highly civilized community. These were not a nomadic people. They lived in villages, cultivated fields, were governed by laws and customs, led organized lives. They obviously had highly-developed arts and crafts, for their gold ornaments and their daggers and knives were of excellent workmanship. They lacked iron and steel, but they had plenty of other metals, mainly gold and brass. They had strict notions of justice and of property. They had a system of weights and measures. They had civilized methods of trading, both among themselves and with outsiders. To be sure, they had their faults. They drank rather freely. They tended to be lazy. They were not always monogamous. But they were a stable society. They believed in a supreme being. They were reverent. They were friendly. Above all, they had said that they wanted to become Christians. Why should they not be baptized?

The Baptism. — The great event took place on Sunday, April 14, only one week after the Spaniards had landed in Cebu. It took place in the public square, where on the preceding day a stage had been constructed and adorned with palm leaves.

Before Magellan disembarked, an artillery salute was fired from the ships. With Magellan, forty other Spaniards got into the boats and were rowed to the shore. From there they marched in procession to the square, with the royal banner of Spain at the head, escorted by two Spanish soldiers in full armor. Upon reaching the square, Magellan embraced the rajah of Cebu and the two of them ascended the stage and sat upon cushioned chairs. The other chiefs and principal men sat on cushions on the floor, the remainder on mats.

The ceremony began with the planting of a wooden cross in the middle of the square. (It is a stylized replica of that first cross which is
venerated to this day in a circular pavilion in Cebu City, on the site of the old public square. Then the rajah of Cebu was baptized and given the name “Don Carlos,” after Charles V of Spain. His nephew and heir was christened Fernando. The rajah of Limasawa was renamed Juan. The other chiefs and principal men were then baptized, to the number of fifty. The holy sacrifice of the Mass was then offered, followed by other baptisms.

At noon the Spaniards retired to their ships for the noon-day meal. Magellan invited the rajah and his principal chiefs to dine with him, but they declined. They, however, accompanied Magellan to the seashore where the Spaniards got into their boats and were rowed back to the ships.

In the afternoon, it was the ladies’ turn. The priests and some of the Spanish laymen again went ashore to baptize the queen and her entourage. She came accompanied by forty women, most of whom were dressed only in a skirt. But the queen herself was elegantly attired in a long robe of white and black. She was “young and beautiful,” says Pigafetta:

Her mouth and nails were very red, while on her head she wore a large hat of palm leaves in the manner of a parasol, with a crown upon it of the same leaves like the tiara of the Pope; and she never goes anywhere without such a hat.

The queen was conducted to the platform and was seated on a cushion until the priests were ready. Before the baptismal ceremony, they showed her three Christian images: a cross, a statue of the Mother of God, and “a very beautiful wooden [image of] the Child Jesus.” These three images moved her very much: “Thereupon she was overcome with contrition, and asked for baptism amid her tears.” She also asked if she might keep the statue of the Child Jesus: the priests could not give it to her for it was not theirs to give; but they took note of her request and informed Magellan.

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Maximilianus Transylvanus in his “De Moluccis Insulis” published by the Guild in 1969 as part of Pigafetta’s relation, categorically states: (p. 123) “Our men saw from on board the ships that the handsome cross, which they had set up in a tree, was torn down by the natives and cut up into fragments.”

On the number of those baptized, see the note on Pigafetta in the Bibliographical Appendix below, page 349.
Like her husband, the queen at her baptism was given a new name: Doña Juana, after the Spanish queen, mother of the Emperor Charles V. Would the queen of Cebu have been flattered had she known that her Spanish namesake was insane? The other forty ladies were also baptized and given new names. The wife of Humabon’s nephew was christened Catalina. Rajah Awî of Limasawa appears to have brought his wife along; she was given the name Isabel—“Lisabela” in Pigafetta’s Italianized Spanish.

After the aristocrats, the commoners followed. On that day, no less than 800 Visayans were baptized, “counting men, women and children.” Among those baptized was the Bornean (or “Siamese”) Muslim trader, who was given the name Cristobal (Christopher), thus becoming a namesake of the great Columbus who had discovered a new world for Spain.

Later that evening, there was great rejoicing in Cebu. Spaniards and Visayans mingled on the shore to watch the fireworks provided by the Spanish gunners and to listen to the firing of mortars. Magellan and Humabon (alias Don Carlos) now “called each other brothers.”

During the rest of the week, more and more of the natives were baptized. By week’s end, “everyone on the island” had been baptized—by which the chronicler doubtless meant the town of Cebu and the surrounding villages under Humabon’s hegemony. Among those baptized were the inhabitants of one of the villages on the nearby island of Mactan, whose chief was named Sula.

But another village on Mactan named Bulaia suffered the fate of the non-conformist—not because they refused baptism, which they did, but because they refused to accept the suzerainty of Humabon and by implication of the Castilian king’s: “We burned one hamlet which was located in a neighboring island, because it refused to obey the king [Humabon] or us.” This burning of a village was a stupid and disastrous blunder. As it turned out, Bulaia was not the only non-conformist village on Mactan. There was another, ruled by Lapulapu.

Indeed, this was the unfortunate element in the great event on Easter Sunday, when the people of Cebu were baptized in such large numbers. What should have been a purely religious ceremony was turned into a political event, giving the impression that baptism and vassalage went hand in hand. Before the ceremony of baptism,
Magellan exacted from the various chieftains an oath of obedience to Humabon. Here is how Pigafetta describes this incident:

The captain told the king through the interpreter that he thanked God for inspiring him to become a Christian; and that [now] he would more easily conquer his enemies than before. The king replied that he wished to become a Christian, but that some of his chiefs did not wish to obey, because they said that they were as good men as he. Then our captain had all the chiefs of the king called, and told them that unless they obeyed the king as their king, he would have them killed, and would give their possessions to the king. They replied that they would obey him. The captain told the king that he was going to Spain, but that he would return again with so many forces that he would make him the greatest king of those regions, as he had been the first to express a determination to become a Christian. The king, lifting his hands to the sky, thanked the captain and requested him to let some of his men remain [with him], so that he and his people might be better instructed in the faith. The captain replied that he would leave two men to satisfy him, but that he would like to take two of the children of the chiefs with him, so that they might learn our language, who afterward on their return would be able to tell the others the wonders of Spain.

This identification of baptism with an oath of allegiance to an earthly ruler was dangerous. Later, the repudiation of one would mean the rejection of the other.

Meanwhile, during the next few days, Magellan had himself rowed ashore daily from his flagship in order to be present at Mass in the public square. These daily Masses were public events, and they were made the occasion for other ceremonies, some of which had political implications. On one such occasion, the oath of allegiance was repeated, by which the chieftains swore fealty to Humabon, but this time Humabon in turn had to swear allegiance to the King of Castile.

Before Mass one day, the captain-general had the king come clad in his silk robe, and the chief men of the city, [to wit], the king's brother and the prince's father, whose name was Bendara; another of the king's brothers, Cadaio; and certain ones called Simiut, Sibuia, Sisacai, Maghalibe, and many others whom I shall not name in order not to be tedious. The captain made them all swear to be obedient to their king, and they kissed the latter's hand. Then the
captain had the king declare that he would always be obedient and faithful to the king of Spain, and the king so swore. Thereupon, the captain drew his sword before the image of our Lady, and told the king that when anyone so swore, he should prefer to die rather than to break such an oath; so that he swore by that image, by the life of the emperor his sovereign, and by his habit to be ever faithful.

This ceremony was followed by another exchange of gifts, this time of a more symbolic value. Magellan presented the rajah of Cebu with a red velvet chair, "telling him that wherever he went he should always have it carried before him by one of his nearest relatives; and he showed him how it should be carried." It is clear that in Magellan's mind, Humabon should become a grand monarch, after the fashion of European kings. But the king of Cebu, brought up in a narrower tradition, could think only of personal ornaments. He promised Magellan that he would have his goldsmiths make jewels for the Spanish captain's personal use. Magellan must have been amused when he was told what these jewels were to be: large earrings of gold for his ears; gold armlets for his arms above the elbow; and large gold anklets. "Those are the most beautiful ornaments which the kings of those districts can wear."

On another occasion it was the queen's turn to hear Mass with her attendants. She was very beautiful, noted Pigafettta, and Magellan treated her with gallantry, sprinkling her with musk before Mass. It was on that occasion that he presented to her the gift which she had desired: the image of the Child Jesus. Magellan told her to venerate it instead of her idols. It is of course not clear how this idea could have been conveyed to her, for it must have taxed the linguistic powers of the Sumatran interpreter.

In this manner, bartering, conversing, and worshipping together, the two peoples seemed to have forged such an alliance that Magellan took up the native rajah's cause and offered to fight his war for him against Lapulapu. It was a quixotic act, not unmixed with overconfidence and a little showing off. And it ended in tragedy.
Was it a Real Conversion?

Such was the beginning of Christianity in the Philippines: within one week the king, the queen and the entire population of Cebu were baptized. Was it not perhaps a pathetic case of misunderstanding? Were not the Spaniards and the natives operating on different wavelengths? The Spaniards understood the baptismal ceremony to be a real sacrament of the faith, admitting new Christians into the church. How did the rajah of Cebu and his subjects understand it? Can we dismiss the possibility that the Cebuanos understood this ceremony as merely the Spanish counterpart of the blood-compact? After all, if they could impose their native ceremony upon Magellan, why could not Magellan impose his Spanish ceremony upon them as a sign of alliance and friendship?

Or even if they understood it as a solemn religious ceremony in honor of the Christian God, did they also understand it as a total conversion by which they abandoned their ancient religion in favor of the new one? Were they not perhaps exercising their native tolerance, willing to accept the religious practices of others in addition to their own, as the ancient Greeks were willing to set up an additional altar to one more unknown god?

These are questions which the historian must ask, even with no hope of knowing the answers. Without being a debunker, and without wishing to belittle the meaning of one of the great events of our history, the historian cannot help but entertain misgivings. Without proper instruction, without even a common language in which instruction could be given, how could the natives have been expected to understand — within one week — that baptism was not a mere ceremony of friendship but a sacrament of conversion, giving them a new life based on faith in Christ, and implying total acceptance of His teaching?

We should not be too harsh in our judgment of the Europeans. How were they to know, in their inexperience, that a much longer and more far-reaching catechumenate was needed to turn an Oriental animist into a Christian?

There was for example the question of polygamy. Pigafetta noted that the natives could take several wives. He also perceived a certain sexual proclivity. How was Christianity to deal with a situation in
which the new converts may have entertained ideals of marriage and of chastity different from those taught by the Christian theologians?

There was also the question of the animist cult. On one occasion Magellan expostulated with the natives that, although they had been baptized Christians, they continued to placate the spirits with religious sacrifices to bring about the cure of a sick man. But was it reasonable to expect a whole nation, within one week, to give up its long-acclimated rituals and folk-beliefs?

There was also the question of slavery. Pigafetta noted that slaves were sold for export. Later, Legazpi discovered that slaves were killed at a funeral. Fray Juan de Plasencia, working among the Tagalogs of Laguna and Tayabas, discovered that when a chief died, a living slave was tied to the corpse and buried with him, thus condemning the wretch to a horrible death. Father Chirino, who had worked in the Jesuit missions among both the Tagalogs and the Visayans, tells us that occasionally, when an important person died, several of his slaves were given a fine meal and then killed so that their master would not go alone to his grave. This was not an exclusively Philippine custom. It was common in the East, where in some places wives were expected to accompany their husbands in death.

How was Christiniaty to deal with that?

In the long run, Christianity did prevail in these islands, and the real criterion by which to measure its success was that, despite great odds ethnic and otherwise, certain practices were stamped out which were incompatible with Christianity. Certainly we no longer kill our servants to accompany us when we die. Nor are servants slaves.

Christianity certainly succeeded in the long run. But for a while, after the first encounter, it seemed to fail. The death of Magellan must have produced a terrible feeling of disillusionment among the newly baptized natives. They had been led to believe in the invincibility of the Spanish armor and in the superiority of the European cannon over the native spears. One Spaniard in armor, Magellan had boasted, was equal to one hundred naked natives. And Magellan in full armor had been massacred by the bare-breasted warriors of Mactan.

The reaction in Cebu to Magellan's death was immediate: and it showed how fickle was the pact of friendship, even though sealed in blood, and how superficial was the faith publicly professed in the baptismal ceremony. It also showed that, beneath the charming facade
of civilized manners, there lurked in the natives — as in even the most advanced nations — a remnant of the eternal savage. Who would have thought that the highly advanced Germans would create places like Dachau and Buchenwald? Who would have expected the friendly Humabon to turn against his allies? But that was what happened. While the Spaniards were in their ships, nursing their wounds from the battle of Mactan, the rajah sent word inviting them to come ashore to dinner, at which, he said, he would give them the jewels that his goldsmiths had made for Magellan. Twenty-six men went ashore. Twenty-four were treacherously killed.

That was one act of treachery, perpetrated by new Christian converts. There was another, committed by old Christians. Among those who had gone ashore was Magellan's trusted friend, Serrano, who had been elected to succeed him as captain-general. Also among those who went ashore was Father Valderrama, the chief chaplain. While the other Spaniards were being butchered by their treacherous hosts, Serrano was able to escape to the seashore where his comrades aboard ship could see him and hear his shouts. Despite his cries for help, the Spaniards in the ship weighed anchor and set sail, leaving behind to their fate their new captain-general, their chief chaplain, and the twenty-four others.

They did leave something else behind, however. Forty-four years later, when the Spaniards returned to Cebu under Legazpi, they received a hostile reception from the natives of Cebu. Angered by this hostility, the Spaniards sent the natives fleeing and ransacked their homes. In one of the houses they discovered an image of the Child Jesus, obviously the one that Magellan had given to the queen almost half a century earlier. The pillaging Spanish soldiers did not know this and they thought that they were witnessing a miracle. It was a Basque soldier who discovered the statue, and Father Chirino records the interjection that escaped his lips: something like, "Good heavens, what is this?" — except that he said it in Basque.

The finding of the statue was considered a good omen. It had not been desecrated, but there was also every indication that it had been discarded. Was this not, perhaps, another instance where — as the Psalmist puts it — " the stone which the builders had rejected has become the cornerstone" of the building?
A False Start

Thus did the faith make a start in these islands. It was perhaps a false start. Forty-four years later, under Legazpi, the missionaries who came with him would make a slower, better start. But, that, also, would be marred by a serious defect: for the Spaniards who had come to make the people Christian, had also come to conquer and colonize. In doing so, they destroyed — as we shall see — the wealth, culture and social fabric of the native population. As a result, those who embraced the faith had to pay a heavy price for that dear possession.

Magellan’s visit to the islands, prior to that fatal day of his death, had been an idyll of cordiality and trust. The Spaniards had come in friendship, and were received as friends by a hospitable people. The tragedy of Mactan, and the greater tragedy in Cebu, shattered that idyll.

It was further shattered by other events in succeeding years, when the Portuguese joined the Moluccans in slave-hunting trips to the Visayas.

When Legazpi came — only four decades after Magellan — he found the natives no longer friendly. Hospitality had been replaced with hostility, trust with treachery. Cebu, which had welcomed Magellan with open arms, had to be conquered by Legazpi’s sword. And Limasawa, where Magellan had spent a pleasant week among a prosperous people and where Mass had been offered for the first time on Philippine soil, was, at Legazpi’s coming, nothing but a desolate island with almost no inhabitants.