

PARISH PRIEST IN A WAR ZONE LETTERS FROM FR. ARTHUR SHEA, S.J.

Annotations by John J. Carroll, S.J.

The town of Bayug, Zamboanga del Sur was truly a war zone in the mid-1980's. It lies in a valley with mountains on three sides, and the military, the New People's Army, and the Tadtad—a fanatical sect used by the military against the NPA—were engaged in a lethal game of hide-and-seek. The chief victims, however, were ordinary poor farmers caught in between the armed groups.

Fr. Arthur Shea, S.J., a Jesuit well into his 70's, was parish priest of Bayug, and I recently dug out a file of letters from him which I and Fr. Kenneth Bogart, S.J. had had the foresight to save. They give a vivid picture of life in the midst of a guerilla war, and incidentally of the remarkable personalities of Fr. Shea, his assistant Fr. Francisco Montecastro, S.J., and Bishop Federico Escaler, S.J., in whose prelature Bayug lay. What follows are quotations from the letters, with occasional explanatory notes.

John J. Carroll, S.J.

I am spending more money than I ever had to spend before in so short a time; it comes from the Bishop rebuilding a barrio burned by the Military back in March. The Bishop got past [sic] of the fund out of the Army. The project crowds my schedule.

We had a funeral Monday of a man killed the night before by allegedly unknown persons, though everybody knows. He had received four warnings to pay his workers and to give the gatherers of rattan a fair break. I do believe he was a scoundrel, an exploiter of the weak, but it sets the program to be followed by the Right when they are in the mountains and the Left is in Malacañang, Camp Crame and is running Bicutan. When will the Civil War end?

Sunday Nov. 24

The body of my slain worker Gregorio Inso¹ was brought to the Church to lie in state for a week. Different parish groups watched each night. I said Mass [at] about 4 a.m. before the watchers returned home. My days were occupied hearing confessions in the public schools, [and with] preparation[s] for Christmas. One day a barrio fiesta.

The funeral mass was scheduled for 10 a.m. We had to wait for the arrival of the Bishop.² He would be the final judge of the route of the procession. About nine, word was brought to me that the police carrying rifles were guarding the corner. I went there. I was angry though in control of my anger. In as loud a voice as I could raise, I inquired the purpose of their being there and asked to see the man who was in authority. I was talking to the Chief of Police. I actually felt ashamed that I did not know the Chief of Police. I had no reason

¹Gregorio Inso, a farm laborer, was a parish worker and chair of the Justice and Peace Committee of the parish. He followed up the burning of houses by the military in Barrio Sigacad, and on the insistence of the Bishop the military provided some money for rebuilding, which Inso supervised. The officer responsible for the burning was disciplined, and it was commonly believed that it was he who later shot and killed Inso in the latter's house.

²Bishop Federico Escaler, S.J., Prelate of Ipil.

to be. He was from out of town and had assumed office only during the past week. He asked me to talk peacefully. I thundered that I would not talk peacefully while surrounded by rifles. My voice was my only weapon. He ordered the armed men to a distance and we had a peaceful talk. He was acting under orders from the Mayor. He asked me to go to the Mayor. The police were there for our security. I assured him that the only threat to our security was the Mayor; I could not appeal to him. He was startled when I told him I hoped he used the tear-gas the police had prepared. I was not supposed to know about that. I proceeded as far as the municipio, pointing an accusing finger at every rifle; there were only 19. Enough to kill a lot of people. The Mayor had very foolishly said that the banning of the procession was to avoid another Escalante. Several weeks ago in Escalante, Negros, the police fired on the demonstration of unarmed farmers killing more than twenty people. Coming from the lips of the Mayor sending out police armed, that was a threat.

Bayog has no fire department. The fire truck from Buug, 19 km. distant, rolled in bringing police reinforcement too. So they had the water cannon ready for us. I realized that W.S. Gilbert could have written the libretto, but the bullets were for real.

The Bishop arrived about 9:45. We drove right to the house of the Mayor. The Chief of Police was with the Mayor. We discussed for about fifteen minutes. The Mayor protested that we had no permit for the procession. The Bishop replied that no permit was required for a funeral procession. Deadlock. The Bishop asked for a piece of paper and wrote out a request for the procession going by the Mercado and the Municipal Hall. The Mayor refused to sign. The Bishop demanded that he sign his refusal to grant the permit and told him that his signed refusal would be in the hands of authorities in Manila in a few days. The Mayor backed down and signed the permit.

And now it is hard for me to believe that Gregorio Inso will not be at the desk in the office tomorrow. I have lost relatives and close friends whom I loved more deeply than I loved Greg. But the course of our lives had kept us physically distant for years; and the loss, however deeply felt, made no change in one's everyday order. I will never get a

better man and Christian qua man and Christian to serve me. About the month before the murder I spoke to him about the danger to his life. Yet he never considered stopping or suspending his service. He was in the strictest sense a ‘Martyr of Christ.’

March 8, 1986

I have heard of self-fulfilling prophecies but never before of self-thwarting scenarios. The earlier letter of the bishops would never have been written if they had not read the scenarios and their truly revolutionary second letter was possible only as a follow-up of the first.³ There could have been no revolution without that second letter. The Bishops have demonstrated to the episcopacies of the world that action in politics is not a Petrine privilege.⁴ And the Holy Father may come to realize that Orders does not dispense priests from the obligation God imposed when he made man societal.

And what will the Holy Father think when he sees the Madres on the Betamax? And the Madres around the world! I am no enthusiast for Madre-lib but I suspect that their participation in the local Revolution will boost the global Sisters Revolution.

As was foreseeable in Bayog at least, the Cory supporters immediately split into two factions. One leader is a model specimen of our old politicians; when he was defeated for re-election back around 1970 or before, the municipio was burned that night. Can Cory find enough honest candidates for government on the provincial and local levels to change any effective campaign against corruption?

March 10, 1986

³Reference is to the “scenarios” produced and distributed by the Institute on Church and Social Issues before the “snap election” of February 1986, and to the statement of the Philippine Bishops following the election and characterizing the latter as fraudulent and as providing no moral basis for the Marcos regime’s remaining in power.

⁴A humorous expression, meaning that it is not reserved for the Pope.

Yesterday I was talking to a farmer who is in a position to estimate and whose judgment is quite reliable. He estimates the NPA in this area to be over 500. "This area" is a vogue term. It would include the mountains of Bayog, Lakewood along Sindangan, a town on [the] northern coast, an area 20 or 25 kilometers long. At any rate there are many more than I estimated.

July 16, 1986

On May 22nd, a detachment from a distant town, commanded by Col. Garcia, with no notice to the local Commanding Officer of his presence here, descended upon Sigacad. The houses were strafed. The people fled. The soldiers camped there for the night and left the next day. The people returned and found two carabaos (each worth a fortune by local standards) had been killed. Their chickens had been killed for food. Seed and fertilizer had been scattered, kitchen utensils, tools and nails were missing. The wood for finishing the houses had served as firewood. Two women had given birth during their flight. One of the babies died.

We documented the case. That "we" now includes Municipal Government and the Church. Such team work would have been unthinkable before the Edsa Revolution. The Bishop carried the report to higher authorities and arranged for a "Dialogue" of the area's Brass with the offended parties.

So yesterday morning soldiers poured into Bayog. A war tank came with them. The road from the National Road up to Bayog was guarded. Then the Brass arrived by helicopter. The "Dialogue" was held in the Town Hall. The Mayor and Col. Kalupig who is in command of this part of the Province co-chairpersoned the meeting. Some 20 odd residents of Sigacad had special chairs provided for them. I studied the faces of the other officers there including Col. Garcia. They were all unsmiling. At a dialogue a year ago, attending officers would sit there like jurymen. Now they bore the countenance of prisoners in the dock. I was frightened most of the apparent low IQ's of some. A low IQ in command of armed men is dangerous.

It was thrilling to see uneducated farmers standing up and giving witness before such brass of what the soldiers had done. The male witnesses were sedate, factual and unemotional. Then women witnesses got into the act and reported dramatically and emotionally other abuses of the Military. The local CO lost his cool and had to learn that you cannot argue with a woman. The other officers had to persuade him to stop waving his arms and sit down. Happily it was a comic interlude that relieved tensions.

I was proud of that of the church. Bishop Escaler was immediately responsible for the Dialogue. But he had behind him the power of the Basic Christian Communities. There the poor learn to stand together to defend themselves. Note that the witnesses were 7th Day Adventists trained by Catholics.

July 17, 1986

Freddy⁵ fascinates me when I see him in action, so simple, so familiar, so unassuming, so assuredly in control of events. He has the power which a Bishop can have if he is up to it, but it is the family background which taught Freddy how to carry such power.

August 25, 1986

Last Monday when I came home from hearing confessions, the parish secretary was documenting the testimony of an excited man. He had been to the Chief of Police, the Chief sent him to the Mayor, the Mayor sent him to the Commanding Officer of the Military who could not give the precise action the man wanted.

His mother and father had been coming down from a mountain barrio, ten km. distant. They were met by many heavily armed men. The armed men gave her the purse of the father and ordered her to go on. When she had gone about 100 meters she heard three shots.

⁵Bishop Federico Escaler, S.J.

She did not go back. People coming down the same trail shortly after reported that the dead body of her husband lay at the side of the road. The son wanted help in retrieving the body.

On Tuesday at 5:45 a.m., as I was preparing to say Mass, two farmers came to me. The Vice-Mayor had gathered a group of men to accompany him to get the body. They were willing to go but afraid to go unless the Padre was with them. So I postponed my Mass and went along. The spot of the killing was about 6 km. up. But it involved a steep climb of about 800 feet. It took me nearly an hour and a half to reach the spot. Rigor mortis had set in. I had forgotten to bring a camera. Maybe just as well. The limbs were stretched in that last second of agony he must have felt as he fell to the ground. There was a note from the killers. They charged the victim was a “bad” man who did much “harm” to society.

The face and clothes of the corpse testified to his status, that of a poor farmer. There were complications. Poverty had left him ignorant. He certainly believed that he had oil which rendered him invulnerable. So he was a member of and I suspect a leader of a fanatical group who are used by the Military to harass the NPA. So that would be one reason for the charge of the NPA. He had worked hard all his life, had lived frugally and had saved money. So though by ordinary social standards here, he would have been classed with the poor, he was a usurer, loaning money at a high rate of interest. In Bayog the rate of interest can reach 30% per month. That might be the second reason for the charge of the NPA.

Capital punishment in capitalistic countries is reserved for the poor. The rich can usually avoid it. The Marxist pattern in Bayog is similar. When I say that I do not mean to recommend that they begin on the bourgeois pillars of the parish. Any plan to reform society by liquidation of the evil men is diabolical, creative of its own hell, here and now.

Why did the farmers fear to go out without a priest? Was it superstition only? Perhaps partly. But Military have told them so often that the priests are communists, that that alone would make them think that we must be friendly to the NPA. They know too that priests go

freely into rebel territory. It is public knowledge that we give clothes to the cold and medicines to the sick including the NPA. So quite apart from faith or superstition, they figured that if the priest were with them the NPA would not shoot civilians. I should note that I would not have dared to go myself with a police or a military escort.

October 22, 1986

Two weeks ago, the NPA executed another “bad” man. He had been summoned to the mountains (I presume for a warning) and refused to go. So he was shot at home. Now I have heard no one say a good word for him. Such complaints as were voiced hardly deserved capital punishment. He had a PA system and he would allow no PA systems from outside to be used at dances in the barrio. And at dances he would not allow anyone to go home at midnight, they had to stay until 3 am. Those responsible for the dance would have a permit only to midnight. I suppose that these can be taken as signs that he was in his own way an oppressor. But if we proceed to purge society in this way, the last survivor will have to be a suicide.

October 23, 1986

My Sunday afternoon quiet was broken by the appearance of a youth. His hushed tone left me, a deaf man, impatient. It was hard for me to get him to raise his voice. He wanted Php3150 for a friend of his in a hospital in Pagadian who would not be permitted to leave until the bill was paid. His answers to my questions were quite vague. I suspect that he might be feeble-minded or a simple “operator.” So I told him that I did not know him and I must have him identified. I asked him if there was anyone in Bayog who would identify him. He immediately gave two names, both active in Church activities. He alleged that he had stayed in the house of one, a woman, since his arrival on Saturday. I told him to call her and I doubted that he would return. He was back within minutes with the worker, a Mrs. Gacer.

She testified that he was genuine, he was from a barrio here. He was now 19 years of age. When he was seven their house was strafed by police. The target was his father who happened to be in Lanao at

the time. His mother and a brother were killed. He was wounded but survived. His father returned from Lanao and was shot. So he ended up an NPA. His companion in the hospital was the same.

Mrs. Gacer was visibly happy when I suggest[ed] that he sleep in the *convento*. She was glad to get him off her hands but she could not refuse him admittance to her house when he needed it. This is an example of personal relationships, a force that will frustrate any totalitarian regime here. She had known his parents, she had known him as a little boy, she could not refuse him hospitality.

His personality was amazing. When at ease he no longer talked in those hushed tones but his natural voice was soft and musical. His innocence, his guilelessness was hard to reconcile with his profession. I asked him whether he believed in God. He seemed surprised by the question and answered: “If there were no God, there would be no world.” Is that a ratiocination from the “*causa incausata*”⁶ or an intuition? I asked him about his companions and he went on to say that they pray and spoke of praying if they go by a chapel. Anyway I got him on his way to Pagadian on the first trip of the jeepney with more than he had asked for and some clothing I had which fitted him.

November 10, 1986

On All Saint’s Day there were reports from up above that there had been an encounter in Sigacad the day before, nothing definite. On Sunday, All Soul’s Day the reports had it that one soldier and many NPA had been killed. [On] Monday a Major confirmed this and reported an operation involving 5 battalions, one from Bayog, the others from Zambo Del Norte and a mountain town to the east, Midsalip.

On Tuesday morning Monte⁷ left before dawn for Sigacad, an hour’s ride for the first 18 km and the 14 km hike. What did he learn about the encounter? On Friday morning there was a group of 7 NPA

⁶Uncaused cause.

⁷Fr. Montecastro

near Sigacad. Three were resting in a nipa hut, four had gone on an errand elsewhere and left their weapons with the three. The Military came upon them. By accident? Or because of an informant? I am not sure but it could be the latter. In that “encounter” one soldier and one NPA were killed. On Saturday and Sunday the Military were still around requisitioning food and chickens[;] a carabao wounded in the encounter was slaughtered. On Monday morning with no NPA in sight, cannons were brought into the action. Ten shells were fired, one was a dud, two of these landed close to the barrio terrifying the people.

Late Tuesday afternoon Monte noticed some NPA passing the house. They came back in about an hour. They had executed an informant. She was a woman in her late twenties, the mother of three small children. They left a letter of explanation for the husband and one for the barrio lieutenant. The charge: she had been an informant for three years in the pay of the Military. She had been warned three times and had not listened. She was blamed for the death of the NPA on Friday morning. Monte hiked back the 32 km on Wednesday.

Before he left there was a meeting in the barrio hall. There was a cry that soldiers were approaching. Mothers gathered their little children to run. Monte told them to stay there, he would meet the soldiers. He went out to meet them as they approached. A woman at his side shouted: “*Ato sila*,” or “They are ours.” All fear vanished, the meeting went on. Those two words reveal what the people in that barrio think of the Military and of the NPA. And this was the morning after execution of the informant.

The execution of the informer increases my confusion. I still preach that such an execution is murder. But I grow less certain of my position. I believe that the NPA are waging a just war. If that be so, is not the execution justified? Or must I conclude that a “just war” is a contradiction in terms? If that be so, why does not the Church denounce all Military Establishments? Now I see that is an exaggerated simplification. But I do believe that the American people sin greatly, to be more technical “gravely” when they consent to or tolerate an Administration’s supplying arms for either side in a civil war. However

much it helps the American economy, it is blood money and participation in murder. God is just and God will repay them in kind.

December 24, 1986

On December 4th Fr. Montecastro took the two Switzers, International Red Cross workers to Sigacad for a rendezvous with the NPA. He brought back 2 NPA who wished to surrender. They left with the approval of the comrades. This is noteworthy since the papers report that men suspected of planning surrender are executed. We hid the two in the *convento* until after Cease-Fire. They would not dare go to the public market. They and I feared not the Military but the Tadtad.

On December 6, NPA visited two barrios not far from Sigacad and killed seven men. A sentence of capital punishment by an NPA court is usually, I admit not always, reserved for informers. Were all 7 informers? I doubt it. There is one report that they went to the barrios to warn the Tadtad. The Tadtad relying on their invulnerability attacked. Their bolos were no match for rifles. I attach high credibility to this report. I admit that I am a biased appraiser.

On the following day the Tadtad retaliated. They went to a barrio adjacent to Sigacad and killed four men. Were these NPA? Of course not. They were poor farmers just like themselves.

A mass evacuation from three barrios involved followed. As of now there are over 700 refugees in Bubuan and there are more in other barrios.

Fr. Montecastro wired his Red Cross friends immediately. And both the Philippine Red Cross and International have helped the refugees in a big way. As of yesterday the refugees still feared returning to their farms. They fear that the Cease-Fire will not hold, that hostilities will break out soon and they will be caught in between. They live in and depend for their sustenance on a true "No Man's Land."

December 29, 1986

Things are looking brighter today in Bayog. General Maderazo came here this morning to look into the disturbing situation and alleged violations of the Cease-Fire. Bishop Tobias⁸ was with him.

There had been no violation of the Cease-Fire since the killings here on December 8th and 9th. The NPA killed seven Tadtad on the 8th in two barrios, the Tadtad killed 4 in an adjoining barrio on the 9th. The three barrios are empty, the people evacuated, the houses in one of the barrios were burned only a few days ago. So though the Cease-Fire has been honored, the society is in turmoil.

Father Montecastro represented the Church & I was able to set the records straight on who killed whom and when & back up the Mayor on his request for the removal of the Captain & his *verdugo*. He is the one I suspect of having arranged the murder of my secretary a year ago. We thought we were rid of him 6 months ago but he was brought back.

Now we have a promise that he will be removed. That will do away with fear of the Military and people may be willing to tell what they know about several killings. Fear of the Tadtad will remain. The formation of the Tadtad was fostered by the Military & now the people need the Military to protect them from the Tadtad.

And they will fear a ceasing of the Cease-Fire & they will be living again in a No Man's Land.

No one complains that life hereabouts is dull.

Three Kings 1987

The Tadtad in the southern part of our Parish had been quiet but the New Year's brought greetings from their captain in one barrio. Several Church workers were threatened by name and he promised to have my assistant Fr. Montecastro chopped up before the year is out.

⁸Antonio Tobias, Bishop of Pagadian.

Alas there was no threat to flatter the writer. Actually I fear more for the lives of the lay workers than I do for that of Fr. Montecastro. I was not killed; my secretary was because he was documenting cases of the violation of human rights for me.

March 21, 1987

Wherever my sympathies lie, my sermons are honest. Murder is a recurring subject, and I condemn murders by the NPA and name them as often as I do murders by the Tadtad. And in the first forty years of my priesthood I never thought murder as important enough to be made the subject of a sermon.

March 21, 1987

Last Dispatch from Bayog

Is one's virtue of poverty in inverse ratio to the weight of *cargamento* a professionally poor man carries with him? Or is the weight in direct ratio to one's scrupulosity? My Malaybalay experience taught me the folly of abandoning a good library, folly that would be a materially grave violation of the first vow. Even now I groan with pain as I gaze upon the treasures I'm leaving behind on the shelves.

I am telling the people that I will leave after Holy Week. I need not tell them that I steal away immediately after the Encuentro Easter Sunday morning.

You are not the first to pick me up on the statement that the NPA were fighting a just war. I fall back on a cautionary introduction and/or peroration I have often used. "Do not expect me to be consistent." Maybe only fanatics are consistent. Our feelings lead us to conclusions that the intellect on reflection might reject. It is Pascal's "The Heart has its reasons that the reason may not know."

Certainly, on the one hand, I reject the just war theory for our day and age. Perhaps it was valid in mediaeval times. Luther's vigorous adoption of Thomas' theses on the just war surprised me when I read of it in Pelican. But at the same time I so felt the rightness of the young men who went to the mountains that I still feel the need to justify them.

My feelings reveal to me where my sympathies lie. Since the Cease-Fire, the leaders of the NDF have shown themselves grossly incompetent. I cannot take joy in their mistakes. Nor am I saddened by their mistakes. I am simply angry. I feel that the men in the mountains have been betrayed by such leadership.

The situation here is far from idyllic. Three weeks ago I helped pick up and bury the body of a man who had been stabbed to death five days before. Probably the victim of some personal feud. Last Sunday, Monte went off on a similar errand. The man had been longer dead, body mutilated by animals and burned. Burning may have been indeliberate, caught in the burning of a "kaingin." The body had been decapitated and head lay outside the burned area. The full set of teeth suggests that the victim was a young man. Decapitation rules out the NPA as suspects. It suggests that the Tadtad were the agents.

Two days ago in broad daylight armed men executed a Subano farmer. He had been campaigning and organizing a group of Tadtad in the barrio where he was killed. I presume that the NPA were the agents. All of these occurred relatively close to the *poblacion*.

The Military here has promised to remain open for a dialogue with the leaders of the local NPA until the end of this month. They have been patrolling and on one occasion they came upon and killed two NPA. But it seems to me that both sides have been avoiding encounters. Father Montecastro is the liaison between the Military and the NPA. Monte has been awaiting word from his contacts for two weeks at least. Are they going to let him down? I don't know.

I've rambled on much longer than I expected. I must add that your Tertian Jack told me that mine was the most pessimistic report he had heard. I rejoined: "All others are wishful thinkers."