THE COLUMBANS IN THE PHILIPPINES
(ZAMBALES 1951-1990)
THE COLUMBANS IN THE PHILIPPINES
(LUZON 1951-1990)
THE COLUMBANS IN THE PHILIPPINES
(NEGROS 1950-1990)
By James McCaslin, MSSC
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These three small volumes complete the history of the Columbans in this country begun in the first, larger volume by Martin Noone and edited by Niall O’Brien and others after Noone’s sickness and death in 1998: The Columbans in the Philippines 1929-1950, volume 1 (reviewed in Landas [15 (2001) 156-58]). Whereas Father Noone tried to survey the entire history of the Columbans from their first arrival in the Philippines until the years of rebuilding and beginnings of expansion after the Japanese War, Father McCaslin, with some inevitable overlapping on Noone, takes three separate areas of the Columban apostolate and treats two of them as separate units. The terminal date of 1990 was determined by the ongoing relinquishing of parishes to the diocesan clergy, partly due to the increase in numbers of diocesan priests, partly compelled by the drastic decline in vocations in Ireland and, to a lesser extent, in the other countries from which the Columbans had hitherto come. Volumes 2 and 4 are self-explanatory from their titles; volume 3 encompasses a large variety of works in Manila, together with a considerable number of parishes in areas which now form parts of the dioceses of Alaminos, Antipolo, Imus, Novaliches, and Lingayen-Dagupan. Taken together with the dioceses covered in the other volumes—Iba in Zambales; Bacolod and Kabankalan in Negros; Pagadian, Ozamis, Iligan, Cagayan de Oro, and the prelature of Marawi in Mindanao, partially covered in volume 1—it may be seen that there is no other religious
order or congregation whose history encompasses, for longer or shorter periods, so many different areas of the Philippines. That is what makes the four volumes much more than the history of one religious congregation; it is perhaps the most important one for viewing the history of a large part of the Philippine Church during some sixty years.

Though more integrated than the first volume, for reasons given there, these three volumes do not pretend to be a definitive history, even of the Columbans, but endeavor to gather up the facts of the period, the Columban priests involved, and the places in which they worked. Though avoiding generalizations about the Philippine Church as a whole, for any Church historian of the forty years 1950-1990, they provide a wealth of information not found elsewhere. Here the reviewer can only give a few paragraphs to each volume.

McCaslin chose Zambales, as he notes, because he spent the larger part of his own ministry in that province. But he provides a picture of many regions of the Philippines in that era, many of them in an acute state at the time of the arrival of the Columbans. He also gives a picture of the Columban pastoral methods of the early years, partly traditional, partly innovative, in a particularly difficult area. Not being an ecclesiastical unit in itself but a neglected part of the archdiocese of Manila, Zambales had been 64.5% Aglipayan in the 1918 census, attended by two secular priests from elsewhere. With the arrival of the SVD Fathers in 1925, working mostly in the north among the Ilocanos, many had been brought back to the Church, but even as late as 1948, Aglipayans still formed 37.8% of the population. When the SVD Fathers were forced to withdraw in 1950 for lack of personnel, the Columbans took over the whole province and began the work which has lasted until today, though now carried on by a small number of men in special activities in Olongapo. Aglipayan resistance was often particularly strong in Zambales, more so than anywhere by that time except perhaps Ilocos Norte, and violence was not lacking at the entrance of foreign priests.

The Columban method, repeated in town after town as men became available, was to establish catechetics, to buy (when the money
was available) a secular private school and make it Catholic, or to found one themselves, and to establish in the parishes the traditional lay apostolates, of which the most notable was the Legion of Mary, active everywhere. All this was made possible by the large number of congregations of religious women brought into what was made the prelate of Iba in 1956, under Columban Father Henry Byrne. Before 1990, the end of the period covered in this volume, the prelate had become a diocese in 1982 with Filipino Bishop Paciano Aniceto succeeding Bishop Byrne on his death the following year. By then, through Columban efforts, a majority of the priests were Filipino.

This volume is most useful for its appendixes—a running chronology of the most important events, as well as various statistics on vocations of women to religious life, on the sacramental growth town by town, on the Columbans who served various assignments and the years of their service, and on the Columban parish priests who served each town, with the dates of their incumbency. I venture that few dioceses could provide such accurate statistics in the light of which the main lines of the Columban story in Zambales are told.

The third volume, *Luzon*, comprises several regions and topics, some of which carry the story forward from Noone’s volume, even at the risk of some overlapping. Malate was assigned to the Columbans almost as soon as they arrived in 1929, and became a major center for a large variety of apostolic activities. In the next few years before the war, Archbishop O'Doherty increasingly asked the Columbans to take over other parishes, mostly those around the Laguna de Bay and now part of the diocese of Antipolo, though there were still others, like Silang in Cavite, and—after the war—such varied parishes as Urduja village and BF Homes in Novaliches, as well as San Pablo and Santo Niño in Tondo. Though they did not encounter the fierce Aglipayan opposition they had in Zambales, the war brought difficult times, and considerable destruction. Most of the Columbans at that time were Irish citizens and therefore not interned by the Japanese; some of the Americans, Australians and New Zealanders were allowed a very limited freedom. Nonetheless,
even the neutral Irish did not fail to suffer at Japanese hands. Most notable was the abduction of Father Francis Douglas by the Japanese, the full facts of which have never been found. Apparently tortured repeatedly, one report said that he was eventually beheaded. In any event, he was never seen again.

Another major field of the parish apostolate was Lingayen and Alaminos, where the Columbans were first invited by Bishop Cesar Guerrero in 1933, and given increasingly more parishes by his successor Bishop Mariano Madriaga. The expulsion of missionaries from China after the Communist takeover made more missionaries available to rebuild and revitalize parishes long abandoned for lack of priests. The problems here were similar to those of Zambales, except exacerbated by the destruction of the war, and if the Aglipayan opposition was weaker than in the early days of Zambales, the militant presence of the Iglesia ni Cristo was an added obstacle. The Columban methods were similar to earlier times, organizing catechetics, parish organizations, construction of churches and schools. This mission too had its apparent martyr, Father Thomas Flynn, taken captive in an attack on the poverty-stricken town of Labrador by the Huks in 1950, and never found, dead or alive. By 1981 the parishes of Lingayen were handed over to the bishop and within the next decade, almost all those of Alaminos. In part, this was due to the effect of an increasing number of diocesan priests; in part, because of the beginning of dwindling numbers on the side of the Columbans, as vocations ceased from Ireland, and to a lesser extent from the other traditional sources of missionaries.

Three other major topics are treated in this Luzon volume. One was the work of Catholic Action among the university and high school students in the private schools of Manila, already begun before the war, but greatly expanded in this period. It was almost wholly a Columban enterprise, to which they contributed men and money, under the encouragement of Archbishops O’Doherty and Gabriel Reyes, but less so under Cardinal Santos. The years of, prior to, and during Martial Law also brought problems of infiltration by the Communist Kabataang Makabayan, and suspicion of all student organiza-
tions by the Marcos dictatorship. By the end of the period, this apostolate was almost totally extinct except for campus ministers in a few schools.

A second topic briefly touched on in Luzon was the Columbans, who were originally secular priests going to China from Maynooth College in Ireland, forming themselves into a religious congregation and admitting Filipinos with a missionary vocation. They had always attempted to form a Filipino secular clergy, and the appendices of the different volumes show their success, especially in Negros. The treatment of the change of admissions policy is brief, since the time between the decision (1983) and the end of the period covered in the book is very short. Filipinos had not been admitted earlier because the ideal was to form Filipino priests for their own apostolate, domestic or missionary. But their admission has been in the hope that they will carry on the Columban spirit as missionaries when all expatriates may be gone.

Finally, there is a brief but frank discussion of the tensions consequent on Vatican II, martial law and nationalism, between those engaged in the traditional apostolates and those who opted for more involvement in the problems of social justice. As in other orders and congregations, these factors inevitably led to the departure of many from the Philippines and even from the priesthood. The latter are listed in an additional appendix to this volume besides those of the others.

The fourth and final volume is devoted solely to the apostolate in Negros, where at the insistence of the Nuncio (in spite of the negative attitude of Bishop Casimiro Lladoc, who, however, died a year later) the Columbans began their work in 1950. From Bishops Yap and Fortich they would receive wholehearted support. The pre-Vatican II years saw similar patterns of apostolate to those used in Zambales, "to revive a dying church," as it was then. The shift toward social action came earlier here and more decided, given the seriousness of the oppression suffered by the disadvantaged people in Negros. Many were made uncomfortable by the idealistic but somewhat reckless Father Hector Mauri, S.J., who as one Columban com-
plained to another, ate and slept in Columban conventos at night, while he rashly, and often unfairly, denounced his hosts the next day for their alleged relations with the hacenderos. Yet, because of Mauri, as some Columbans would later admit, but especially because of how they began to look at the situation in the light of Vatican II, many did involve themselves deeply in the struggle for justice, here in Negros perhaps more than anywhere else. In the heat of the struggle, author McCaslin surmises that at least a few were in contact with the NPA, persecuted as they were by a military usually at the service of the oppressors. A large section is devoted to the invented Gore-O'Brien murder case and their imprisonment.

This fourth volume as a whole is the most gripping of the three, though McCaslin cautions that never having worked in Negros himself, as he had in the regions covered in the other volumes, he was dependent on the cooperation of those who were there. He admits there may be many inaccuracies as to persons and events, but "I tried to tell the truth as I learned it." For one reading the book as a whole, he has succeeded well in all that is substantial, to the knowledge of this reviewer.

As the Columban priest who gave me these books cautioned, not every Columban will agree with everything written in these volumes. But that is the hazard that everyone who tries to collect the facts of fairly contemporary events, especially where there are controversial events and periods. But to wait for a definitive history is an illusory attitude, and it would be of great service to the Philippine Church if other religious groups were to write honest accounts of their work in the twentieth century, something which has not yet even been accomplished for the nineteenth century, with a very few exceptions.

When this is done, it is to be hoped that they will avoid, as McCaslin has quite generally, the tendency of the old Spanish chronicles. Almost universally, these chronicles content themselves with the praise of the accomplishments of their orders and their great men, mentioning Filipinos mostly as the beneficiaries of the missionaries' zeal, or worse, as obstacles to the success of their efforts. Though the activities of the diocesan clergy have likewise been im-
portant, the fact is, however much one may wish to lament or explain it, that at least until quite recently, the majority of the clergy in the Philippine Church did belong to religious orders, and many of the most innovative and fruitful changes have come through them. The work of the diocesan clergy has scarcely even been chronicled anywhere, as it must also be if there is to be a real history of the Philippine Church.

Such partial and perhaps preliminary histories need to be frank without being scandal-mongering, must pay attention to contrary remembrances of the facts on the part of others, and must be willing to acknowledge limitations where there are or may be such. They also need the systematic collation of names, persons, and places, such as has been done here so admirably in the various appendixes. On all of these counts, Father McCaslin is to be given high marks, and the Columban Fathers, celebrating three-quarters of a century in the Philippines, deserve great credit for assigning him the job and giving him the time to do it. May other orders and congregations do the same.