

BONUS MILES CHRISTI: JORGE ALFONSO IMPERIAL BARLIN

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The Catholic Church (and Christianity for the matter) was born in the Philippines with the coming to the islands of the Portuguese navigator *Ferdinand Magellan* in 1521. Yet it took a long time after that before the church in the Philippines could produce its first native priest. According to historians, the Spanish hierarchy, which ruled the Philippine Church for three centuries, had so much distrust for the natives, who from their point of view were considered unsuitable for the priestly ministry.

Much longer still was the wait for the Church in the Philippines to produce its first native bishop. In fact, even at the time when the natives were already admitted into clergy, they were seen as incompetent to hold higher offices in the Church.¹ It was only at the turn of the twentieth century, in 1905, when the Philippines saw the ascendancy into the episcopacy, of a humble and unassuming Filipino and Bicolano cleric in the person of *Jorge Alfonso Imperial Barlin*. It is just unfortunate that up until recent times this distinguished Bicolano achiever remains virtually unknown to the majority of Filipino Catholics, even to the Bicolanos among them.

The Birth of Jorge Barlin and His Childhood

Jorge was born to *Mateo Alfonso Barlin* and *Francisca Imperial*,² a devoutly Catholic couple of modest origins, in the sleepy town of Baao, Ambos Camarines (now Camarines Sur) on April 23, 1850. He was baptized on the following day, April 24, 1850 in Baao by *Pedro de*

¹ See A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops: The Vatican Initiative", in *Diwa* 19 (1994), 75-95. Uy mentions in the article (p. 75) the Dominican, *Bernardino Nozaleda*, and the last Spanish Archbishop of Manila as having said that Filipino priest were "totally incapable (omnimo impotens) of carrying out the sacred ministry." Much more disparaging were the remarks of *Jose Hevia Campomanes*, Bishop of Nueva Segovia, who said that the natives were "not for the priesthood much less for the episcopate." See also A. Uy, "The native Clergy in the Philippines, the year 1900 circa: The View from the Vatican", in *Diwa* 17 (1992), p. 18-20.

² There are sources which indicate that Barlin was a *mestizo* since his mother was Filipina while his father was believed to be English. A. Uy ("The First Filipino Bishops", p. 78) mentions this information as indicated in the correspondence sometime in 1903 between *John Baptist Guidi*, the Apostolic Delegate to the Philippines (1902-1904) and *Cardinal Rampolla*, then the Vatican Secretary of State. According to J. Esplana, however, there is no truth to this information since both Barlin's parents were pure-blooded Filipinos, Jorge Barlin himself thereby being a pure-blooded Filipino and Bicolano. See J. Esplana, "Barlin, The Pride of Bicolandia", in *Kaiba Magazine*, The Official Yearbook of *Kausaran sa Ikararay ka Baao*, January 1996, p. 44, p. 46, and p. 48; see also J. O'Brien, "Jorge Barlin: First Filipino Bishop, A Condensation from D. Abella's Bikol Annals", in *Kaiba*, 1995, p. 11. See also "Monumento a Mons. Barlin", in *Seminarium*, Vol. 8, n. 7 (October 1952), p. 7: "Es de notar que Mons. J. Barlin fue no solamente el primer Obispo Bicolano sino tambien el primer Obispo Filipino de pura cepa. Los otros que se dicen Obispos Filipinos anteriores a él eran Filipinos tan solo por haber nacido en Filipinas, pero de abolengo y padres españoles."

Guzman, the priest-assistant of *Francisco Cabrera*, the Parish Priest of Baao at that time. He was given the name Jorge Alfonso after his father Mateo Alfonso, who was the incumbent *Cabeza de Barangay*. Jorge's godfather was *Jose Marcos* of the same town.³ Though coming from such humble beginnings, the boy Jorge showed sign of greatness. As a child, he displayed extraordinary intelligence, learning Latin at the age of ten under the private tutorship of *Benedicto Beltran* in his hometown.⁴ He was not a stranger to hard work since, coming from a family of only modest means, he was taught by his parents the necessity of toil and labor. Very early in his life, at the young age of twelve, when he barely passed the age of childhood into adolescence, he made a decision that might have been beyond his age, that of becoming a priest. Thus, he entered the *Seminario Conciliar de Nueva Cáceres* (now Holy Rosary Seminary in Naga) in 1862, three years before the Vincentians took over the administration of said seminary on May 9, 1865. At a time when young boys of his age would simply go to school and enjoy exhausting all their youthful energy, Jorge found time to seriously think about the future, feeling that he was called to serve God and his fellow countrymen. This was, of course, something that he discovered and later nurtured not entirely on his own but mainly due to the influence of his uncle, *Pío Imperial*,⁵ who was already a priest at that time, and likewise for sure because of the deeply religious environment in which the grow up.

Barlin's Seminary Life and Early Priestly Ministry

In the seminary, Jorge's performance was clearly exceptional. He stood out among the rest of the seminarians because of his diligence, sense of responsibility and leadership qualities. Because of his extraordinary ability, he did not escape being noticed by the great Dominican Bishop of Nueva Cáceres at that time, *Francisco Gainza*, who readily adopted him as a *beca* (a term used to designate Bishop Gainza's protégés who were favored with a scholarship grant). It was indeed providential that the Bishop caught sight of the promising student, especially in his needs, as his parents were finding it more and more difficult to pay for his matriculation. Ever since, the young Jorge became close to his bishop, eventually becoming the bishop's understudy so to speak.⁶ One biographer narrates an incident showing how close Barlin was to his Bishop and how serious he was as a seminarian in his vocation:

"Jorge", le interpela Mons. Gainza una tarde que iban los dos de paseo al ver un grupo de mujeres en el río en traje de baño, "qué harías si encontraras en el destino con una mujer en esa postura provocativa?" "No mirarla", contestó inmediatamente el familiar que no esperaba aquella estocada. "Bien; pero la viste, y la curiosidad te incitaría a fijar tus pupilos en ella." "En ese caso, haría un acto de fe en la presencia de Dios para reprimir la curiosidad", replicó. Y en verdad que había sido muy circunspecto en mirar

³ See Folio 135 of the *Liber Baptismorum*, n. 5 of the Parish of St. Bartholomew, Baao, Camarines Sur. See also D. Abella, *Bikol Annals, A Collection of Vignettes of the Philippine History*, Vol. 1, Manila, 1951, p. 301-302.

⁴ Anonymous, "Msgr. Jorge Barlin Imperial, First Bicolano Bishop", in *Seminarium*, Vol. 8, n. 7 (1952), p. 6.

⁵ Pío Imperial's name is mentioned at least in one source, see Anonymous, "Outstanding Bicolano, Bishop Jorge J. Barlin", in *Bikol Daily*, September 10, 1997, p. 5 and p. 7.

⁶ D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 202.

*a las personas de diferente sexo como si fuera otro Job había celebrado pacto con los ojos de no mirar lo que no era licito desear. Por eso... nadie le ha podido señalar con el dedo arguyéndole de la más leve falta en esta materia tan deleznable de la castidad sacerdotal... logrando con ésta captarse la simpatía de los buenos e infundir respeto a los mundanos.*⁷

After twelve years of assiduous formation, and after having completed the theology course *sobresaliente*, Jorge was finally ordained as priest by Bishop Gainza on September 19, 1874. Immediately after ordination, he was appointed as the *capellan de solio* and *mayor domo* of the cathedral where he stayed for the next five years. His outstanding performance at the cathedral made him even much closer to Bishop Gainza whom he deeply revered until the bishop's death at the Santo Domingo Convent in Manila on July 31, 1879. Surely, it was due to his closeness to Gainza and the bishop's influence on him that he became a Dominican Tertiary. This also explains why he had such singular love for the Spaniards and the Dominicans.⁸

Gainza's successor, however, the Augustinian *Casimiro Herrero*, was not as fond of him as was his predecessor. He disliked in particular seeing the native clergy being accorded positions of authority. Thus, Barlin was exiled to the almost inaccessible fishing village and poor parish of Siruma in Ambos Camarines.⁹ On this change of assignment, D. Abella had this to say:

*What a change must have been experienced by the young priest – from the high social glitter of an Episcopal court and the charge of cathedral to the seclusion of a shack for a chapel, away from civilization! But such was his humility and willingness to obey superior orders that he went to his deportation without demur.*¹⁰

Here, he labored among the *negritos*, the *cimarrones* and the country folk, converting them with the light of the gospel. He did not stay long in this parish though as he was moved to the province of Albay, first as coadjutor of Tabaco, then as parish priest of Libog (now Santo Domingo), where he served for five years.¹¹ The situation in Libog was not that different from that of Siruma for it was just as poor. It was therefore a situation which further tested his adaptability, patience and perseverance, but also a situation where his zeal, piety and talent became obvious.

Barlin's experience, however, in such difficult assignments somehow prepared him to assume bigger roles in the diocese. In 1887, with the appointment of a more benevolent Bishop in Nueva Cáceres, Bishop *Arsenio del Campo*, Barlin was appointed parish priest of

⁷ R. Rey, "Biografía de Mons. J. Barlin"; D. Imperial, "Most Rev. Jorge Barlin, D.D.", in *Vinculum*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (December 1960), p. 19-23, p. 21.

⁸ "Cronica, Extranjero", in *El Santísimo Rosario*, Vol. XXI (1906), p. 647-649, p. 649.

⁹ See J. O'Brien, "Jorge Barlin: First Filipino Bishop", p. 11.

¹⁰ D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 202-203.

¹¹ Anonymous, "Msgr. Jorge Barlin Imperial", p. 6; D. Imperial, "Most Rev. Jorge Imperial Barlin, D.D.", p. 19; F. Regala, "Msgr. Jorge I. Barlin", in *Hingowa*, Vol. 3, n. 9, June-July, 1976, p. 11-19, p. 11.

Sorsogon, Sorsogon and the Vicar Forane of the whole province. He held the positions for sixteen years, that is, until 1903, during which time he was highly regarded, enjoying as he did such good reputation before the public. On top of that, he obtained a good impression from his bishop because of his outstanding performance, apart from the fact that no complaint had ever been lodged against him.¹² As one of his biographers noted:

*(Barlin)...became the idol of his parishioners, and was a living example to all the clergy for his excellent virtues and unstinted name... a lover, like a **jew**, of the splendor of the catholic worship and of the discipline of the clergy, he was at all times a model along these lines; not only did he set an example – he saw to it that, with whatever monetary help he could give, all other priests under his vicariate would do the same... his circulars to his subordinates were full of wisdom and sound advice.*¹³

Another biographer said of him:

*Su desprendimiento fué el de un austero religioso, pues con poseer tan pingue parroquia, como la de Sorsogon, y por tanto tiempo, apenas llevó consigo cantidad alguna considerable al dejarla; tanto es así que no tuvo para costear los gastos necesarios que lleva consigo la promoción episcopal; fué necesario que le ayudara su clero. En cambio era prodigio para con los pobres.*¹⁴

It is said that Barlin's appointment as Vicar Forane was unprecedented, if not unexpected, since he was very young at that time not only in age but likewise in the ministry, and there were other priests much more senior than he was and who were also probably covetous of such an important position.¹⁵ As if this was not enough, he was further accorded the honorary title of Papal Chamberlain, then as Domestic Prelate by His Holiness, *Pope Leo XIII*, titles which up to that time had never before been given to a Filipino cleric.¹⁶ This was not, however, Barlin's only achievement while he was in Sorsogon. On September 20, 1898, *Señor Villamil*, who was to be the last Spanish Governor of Sorsogon, turned over the administration of the provincial government of Sorsogon to Msgr. Barlin. Such a move was actually prompted by Villamil's fears that more bloodshed might be spilled in the Bicol Region as it happened in Naga on September 17-18, 1898, when the native contingent of the *Guardia Civil* under *Corporales Elías Ángeles* and *Felix Plazo* led the violent rebellion, fled with a group of other Spanish employees for safety to Iloilo, and further on to Manila.¹⁷ It is said that Villamil trusted the ability of Barlin as he acknowledged that it was only the Vicar Forane

¹² A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops", p. 82.

¹³ D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 203. Abella's source for this was "*Los Padres Paules y las Hijas de la Caridad en Filipinas – Breve Raseña Historica, 1862 a 1912*", written by a priest of the Congregation of the Mission, Manila, 1912.

¹⁴ "*Los Padres Paules y las Hijas de la Caridad en Filipinas - Breve Raseña Historica 1862 a 1912*" por un Sacerdote de la Congregación de Mision, Manila, 1912, p. 380-381; D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 207-208, fn. 180.

¹⁵ D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 203.

¹⁶ Anonymous, "El Primer Obispo Bicolano", in *Bicol Pioneer Herald*, September 11, 1937, p. 12.

¹⁷ See J. O'Brien, "Jorge Barlin: First Filipino Bishop", p. 11.

who could command the respect and obedience of the people.¹⁸ Barlin, thus, became the first cleric and the only one at that time to hold an important position in civil government, that of being the Governor of Sorsogon. Barlin was to keep this position until the coming of the Americans in the 1900's.

As Governor of Sorsogon, Barlin presided over the peaceful transition of power in the province, preventing too much bloodshed, which characterized similar transitions elsewhere in the country, especially in Daet and Naga in Ambos Camarines. Through his timely intervention, the Spanish Ecclesiastical Governor in Naga, *Fray Gonzales*, who was taken prisoner by the *insurrectos*, was treated kindly and allowed to stay in the seminary, instead of being detained in jail.¹⁹ His strategy was one of non-violence as he exerted all his efforts to pacify instead all those involved in the conflict.

He did exactly the same thing when *General Ananías Diokno* and his insurgent troops, sent by the Filipino Revolutionary Government in Malolos, arrived in the province in October 1898. Through Barlin's intervention and pacification campaign, the Revolutionary Government was established peacefully in the province. Once again, when the Americans established a military government in the province, Barlin was there to facilitate the smooth transition of power. Eventually, the Americans under *Capt. J.G. Livingstone* of the 47th infantry of the U.S. Army replaced military rule with the civil government on April 30, 1910. Barlin was no longer governor but he remained Vicar Forane in the province. In any case, whether as governor or as Vicar Forane, he was able to rally the people to maintain peace and order in the province by influencing them through a kind of leadership that was based on charity.²⁰ For two years at least, Barlin then was acting simultaneously as head of the Church and as head of the province, governing so to speak both "ecclesiastically" and "politically", certainly a distinction that has never been duplicated even up until recent times. Here, he showed what kind of charismatic leader he was, especially at a very crucial time in the history of the Philippines when the country was being torn between two loyalties, i.e., Spain and America.²¹

Barlin as Apostolic Administrator

In July 1903, Barlin was assigned back to Naga where he took over as Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Nueva Cáceres after this was left vacant with the resignation of the Bishop of Nueva Cáceres, Arsenio del Campo, on March 30, 1903. Given this great

¹⁸ Anonymous, "El Primer Obispo Bicolano", p. 12: "En tiempo de la Revolucion, 1898, cuando el último Gobernador español de la Provincia de Sorsogon, creyó prudente dejar la Provincia para reconcentrarse en Manila con un grupo de empleados españoles, no halló otra persona de más confianza y habilidad que la del Parroco y Vicario Foráneo de Sorsogon el entonces O. Jorge Barlin." See also J. Esplana, "An Primerong Filipino na Nagin Obispo", in *Kaiba*, n. p., n.d., p. 12: "...sabi ni Villamil... 'Si Padre Barlin sana an respetado asin tinutubod kan mga tawo...'" ; Anonymous, "Outstanding Bikolano", p. 7.

¹⁹ Anonymous, "Msgr. Jorge Barlin", p. 6.

²⁰ See J. O'Brien, "Jorge Barlin: First Filipino Bishop", p. 11; J. Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy, The Filipino Clergy and the Nationalist Movement, 1850-1903*, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, 1981, p. 170-171; Anonymous, "El P. Barlin", in *La Estrella de Antipolo*, January 31, 1903.

²¹ See J. Esplana, "Barlin, The Pride of Bikolandia", p. 44.

ecclesiastical position, he was named seven months later, that is, on October 30, 1903, Protonotary Apostolic *ad instar participantium* by His Holiness, *Pope Pius X*. Given this title, Barlin obtained a place in the rank of the chief order of Prelates. Again, Msgr. Barlin was the first Filipino to have been given such a revered ecclesiastical title. This was certainly not something one could just take for granted since it was almost impossible at that time for a native *Indio* to be accorded such an honorific title and to be entrusted with such tremendous responsibility.

In fact, Barlin's appointment to higher ecclesiastical office was a product of a long and protracted struggle. It should be recalled that when the Spanish bishops were to leave the Philippines at the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1898, the question was already raised as to whether the Filipino clerics who were found worthy should be named to succeed them. It was logical of course at that time to think that with the entry of the Americans into the country as the next colonial power, the American bishops were the practical choice to replace the departing Spanish bishops. Yet the question could somehow not be avoided as to whether the Filipinos already deserved to take over the administration of at least one or two dioceses in the country owing to the growing nationalistic spirit. Otherwise, why else should Bishop Arsenio del Campo of Nueva Cáceres suggest to the Nuncio in Madrid that it was still "most convenient" to "continue drawing (Spanish) bishops from the religious orders and in no way at the moment indigenous?"²² One could surmise that already at this time, at least the possibility of Filipinos becoming bishops was already being entertained, if not actually being urged.

Of course, the reluctance and hesitation to accept the Filipinos into the hierarchy had its accompanying reasons. First, it was because of the political situation. Naming Filipino bishops could mean that the Vatican was, albeit indirectly, officially recognizing the legitimacy of the Philippine revolutionary government led by Emilio Aguinaldo.²³ This was indeed a sensitive issue. Second, there was the long standing perception and impression that the Filipino clergy received inferior training, and with the *Patronato Real* at work, it was almost impossible for any Filipino to get the recommendation of the Spanish bishops to the Spanish Crown.²⁴ Third, especially as the years progressed, it remained dangerous from the point of view of the Spanish bishops to entrust the administration of the Philippine dioceses to the Filipino clerics, since it was possible that they could be sympathetic to the Filipino Revolution²⁵ and to the cause of the nationalization of the Philippine Church being

²² A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops", p. 75. Uy maintains that if ever the question of naming Filipino bishops was entertained, it was due to Vatican initiative.

²³ A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops", p. 76.

²⁴ J. Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy*, p. 203. In accordance with this system, the Vatican appointed only those recommended by the Spanish crown.

²⁵ See J. Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy*, p. 160: "...in Nueva Cáceres there was a much larger number of the clergy who would collaborate closely with Filipino military leaders and even take active military roles themselves."

championed by the schismatic church founded by *Gregorio Aglipay* in the Ilocos Region in 1902.²⁶

At the same time, however, Protestantism and masonry were spreading very swiftly in the islands. Given this situation, one could not help but think that the “only effective remedy” was “to grant to the virtuous, intelligent, and from every aspect, most fit Filipino clergy its rights to occupy exclusively all archbishoprics, bishoprics, ecclesiastical courts, vicarships, chapters, parishes (and) the administration of seminaries.”²⁷

It took, however, a succession of three apostolic delegates, beginning with *Placidus Chapelle* (1901-1902), then *John Baptist Guidi* (1902-1904) and finally *Ambrosius Agius* (1904-1911), before a Filipino cleric could be named bishop in the person of J. Barlin. The first of them, P. Chapelle was completely opposed to the idea as he saw the native clergy as “absolutely incapable” and in such a “deplorable state”.²⁸ It was J. B. Guidi who began to speak favorably of the native clergy and actually insisted that it was high time that a Filipino cleric be ordained bishop. He implored the Holy Father through the Vatican’s Secretary of State, *Cardinal Rampolla*, “to name Filipino priests as bishops” mentioning in particular the parish priest Jorge Barlin as the most suitable candidate for Nueva Cáceres.

The vehement objections of Nueva Segovia Bishop, *Hevia Campomanes*, said to have been imprisoned and to have suffered humiliations in the hands of the Filipino revolutionaries,²⁹ did not diminish Guidi’s conviction that there were already Filipinos who were capable of assuming episcopal and administrative duties. Among them was Jorge Barlin, that is, to name but one. For one thing, Guidi believed that Barlin, by defending the rights of the Church during the time of the revolution, was not a sympathizer of the renegade cause. Besides, Guidi saw Barlin as a staunch supporter of the Church against the Aglipayan schism.³⁰ Together with *Pablo Singzon*, who was also being eyed for the Diocese of Cebu, Guidi described Barlin and his fellow candidate as

...under every regard, most worthy and most fit for the episcopate. They are virtuous, they possess more than sufficient learning, they are prudent and at the same time firm of character (fermi di carattere) and gifted with talent for government. Both have moreover the practice and experience in managing church affairs. The parish priest

²⁶ A. Uy mentions three reasons, which he summarizes as follows: 1) the bias and prejudices of Spanish ecclesiastics, 2) the Spanish *Patronato Real* and 3) the perceived - true or not - unfitness of native clerics (see A. Uy, “The First Filipino Bishops”, p. 88).

²⁷ A. Uy, “The First Filipino Bishops”, p. 77. Uy says that the quoted text is a portion of a letter addressed to the Holy Father, Leo XIII, and coming from *Isabelo de los Reyes*, Presidente de la Comision Secular europeo-americana por el clero filipino; *Felix de Leon*, Vice-Presidente de la misma; *Tomás Arejola*, Presidente del Comite Republicano Filipino de Madrid and other individuals, in Madrid, on June 29, 1901, found at the *Archivo Storico del Consiglio per gli Affari Pubblici della Chiesa* (at the Papal Secretariat of State), Sp. a. 1901, Posiz. 954, Fasc. 348, p. 64.

²⁸ A. Uy, “The First Filipino Bishops”, p. 77.

²⁹ A. Uy, “The First Filipino Bishops”, p. 78-79.

³⁰ A. Uy, “The First Filipino Bishops”, p. 81, p. 92, fn. 52: “Guidi to Rampolla, 31 December 1902, Manila, no. 10, no. 75917, SCAAEESS, Sp., a. 1902-1903, Posiz. 986, Fasc. 385, p. 35.”

*Barlin as for many years close to and then secretary of the famous Dominican Bishop Gainza of Nueva Cáceres.*³¹

Thus, as early as December 1902, Guidi already listed Barlin as the next Bishop of Nueva Cáceres.³² Arsenio del Campo of Nueva Cáceres, who at first was not that determined to endorse the recommendation of any Filipino candidate, apparently changed his mind and now reinforced Guidi's conviction. When asked about the suitability for the episcopacy of J. Barlin in particular, he was at least prepared to say that said candidate could be elected. It is true, Barlin was, for Bishop del Campo, of a "very weak and changeable character" and could therefore easily "fall victim to bad influence." Furthermore, he has not proven himself under trying circumstances and has not shown yet the solidity of his religiosity, but at the moment and under the present circumstances, he was the only person among the native clergy who came close to meeting the requirements.³³ The Archbishop of Manila himself, *Bernardino Nazaleda*, though still apprehensive about the Filipino clergy's ties with the Aglipayan schism, could not help but concede that the Filipino candidates being considered for the episcopacy, on top of the list of which was Barlin, were not "tainted with any moral blemish and they for sure constitute a select group of the native clergy."³⁴

Guidi's efforts produced concrete result. Backed up by the recommendation of Bishop del Campo himself, whose resignation was accepted on March 30, 1903, Barlin was appointed Apostolic Administrator of Nueva Cáceres³⁵ on October 15, 1903 and given the title of Protonotary Apostolic on October 30, 1903. In fact, he was the only Filipino, among four other Americans, who obtained jurisdiction over one of the episcopal sees left vacant by the last Spanish bishops. As Apostolic Administrator, Barlin became acting bishop of the whole Bicol diocese.

Of course, historians note that Barlin's appointment as Apostolic Administrator was the result of a compromise between the urgings of his Capuchin and other supporters in Rome, and the Spanish-American opposition in Manila.³⁶ But whatever really happened, Guidi certainly played a major role in the selection of Barlin. He is then to be credited with having proven the fact that already at that time some Filipinos were worth considering for the episcopal office. Indeed, it was mainly due to his efforts that something was done to translate such claim to concrete action.

³¹ A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops", p. 82, p. 92, fn. 54: "Guidi to Gasparri, Secretary of SCAAEESS, 26 April 1903, SCAAEESS, Sp., a. 1903, Posiz. 998, Fasc. 396, p. 41."

³² A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops", p. 81, p. 92, fn. 53: "Guidi to Rampolla, 31 December 1902, Manila, no. 10, no. 75917, SCAAEESS, Sp., a. 1902-1903, Posiz. 986, Fasc. 385, p. 38."

³³ A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops", p. 79, p. 82 and p. 93, fn. 55: "Bishop Arsenio to Rampolla, Valladolid, 14 May 1903, n. 77851, SCAAEESS, Sp., a. 1903, Posiz. 998, Fasc. 396, p. 56." The assessment of Barlin as weak and changeable was expected since the Filipinos were generally perceived as such by the Spanish bishops.

³⁴ A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops", p. 79.

³⁵ At that time, the diocese counted 107 parishes, 17 parish missions, 124 friars as parish priests and 148 native seculars. See D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 195.

³⁶ J. Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy*, p. 252.

Barlin and the Aglipayan Schism

Barlin did not frustrate his superiors' expectations. As Apostolic Administrator Barlin's most significant accomplishment was his successful campaign to combat the Aglipayan schism. At a time when Filipino insurgents were rising up in arms against Spanish rule, some if not many members of the native clergy were also busy defying the Church hierarchy in the Philippines as this was dominated by the Spanish friars. This struggle continued up until the coming of the Americans in the early 1900's. On October 17, 1902, during a convention in Manila held by the Filipino dissidents, *Gregorio Aglipay*, leader of the renegade movement, proclaimed the establishment of *The Philippine Independent Catholic Apostolic Church* (now known as the Aglipayan Church after its founder G. Aglipay). Aglipay, knowing the kind of Church leader that Barlin was in Nueva Cáceres and recognizing the influence he had on so many priests, offered to grant the Bicolano the Pontifical Regalia of the new Church by being its *Obispo Maximo*. Barlin, however, emphatically refused to join the schismatic group, a move that was to stall the further spread and destructive consequences of the Aglipayan Movement. In a telegram addressed to Aglipay on October 17, 1902, he declared, "*Prefiero ser lampazero a ser la cabeza de su jerarquía cismática.*"³⁷ Again, in another letter to Aglipay, Barlin reiterated his adamant stand:

*I received your letter and the newspaper Fraternidad, "Bulletin of the New Filipino Church, seprated from the Apostolic Roman Catholic." I return this document to you...since I do not belong to that new Church. For one could ill be a leader of it if he is not a member of the same, since he belongs to the one true Church which is that of Rome, whose only head is the Roman Pontiff, successor of the prince of the Apostles, whom I must obey...for forty mortal years I have studied the constitutions and laws of my Church...as a member of this unique Church I despise with all my heart the honor bestowed on me by your schismatic congregation...begging the supreme Being to illumine you so that all of you may see precipice to the brink of which you are hastening with gigantic strides if you persist in such an absurd idea.*³⁸

Having obtained the loyalty of many native priests, the Aglipayans gained control of so many Churches in the Philippines. In the Bicol Region, however, the Aglipayans did not get as much followers due to Barlin's loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. They could therefore not simply take possession of the Churches there. But the question of the ownership of Church buildings would surface here more than elsewhere when the only defector among the remarkably loyal Bicol clergy³⁹ and parish priest of Lagonoy in Ambos Camarines, *Vicente*

³⁷ See D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 205; J. Esplana, "Barlin, The Pride of Bikolandia", p. 44; C. Sarte, "Barlin to Varela", in *The Rainbow* (May 1967), p. 8, 13.

³⁸ P. Achutegui-M. Bernad, *Religious Revolution in the Philippines*, Ateneo de Manila, Quezon City, 1960, p. 187; D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 195; J. Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History*, 2nd ed., Loyola School of Theology, Quezon City, 1987, p. 320-321.

³⁹ J. Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy*, p. 235: "The diocese of Nueva Cáceres seems to have been equally solid... not only was the proportion of Filipino priests holding parishes before the revolution larger than anywhere else, but likewise the feeling against the friars had never been strong in comparison with other dioceses, except for a time in Camarines... All sources give Father Barlin major credit for keeping the diocese united in loyalty to the Holy See under the Augustinian ecclesiastical governor."

Ramirez, joined the schismatic group without vacating the parish and turning over the church properties to his duly appointed successor.⁴⁰ Barlin, therefore, in asserting and in defense of the rights of the Roman Catholic Church, brought the case to the Court of First Instance in Ambos Camarines.

In Court, Barlin displayed the kind of intellectual acumen he possessed, putting forward both persuasive and convincing arguments that must have prompted the Judge to decide in favor of the Roman Catholic Church in 1904.

The Aglipayans appealed the case to the Supreme Court (thus the celebrated Barlin vs. Ramirez et.al. case). Ramirez argued that since he joined the schismatic group, the Church building that was entrusted to him was no longer under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church. But his effort proved futile since the Highest Court in the country simply sustained the decision of the lower court granting ownership of all Church buildings in the region to the Roman Catholic Church. In this landmark decision dated November 24, 1906, Justice J. Carson of the Supreme Court declared with finality:

For the purposes of this opinion it is not necessary, nor would it be profitable, to do more than indicate the line of reasoning which has led me to my conclusions, nor to discuss at length the question of ownership of this property, because whether it be held to be in abeyance or in God or in the Roman Catholic Church or in the United States it has been shown without deciding this question of ownership that the right to the possession for the purpose for which it was dedicated is in the Roman Catholic Church, and while the complaint in this action alleges that the Roman Catholic Church is the owner of the property in question, the prayer of the complaint is for the possession of this property of which it is alleged that church has been unlawfully deprived; and because furthermore, if I am correct in my contention that the legal title to the State-constructed churches in the Philippines passed to the United States by virtue of the treaty of Paris, it passed, nevertheless, subject to the trusts under which it was held prior thereto, and the United States cannot at will repudiate the conditions of that trust and retain its place in the circle of civilized nations; and as long as this property continues to be used for the purposes for which it was dedicated, the Government of the United States has no lawful right to deprive the Roman Catholic Church of the possession and control thereof under the terms and conditions upon which that possession and control were originally granted. Judgment affirmed.⁴¹

This legal victory thus immortalized the name of Jorge Barlin in Philippine Jurisprudence. As a result, the Aglipayans were banished from all Churches in the region and as a matter of fact in the whole country.⁴²

⁴⁰ J. Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy*, p. 235-236.

⁴¹ See Supreme Court Decisions of 1906 9N. 2832, November 24, 1906), Barlin vs. Ramirez et al. in *Philippine Reports*, Vol. 7, p. 11-65, p. 65, see also p. 41.

⁴² J. Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History*, p. 332.

The Supreme Court's decision, thus, inflicted on the Aglipayans the most severe and damaging blow against the further spread of their schismatic church in this part of the country. And all because of Barlin's vigilance, courage and solicitude. If not truly for Barlin, the renegade priests could have taken control and possession of all Churches in the country that truly belonged to the Roman Catholic Church,

The Election of Barlin as Bishop of Nueva Cáceres

Even before Barlin's victory in court could be ascertained with the Supreme Court's decision in 1906, the ecclesiastical authorities both in the Philippines and in the Vatican must have already been convinced of his loyalty and fidelity to the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, during the term of the third Apostolic Delegate, A. Agius, the question was settled as regards Barlin's suitability to receive the episcopal staff and miter. In a secret consistory on December 14, 1905, Pius X named Msgr. Barlin as the new Bishop of the vast Diocese of Nueva Cáceres, which at that time included all the provinces of the Bicol Region and extended to as far North as Palanan, Isabela and far South in the province of Samar. Six months later, on June 29, 1906, what was most unthinkable and unexpected in so many years, spanning a period of over three centuries of Spanish domination, became a reality. Msgr. Barlin was ordained Bishop by Msgr. Agius at the old Santo Domingo Church in Intramuros, Manila, making him the *first Filipino and Bicolano bishop* ever to have graced the pages of the history of the Church in the Philippines. He was ordained in the very same Church where his mentor, F. Gainza, was also ordained.⁴³ For his motto, Barlin chose a passage from Paul's second letter to Timothy (2:3): "*Labora sicut miles Christi Jesu*". The occasion, attended by no less than the Archbishop of Manila himself, *Archbishop Jeremias Harty*, and by *Bishop Frederic Rooker* of Jaro, who were both co-consecrators assisting the Apostolic Delegate, was celebrated as a national event as it was indeed a real breakthrough in the life of the local Church. In fact, the event occupied the attention of the public even long after Barlin's episcopal consecration.⁴⁴

Bishop Barlin actually took over the administration of the diocese on July 21, 1906.⁴⁵ Upon his assumption into office, he showed to everyone that Vatican's choice of him was worth the gamble. He proved worthy of the trust and confidence bestowed upon him and certainly deserving of the respect of the Filipino clergy who naturally pinned their hopes on him.

Within a short period, Barlin was able to visit his vast diocese of 800,000 faithful at that time as he went on an extensive pastoral visitation of all the parishes. He reorganized the parishes of his huge territorial jurisdiction, always with the mind to entrust them to capable and zealous pastors. He did not only concern himself with the spiritual welfare of his flock, especially that of the poor, but also made sure that the material needs of the Church were also well provided for. He undertook the repair of various Churches demolished by a strong

⁴³ "Cronica, Extranjero", p. 647. See also "De Sorsogon", in *El Pueblo*, January 31, 1903; "El P. Barlin", in *La Estrella de Antipolo*, January 31, 1903.

⁴⁴ D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 200.

⁴⁵ A. Uy, "The First Filipino Bishops", p. 82 and p. 93, fn. 59-60: "R. Ritzler, OFM Conv. and P. Sefrin, OFM Conv., *Hierarchia Catholica Medii et Recentiores Aevi*, Vol. IX (Padua: Il Messagero di S. Antonio)."

earthquake in 1907 and other Church structures, especially the episcopal palace itself, which unfortunately he was unable to finish on account of his untimely death in Rome.⁴⁶

One of the things that Barlin changed in the diocese even before he was ordained bishop, was the timing of the celebration of the feast of its patroness, Our Lady of Peñafrancia. The feast in her honor was celebrated in the month of July but Barlin petitioned the Vatican to move the feast to September instead. In response to Barlin's petition, a Vatican Rescript dated April 8, 1905 decreed, "...It is hereby granted that Her (Our Lady of Peñafrancia's) feast be transferred from the first Sunday of July to the Sunday following the Octave of the Feast of Nativity (September 8) of the Blessed Virgin Mary." The whole Bicol Region, therefore, owes to Bishop Barlin the celebration of its patronal feast at this most appropriate time during the year, a practice that has endured up until the present time.⁴⁷ Not only was he concerned about his diocese's affairs. He also bore his imprint on the national scene. On October 16, 1907, he delivered the invocation at the inauguration of the Philippine Assembly. On the significance of this historic event, the American writer, *Frank Wilkes Pye*, wrote:

*The Bicol, who for decades have pointed with pride to their high percentage of literacy... are a deep-thinking, serious-minded people; they have their Jorge Barlin, the first Filipino bishop... It was Father Barlin who made the invocation at the opening of the first Philippine Assembly in 1907 – a little incident in world history, the full significance of which one hardly grasps. In a setting of Oriental fanaticism, where life is held at naught, where man has no right that he may not lose overnight, where his liberty, his home, his family are his only so long as they are not wanted by another more powerful than he, there had come into existence an island people with Christian ideals, in whose land our own America had laid down the foundation of democracy. Here, in 1907, the Bicol bishop, Father Jorge Barlin, gave the opening invocation at the first oriental assembly of the people, by the people and for the people.*⁴⁸

Two months later, he took part in an ecclesiastical assembly, the first Provincial Council in Manila, which discussed the Church's problems under the new government set-up.⁴⁹ Bishop Barlin was the *only* Filipino Bishop who took part in this Council.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, "El Primer Obispo Bicolano", p. 16.

⁴⁷ J. Esplana, "Barlin, The Pride of Bikolandia", p. 48. The authorization (n. 15.1905.Y) read: "Votis fidelium incolarum Civitatis 'de Nueva Cáceres' in Insulis Philippinis libenter obsecundans, R.P.D. Georgius Barlin Imperial, Administrator Apostolicus dioeceseos de Cáceres, Sanctissimum, Dominum Nostgrum Pium Papam X humillimis precibus rogavit, ut festum Beatae Mariae Virginis sub vulgari titulo '– Peña de Francia' Patronae ipsius Civitatis, Dominicæ primæ Julii affixum, quo tempore fidelis plebis consursus desideratur, fixw assignari valeat Dominicæ post Octavam Nativitatis ejusdem Deiparae Virginis cum omnibus privilegiis atque honorificentis, quæ Patronis locorum de jure competunt, necnon indulgentis ab Apostolica Sede anno 1895 eiusmodi solemnitati attributis, amandando in primam proximiorum ex Dominicis sequentibus iuxta Rubricas liberam Officium Septem Dolorum B.M.V. Sacra porre Rituum Congregatio, utendo facultatibus sibi specialiter ab eodem Sanctissimo Domino Nostro tributis, benigne annuit pro gratia in omnibus iuxta preces: servatis Rubricis. Contrariis non obstantibus quibuscunque. Die 8 Aprilis 1905." (See D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 210.)

⁴⁸ C. Sarte, "Barlin to Varela", p. 13.

⁴⁹ D. Abella, *Bikol Annals*, p. 207; J. O'Brien, "Jorge Barlin: First Filipino Bishop", p. 11.

Given his experience of the Aglipayan schism, he was wary of anything that might militate against the teachings of the Church. Thus, he formed a Council of Vigilance, the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, in all the parishes with the task of examining and denouncing books and pamphlets which contain errors in faith and morals, thereby checking the inroads of heresy and schism. To protect Church properties, he had them assessed. Titles of these properties were secured to prevent others from taking possession of them. Furthermore, to carry out Pius X's *motu proprio* of 1903, he named a Vincentian Priest, *Father Zaro*, to head a committee on sacred music.

It should be noted that when Barlin took over the administration of the diocese, the whole country was still in deep disarray and the civil *status quo* could not but have affected the Church in many ways. In fact, the Church itself was also in such a chaotic situation that it required an institutional reorganization of its own. Barlin himself described the situation by saying that during –

...that bloody insurrection, the leaders of which, affiliated with the Masonic sect, displayed no fear of God, no respect for his ministers, no reverence for sacred things, no obedience to the laws of God and of the Church, but rather taught the people by word and deed to scorn and despise all of these; after the Filipino-American war, during which pernicious examples of irreligion and immortality were daily displayed before the eyes of the faithful, after the continued attacks... by protestant ministers, after all the efforts of the followers of the Aglipayan schism...⁵⁰

Thus, when the project of reform was achieved in 1908, Barlin was content to see how things improved in the faith-life of his people in the diocese. Regarding this marked change for the better, he also had this to say of his faithful in his diocese:

...this people remains firm in its Catholic faith. It loves the Christian religion, it preserves Christian morality, it is obedient to the laws of God and of the Church, it honors the bishop and the priests with reverence and submission, it frequents the churches, it observes the feasts of God and celebrates the veneration and honor paid to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, it listens to the preaching of the Gospel, it receives the sacraments, prays for the dead, and leads a Christian life, often adorned with beautiful works of virtue and the exercise of solid piety.⁵¹

When the American educational system was adopted in the country, Barlin regretted the fact that religious instruction could no longer be given in public schools. The clergy and the parents were caught unprepared for this eventuality. It was sad that this should happen since the clergy, being poor themselves, could not afford to construct school buildings and could therefore no longer absorb the growing number of school children, who were thereby turned over to the public schools without the benefit of religious instruction. Besides, the

⁵⁰ J. Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History*, p. 353.

⁵¹ J. Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History*, p. 353.

priests were unable to speak English, so even if they were to be admitted at all in the public schools to teach religion, they were naturally prevented by this handicap.⁵²

Finally, in an effort to instill discipline upon his clergy and to improve their image, he also rooted out the abuses which had crept in among their ranks.⁵³ Certainly, part of this effort was his concern for priestly training. Thus, he raised the standards of the seminary curriculum, granted scholarships to exceptional students to take academic degrees at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. Like Bishop Gainza, his mentor, Barlin took a young seminarian as his protégé in the person of *Santiago Sancho* of San Vicente, Libmanan. Sancho eventually became Barlin's secretary, and like Barlin, was later elected bishop, and became the Archbishop of Nueva Segovia. Sancho proved loyal to Barlin, having always been on his side until his death in Rome in 1909.

Barlin's Death in Rome

The year 1909 just began when Barlin fell ill. Just a little over three years in the ministry as bishop, a short span of time by any standard, but it was enough to wear Barlin out. His doctors advised him to go abroad for treatment. It was, however, also time for him to go to Rome for his *ad limina* visit. At the end of April 1909, Barlin left for Rome for such an important visit. He arrived there at the end of May 1909. Sancho, his protégé and secretary accompanied him on this trip. In Rome, they were listed as guests at the College of the Spanish Dominicans at Via Condotti this city.⁵⁴ But as soon as he reached Rome, his sickness had gotten worse. His health quickly deteriorated. In fact, his condition was such that it required him to undergo a rather long treatment, thus putting his visit to the Holy Father on hold. Instead, was confined to his bed. The Holy Father in turn did not fail him. In his name, he sent the ailing bishop, cardinals and prelates who took turns to comfort him and let him know how much the Holy Father was concerned about his situation. In spite of the consolation he was getting, he must have suffered a lot. His sickness though did not keep his mind out of the diocese. He was eager to go back, perhaps thinking that there were still so many things that were left undone.⁵⁵

It is said that during his long ordeal with his illness, he could be heard uttering in part Jesus' very own words: "*El buen pastor es aquel que da la vida por sus ovejas y yo quiero sufrir este sacrificio por mis amados diocesanos.*" In spite of his strong and robust body, he was slowly consumed by his sickness day after day. No amount of effort and expertise on the part of the doctors attending to him could thwart the course of his sickness. After having received the last sacrament and the apostolic blessing from Pope Pius X,⁵⁶ he was ready to face what was now inevitable. On a Saturday, September 4, 1909, at 4:30 p.m., Barlin peacefully expired.

⁵² J. Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History*, p. 353.

⁵³ D. Imperial, "Most Rev. Jorge Imperial Barlin, D.D.", p. 22; Anonymous, "Msgr. Jorge Barlin", p. 6.

⁵⁴ Libro de cronicas (1901-19460, Gobierno y adm. del Colegio de la Sma. Trinidad durante el Rectorado del P. José Noval a. 1906-1910.

⁵⁵ D. Imperial, "Most Rev. Jorge Imperial Barlin, D.D.", p. 20.

⁵⁶ "Un Prelado Menos, El Ilmo. Sr. D. Jorge Barlin Imperial, Terciario dominico, primer Obispo Indigena de Filipinas", in *El Ssm. Rosario*, Vol. XXIV(1909), p. 722.

Father *J. Noval*, Rector of the Dominican College and Father Sancho himself were all there at his bedside to see him breathe his last and to commend his soul back to his Creator.⁵⁷ Being a Dominican Tertiary himself, his funeral was held at the Church of the Holy Trinity of the Spanish College of the Dominicans and was presided over by the Dominican Master General,⁵⁸ *Jacinto Ma. Cormier* and a consultor of the Sacred Congregation for Sacraments *Jerónimo Coderch*. Present during the funeral were cardinals, bishops, superior generals of religious orders, secular priests and the so-called *devotos caballeros de la nobleza romana*. Thus, contrary to what some generally thought, Barlin was accorded burial rites that were befitting a bishop.⁵⁹ His remains were buried in the cemetery at *Campo Verano*, in the crypt of the chapel of the Dominican Fathers in Rome on September 7, 1909. His bones were later deposited in the common grave of the Order in the same chapel.⁶⁰

Barlin's rule in Nueva Cáceres was rather short but full of works of zeal and pastoral solicitude. He administered the diocese as a good father but always with due regard to the demands of ecclesiastical discipline. On the whole, Barlin's episcopal ministry could be characterized by his fidelity to his chosen motto. All his life as a bishop, "he was a tireless worker in the vineyard of the Lord, an uncompaining soldier of Christ, defender of justice and truth, an uncompromising leader and servant of the people."⁶¹ A biographer described his life as follows:

*Fué el paño de lágrimas de los necesitados que después de 31 años de sacerdocio y 3 de Episcopado dejó este mundo como vino él y vivió en él sin cesa, ni hacienda, ni dinero para pagar un ser viente que le atendiera en los últimos momentos de su vida, que le barriera el suelo del aposento y que le hiciera el caldo. Gracias a la caridad de su exfamiliar que le servía de enfermero, de criado y de cocinero todo a un tiempo, tuvo el pequeño consuelo de morir en Roma...asistido por una persona amiga. Ese es el Arzobispo actual de Vigan, El Excm. Sr. Santiago Sancho.*⁶²

Given such remarkable life, not only for being the First Bicolano and Filipino Bishop, but precisely because of what he has done for the State and the Church in the Philippines, Barlin deserves to be immortalized in the pages of Filipino history. The Catholic Church could have never been what it is now especially in Bicol without the tremendous contribution of this great man from Baao, *Jorge Alfonso Imperial Barlin*.

⁵⁷ Anonymous, "El Primer Obispo Bicolano", p. 16.

⁵⁸ See S.P.Q.R., *Direzione dei Cimiteri, Scheda di seppellimento*, Registro del 1909, n. 8852.

⁵⁹ "Un Prelado Menos", p. 722.

⁶⁰ The actual resting place of Bishop Barlin could not exactly be located until a team, headed by Dr. Luciano Santiago, commissioned by the Archdiocese of Manila, conducted a search in Rome in 1990. Dr. Santiago was a scholar of the Toyota Foundation and with him in the team were Fr. Mario Gaité, a townmate of Bishop Barlin, Rev. Delfin Felipe, then a student residing at the Collegio Filipino in Rome, and Mr. Benedict Ballesteros of Sorsogon. See "Tomb of the First Filipino Bishop Found in Rome" (Press Release dated December 5, 1990), in *Boletín Eclesiástico*, Vol. LXVII, n. 736-737, March-April 1991, p. 176.

⁶¹ J. Esplana, "Barlin, The Pride of Bikolandia", p. 46 and 48.

⁶² R. Rey, *Biografía de Mons. Barlin*.