

## **Last Decade of the Augustinian Recollects in San Carlos Borromeo Parish, San Carlos City, Negros Occidental (1965-1975)**

Emmanuel Luis A. Romanillos  
Recoletos School of Theology, Quezon City, Philippines  
elaromanillos@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

The controversial cession of San Carlos Borromeo Parish in 1975 by the Augustinian Recollects to the diocesan clergy was significant. Unknown by the present generation, the story is recalled in detail forty-five years after. Rich in primary sources and personal interviews with Recollects and diocesan priests, both protagonists, and eyewitnesses were utilized. The narrative objectively recounts the Recollect ministry in San Carlos. It then focuses on the diocesan consultors' meeting in October 1974 that sanctioned the takeover despite the lack of priests, the uninformed Recollect superiors' vicarial meeting on the reshuffle of curates in November 1974, and the persistent takeover rumors in San Carlos since October 1974. The official cession—that included Calatrava and Barangay Quezon parishes—happened on 6 January 1975. Reasons are revealed and discussed. In retrospect, the early beginnings of San Carlos and its creation as a diocese in 1988 have reminisced. Highlighted is Bishop Epifanio Surban's heartfelt gratitude for the Recollect evangelization effort.

**Keywords:** Augustinian Recollects, San Carlos Borromeo Parish, Diocese of San Carlos, Negros Occidental

---

Date Submitted: February 9, 2020

Date Revised: June 3, 2020

Date Accepted: June 15, 2020

In the early 1960s, quite a number of changes at the helm of the Augustinian Recollect parish of San Carlos Borromeo in San Carlos City, Negros Occidental, took place. Padre Esteban R. García, who took over the late Padre Alonso S. Bernal's post in September 1964 in an acting capacity, was transferred to Saint Peter Parish in Calatrava, a few kilometers north of San Carlos City. On 8 December 1964, Padre Esteban yielded the reins of the curacy to a Spanish confrere and classmate whose immediate past assignment was San Nicolás de Tolentino Parish in Dauin, Negros Oriental. Who could have foretold that this amiable curate Father Víctor Celigueta, *Padre Víctor* to parishioners, would be the last hardworking Augustinian Recollect parish curate after more than eighty years of the Augustinian Recollect Order's parochial stewardship of San Carlos Borromeo parish?

### **Víctor A. Celigueta OAR, last Recollect parish priest**

It was the Marian solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December 1964, chosen by Padre Víctor Celigueta (1926-1981) for taking possession of the parish. He was born on 20 April 1926 at Olite, Navarra, Spain. He pronounced his monastic vows in 1942. At Ivybridge in England, he was ordained a priest on 31 July 1949 together with Padre Esteban García. After arriving in the Philippines in 1949, Padre Víctor was sent to Saint Augustine of Hippo Parish in Bacong, Negros Oriental, to learn the Cebuano language and acquaint himself with the Filipino parishioners and their way of life. He served the faithful of Bacong until 1960. From 1961 to 1964, he was put in charge of San Nicolás of Tolentino Parish in Dauin.

During the last ten years of the Order's administration of San Carlos which coincided with the pastorate of Padre Víctor, six Augustinian Recollect priests served as assistant priests or parochial vicars, namely: Francisco Irrisari in 1964-1970; Herminio Álvarez, 1969-1971; Melchor Dano, 1969-1970; Pedro A. Escanillas, October 1973; Eusebio Zabaleta, 1970-1975; and Rafael E. Cabarles, 1971-1975. From the vicar provincial's files of obituaries of the Augustinian Recollect Vicariate of the Philippines and China, the following scanty information on Padre Víctor's fine qualities was obtained. His superiors remembered him for:

Outstanding was his zeal for the confessional and care towards the sick and great love for the affairs of the community. The cheerful and jovial character that made him an ideal companion in religious life always.<sup>1</sup>

### **Confreres' reminiscences**

Old parishioners of San Carlos could still recall Padre Víctor as the hardworking motorcycle-riding priest. He later abandoned the unsafe motorcycle and drove his owner-type jeep. In the recollection of the Recollect Father Emilio L. Larlar, Padre Víctor—an ecclesiastical sponsor at his *cantamisa* in 1965—was an overly generous, approachable priest and a good member of the religious community.<sup>2</sup>

A Spanish confrere Father Antonio Ramón Palacios, who occupied various posts at Colegio de Santo Tomas-Recoletos in 1974-1984, knew him well as a hardworking priest, jovial, dedicated, very down-to-earth, known for his loud guffaws but, most of all, compassionate to impoverished families.<sup>3</sup> These personal observations were readily confirmed by Padre Rafael Cabarles, Padre Víctor's Filipino companion towards the close of the Augustinian Recollect annals of San Carlos parish.<sup>4</sup>

Remarkably fluent in Cebuano after fifteen years in two Negros Oriental parishes and gifted with a deep baritone voice, Padre Víctor delivered his homilies effectively and never failed to hold the attention of his hearers. His great baritone voice stood out from the rest in fraternal gatherings and birthday celebrations of fellow Recollects. He was quick to smile; his guffaw was extremely contagious.

---

<sup>1</sup>*Libro de Necrologías, Protocolo Núm. 42/1981*. Vicar Provincial's File. Vicariate of the Philippines and China, Quezon City.

<sup>2</sup>*Interview with Father Emilio L. Larlar*, 15 April 1995, University of San Jose-Recoletos, Cebu City.

<sup>3</sup>*Interview with Father Antonio Ramón A. Palacios* 10 April 1995, University of Negros Occidental-Recoletos, Bacolod City.

<sup>4</sup>*Interview with Father Rafael E. Cabarles*, 13 April 1995, Our Lady of the Abandoned Parish, Valencia, Negros Oriental.

An enduring legacy he left for San Carlos is the present two-story rectory that houses the sleeping quarters, kitchen, dining hall, and offices of the parish curates and personnel. With the generous help of his parishioners, it was constructed in the wake of the fire that completely gutted Padre Manuel Gómara's old rectory in 1967. The parochial records were providentially saved from that conflagration.

### **A Saint Paul sister's visit**

Fr. Antonio Ramón Palacios once recalled a bittersweet episode in 1974—Padre Víctor's presbyteral silver jubilee.<sup>5</sup> One day a Saint Paul sister from Bacolod *en route* to Cebu had to make a stop-over at San Carlos. She had failed to catch the last ferry trip to Toledo City in Cebu across Tañon Strait. It seemed natural that she sought the parish priest's assistance. On Padre Víctor's recommendation, the jovial Saint Paul sister was then taken to adjacent Colegio de Santa Rita, where she spent the night with the Augustinian Recollect Sisters.

After mass, she was invited to a breakfast at the rectory. The ebullient religious sister gladly commended the Spanish priest's amazing proficiency in the Cebuano language. Furthermore, she profusely congratulated Padre Víctor for his fruitful twenty-five years in the presbyteral ministry. All those twenty-five years of pastoral zeal and dedicated service solely to the People of God in parishes of the diocese of Dumaguete.

### **A plaque for 25 years of service?**

"Padre Víctor, you ought to be given a medal by the Diocese of Dumaguete," the Paulinian religious sister delightedly told the parish priest, according to information conveyed by Fr. Antonio Ramón Palacios. "You definitely deserve a plaque of appreciation or whatever from your bishop! Twenty-five years of dedication!" Had she known the fate that befell on the jubilarian priest not long after, she would have been appalled at the ironic and incomprehensible turn of events in the coming months. The Paulinian religious never got to know that Padre Víctor and his two Recollect associates had to leave San Carlos parish shortly afterward. Had the good sister known the outcome, she might not be able to comprehend the irony of it all. Fr. Palacios said it was a rueful end to twenty-five years of selfless ministerial priesthood for God's People in the Dumaguete Diocese.

Padre Víctor resided for two months only at Colegio de Santo Tomas-Recoletos after the cession of San Carlos to the diocesan clergy in January 1975. He might have asked for a parochial assignment. He then went to Manila to have his travel papers processed. Not long afterward, he was sent by his superiors to San Juanico in Mexico. In Tecamachalco, Mexico, he passed away, a person with lung cancer on 20 May 1981. His untimely demise came exactly a month following his fifty-fifth birthday.

### **Rafael E. Cabarles OAR**

A native of Talisay City in Negros Occidental, Padre Rafael E. Cabarles was an assistant priest in 1971-1975. The multi-talented Visayan Augustinian Recollect finished his secondary education in 1960 at Colegio de Santo Tomás-Recoletos. Of this school, he would be a director and concurrently prior to its Recollect community in 1977-1979

---

<sup>5</sup>interview with Father Antonio Ramón Palacios.

and 1988-1994. He became vice president (1979-1982) and president (1982-1988) of the University of San Jose-Recoletos.<sup>6</sup> Shortly after his sacerdotal ordination at the Recollect theology house in Marcilla, Navarra, Spain, in 1971, he was sent to assist Padre Víctor. He was to be the last Filipino Recollect curate of San Carlos.

### Setting the record straight

In 1988—at the inception of his second triennium as director of Colegio de Santo Tomas-Recoletos—Padre Cabarles had authored an unpublished 17-page narrative *“How the Recollect Parish of San Carlos City was Taken by the Secular Clergy.”* It was replete with photos and relevant documents. He was a most knowledgeable person, being a direct participant and eyewitness in the “historical drama” that unfolded during the last quarter of 1974. He had to write a well-documented account because since 1975, a great number of parishioners “were not aware of the why and the how the Recollect parish was taken by the secular clergy.”<sup>7</sup> The lengthy article later became the basis of a chapter of his informative and highly-documented book, *The Centenary of the Recollects in San Carlos City, Negros Occidental, and the Golden Jubilee of the Colegio de Santo Tomas-Recoletos Foundation*. The centennial opusculum was published in December 1991 and launched at USJ-R.

### Ex-future spiritual director

On 15 October 1974, Padre Cabarles traveled to Dumaguete to submit a “very important document” to the chancery. The document contained the lay leaders’ request to have San Carlos Borromeo parish designated as a pilgrimage center, Dumaguete being a far-off site. At the same time, he requested Bishop Epifanio B. Surban of Dumaguete, to grant him a written authority to effectively coordinate the various activities of the 1975 Holy Year in San Carlos.

In an interview with this writer, Padre Cabarles said Bishop Onesimo C. Gordoncillo, auxiliary of Dumaguete, then redacted the authorization letter that was later signed by the local ordinary and personally handed to the guest from far-off San Carlos. Bishop Surban told the Recollect curate in that letter that he was “moved by the spiritual welfare of the people of God and desirous of promoting the Spirit and aims of the Holy Year. He further “hoped to give our people a chance and opportunity to fittingly commemorate this memorable event of the Universal Church by encouraging the faithful to make pilgrimages, together with the different acts of piety and forms of penitential rites and sacrifices.”

Continues the episcopal letter:

Taking cognizance of the distance of parishes from the Mother Church, our Episcopal See, the Cathedral Church, San Catherine of Alexandria in Dumaguete City, and to facilitate the making of these pilgrimages by our people in the North, we, Epifanio B. Surban, establish the parish church of Saint Charles Borromeo in San Carlos City as a center of pilgrimage.

---

<sup>6</sup>A BA graduate of the Saint Louis University of Baguio City, Padre Cabarles got another degree—BS Education—from Santa Rita in 1972. In USJ-R, he finished his Master in Management, major in Education Management in 1982.

<sup>7</sup>Rafael CABARLES, *How the Recollect Parish of San Carlos City was taken over by the Secular Clergy* [unpublished article], (San Carlos City 1988) 6.

I also appoint you Rev. Fr. Rafael Cabarles OAR as the Spiritual Director to coordinate with the activities connected with the pilgrimages from the other parishes. You will please explain to the pilgrims the spiritual benefits and indulgences that can be gained through these religious activities.

In the 1988 article mentioned above, Padre Cabarles regretted that neither Bishop Surban nor Bishop Gordoncillo “hinted to me that they were planning to take over the parish.” The Recollect curate had joined the two bishops for lunch. They had all the time for a post-prandial conversation. Yet nothing of the imminent takeover was insinuated to the young Recollect curate during his brief Dumaguete visit. The prelates never disclosed to him what was at the back of the prelates’ minds. It was merely nine days before the momentous meeting of the diocesan board of consultors that would decide the fate of San Carlos Borromeo parish, which was founded and administered under the aegis of the Augustinian Recollect Order for eight decades. Padre Cabarles could not perform his tasks as spiritual director for the Holy Year pilgrimages to San Carlos because on 6 January 1975, the Augustinian Recollects had to leave the parish, ending their eighty-four year administration.

### **Pedro A. Escanillas OAR**

A newly ordained priest of San Pedro, San Jose, Antique, Padre Pedro A. Escanillas, was informed of his first pastoral assignment after receiving the holy order of priesthood.<sup>8</sup> On 18 October 1973, the Filipino Recollect priest was sent by the vicar provincial to San Carlos to replace Padre Eusebio Zabaleta then on vacation in Spain. The Spanish curate had not indicated yet his intention to go back to the parish.

Upon his arrival, Padre Escanillas buckled down to work. Padre Cabarles showed his younger confrere the hacienda ministry of the parish. They visited the haciendas personally. Padre Víctor had requested them to supervise the sugar haciendas that were not under the supervision of Colegio of Santo Tomas. The two curates then apportioned the haciendas between themselves.

To his great surprise and dismay, Padre Escanillas received the *patente* of another assignment. Colegio de San Jose-Recoletos in Cebu City had urgently needed the services of a Filipino administrator. Furthermore, Padre Eusebio Zabaleta had expressed his wish to return to San Carlos. On 25 October, exactly a week after his arrival, the young Filipino priest reported to his new assignment in the educational apostolate of the Order. He was to organize the theology department of the future Recollect University.

In the Recollect annals of San Carlos parish history, Padre Pedro Escanillas would be remembered as the first and only priest to hold the briefest term—seven days—as parish curate.

### **Foreboding October 1974**

A secular priest from the Dumaguete diocese, Fr. Elmo Luis Vergara, had come

---

<sup>8</sup>Interview with Father Pedro A. Escanillas OAR, 16 August 1995, Our Lady of Consolation Parish, Mira-Nila Homes, Quezon City. See also *Meet our new parish priest: Father Pedro A. Escanillas*, in *Souvenir Program of Parish Fiesta Celebration of Our Lady of Consolation Parish, 2-3 September 1995* (Quezon City 1995) 8-9.

to San Carlos in late September or early October of 1974. He had relatives in the city. "Being the administrator of their family farm in Guihulngan," Padre Cabarles writes in his book, "he had the books of the farms audited by Mr. Antonio de la Cruz, a certified public accountant who lived near Santo Tomas in Broce Street."<sup>9</sup> Apparently, there were some conflicts in the family business that required the diocesan priest's immediate attention and presence.

During a mass celebrated at the parochial church in the early part of October, Fr. Vergara had publicly announced that diocesan authorities were poised to take over the parish from the Recollects. He had spread the word of the imminent takeover. In the extraordinarily small-town ambiance of San Carlos City, where walls possessed ears and words had wings, the report caught the attention of the Augustinian Recollect priests of the parish and Santo Tomas religious community. But the matter was simply brushed aside by both Recollect communities for lack of official communication on the extremely vital issue from the Dumaguete diocese.

### **Persistent takeover rumors**

Among other places visited in the early days of October 1974 by Fr. Elmo Luis Vergara was Colegio de Santa Rita. Following the community mass at the conventual chapel, he conversed with the Augustinian Recollect Sisters. He inquired about their relationship with the parish administration. He then informed them that plans were afoot to take over San Carlos. The sisters told the parish guest that the inter-Recollect relationship had never been so good. They lost no time in conveying the information to their fellow members of the big Augustinian Recollect family and sought confirmation on the scuttlebutt. Nevertheless, no explanation or confirmation by their confreres at the rectory could be given to them.

An absurd variant of the malicious rumor was the imminent expulsion of the Spanish Recollects Padre Víctor and Padre Eusebio Zabaleta from the parish. The Filipino curate was to remain behind, together with the new secular priests from the Dumaguete diocese. Evidently, some parishioners had yet no crystal-clear distinction between secular and regular clergy. They never imagined that once the takeover was completed, the three Recollect priests, including Padre Cabarles, would have to vacate the parish.

### **A diocesan consultor's visit**

On 3 November 1974, the diocesan consultor Msgr. Tomas Q. Avenido, vicar general of Dumaguete Diocese in 1957-1965 and later parish priest of San Carlos Borromeo cathedral parish in 1984-1993 arrived at San Carlos for the pompous city fiesta. He was accorded the customary gesture of hospitality and deference by the Recollects at the parish rectory.

In his trip to San Carlos City, Msgr. Avenido was accompanied by Father José María S. Martínez, then coadjutor of San Antonio de Padua parish in Sibulan, Negros Oriental.<sup>10</sup> The former vicar general of Dumaguete was the main celebrant of the

---

<sup>9</sup>CABARLES, *Centenary*, 6.

<sup>10</sup>*Interview with Father José María S. Martínez OAR*, 12 July 1995, San Sebastian Convent, Quiapo, Manila.

principal mass of city fiesta. In that mass, vividly recalled Father Martínez, the preacher invited for the special occasion was Fr. Cirilo M. Durana (1929-1995), Recollect parish priest of Santo Niño Parish in Quezon, a southwestern upland barangay of San Carlos.

### **Prophetic words**

During his sojourn at the rectory, Msgr. Avenido engaged Fr. Martínez in a conversation at the terrace. As they both gazed at the imposing spires of the temple constructed four decades back by Padre Leoncio Reta and Padre Manuel Gómara, the parish guest uttered some prophetic words about the parochial church: "That is going to be a cathedral someday." Indeed, in 1988 the diocesan consultor's prediction became a reality. Still, the takeover plan was kept under wraps.

### **The vicar provincial's visit**

In November 1974, the vicar provincial Fr. Alejandro L. Remírez visited San Carlos City to conduct a consultation with the Recollect priests. Plans for a reshuffle in parochial assignments in Recollect parishes in Negros Occidental were afoot. Padre Víctor, Calatrava's Padre Esteban R. García, and Talisay's Padre Florentino R. Echávarri (1926-1991) arrived from vacation in their native Spain. At Santo Tomas, the vicar provincial then talked with the Recollect priests directly affected in the planned reshuffle of personnel.

One of those consulted first was Fr. Marcelino Mayor with residence at Santo Tomas since 1969. He had served as parish priest of Zamboanguita, Negros Oriental in 1964-1969, and as a school administrator at Santo Tomas in 1960-1963. At that time, the forty-year-old Recollect priest was enrolled in a master's degree program at the University of Negros Occidental-Recoletos [UNO-R] in Bacolod City and religiously traveled to the provincial capital every Saturday for his graduate studies.

Padre Marcelino was being eyed by the vicar provincial as Calatrava's new parish priest. Padre Esteban García had sought to be relieved of his post for health reasons. After weighing the pros and cons of the issue, the vicar provincial permitted Padre Marcelino to pursue his master studies.

### **Reshuffle proposed and opposed**

The fate of Padre Cabarles was likewise considered. The vicar provincial was toying the idea of making him the national vocation director. He was to replace Fr. Dalmacio Sua-an of UNO-R. The vicar provincial had already firmed up his decision. Fr. José María L. Juango, director of Colegio de Santo Tomas and superior of the Recollect community, had earnestly sought Fr. Cabarles' appointment. Padre Víctor, however, was adamantly against such a proposal. He put his foot down on his associate's new designation because he wanted to retain him at the parish.

Nothing resulted from the planned reshuffle. Apparently, the vicar provincial had decided not to disturb the status quo. He retraced his steps to Manila with the parish and school personnel in northeastern Negros intact. Nevertheless, a series of disquieting rumors, emotion-filled events, and convoluted arguments from October 1994 to January 1975 would severely upset the whole ecclesiastical set-up in San Carlos, Calatrava, and Barrio Quezon.

It was two days before the tenth anniversary of Padre Víctor as parish priest of San Carlos—6 December 1974—when some portentous event was taking place elsewhere. On that day, a letter from Prior Provincial Father Javier M. Pipaón in Madrid reached the office of the vicar provincial of the Philippines and China in Quezon City.<sup>11</sup> The letter enclosed another from Bishop Epifanio Surban, which and addressed to the provincial house at Paseo de la Habana in Madrid, Spain. For appropriate and speedy action, the prior provincial dispatched it—through Fr. Pedro Herce, a Recollect who was returning to Manila—to the Philippine vicar provincial, Fr. Remírez.

### **Episcopal communications**

In his 5 November 1974 letter, the Dumaguete bishop informed the prior provincial about the decision of the diocesan board of consultors who were convoked to a meeting on 24 October 1974 at the chancery in the Negros Oriental capital. They had come up with a resolution to “ask the cession of San Carlos Borromeo Parish in San Carlos City, Negros Occidental, from the Corporation of the Recollect fathers into the hands of the secular priests.”<sup>12</sup>

Attached to Bishop Surban’s letter to the Recollect provincial superior in Madrid were the approved resolution signed by the diocesan consultors and a copy of his letter dated 2 April 1960 to then Vicar Provincial Fr. Tomás Z. Cornago (1900-1980). In 1960 the Dumaguete prelate had told the Order’s major superior in the Philippines that unless there were sufficient priests, the Recollect priests could go on with their pastoral ministry in his vast diocese. A letter—similar to the one dispatched to Fr. Pipaón in the Spanish capital and dated 29 November 1974—was also mailed by the bishop to the vicar provincial. This episcopal communication was received in mid-December 1974 by Father Remírez upon his return from Negros.

### **Diocesan board of consultors**

Padre Rafael E. Cabarles had acquired months later—on 13 June 1975—a true copy of the minutes of the diocesan board of consultors meeting from the San Antonio de Padua parish in Sibulan, then at the hands of the Recollects. At that time, Padre Cabarles was invited to preach at the solemn mass of their town fiesta. Among the pertinent points of the board meeting that lasted two hours and a half were the following:

Since Manjuyod is left vacant, the Board of Consultors agreed to have it attended by Fr. Fermin Martin of Bindoy.

The taking over of the administration of San Carlos City-Parish from the Recollect fathers was discussed lengthily. The board came to a unanimous agreement to send a resolution signed by all the members to the provincial superior of the Recollect fathers giving reasons for the taking over of the said parish by the diocesan clergy.

---

<sup>11</sup>CABARLES, *Centenary*, 5.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*



A letter framed by the bishop should accompany the resolution stating that upon receipt of it, three months is being given to vacate the parish. Fr. Elmo Luis Vergara will be assigned pastor of Saint Charles Borromeo Parish, San Carlos City.<sup>13</sup>

### 5 November 1974

The episcopal letter of 5 November 1974 to the prior provincial in Madrid listed the important reasons given by the diocesan board of consultors for taking over San Carlos parish. Three most important ones were cited: first, “the increase in the number of the diocesan priests requires that some of the parishes be turned over to the diocesan clergy; second, the term of ten years that has been granted to the Recollect fathers upon the request of then Vicar Provincial Father Tomás Cornago has already expired as evidenced by the accompanying letter; and third, the consensus of the diocesan board of consultors is that the parish of San Carlos Borromeo, San Carlos City, which eventually may become a diocese should be the foothold in the northern parishes of the Diocese.”<sup>14</sup>

The board resolutions were signed by Msgr. Epifanio Surban and the six *present* consultors: Auxiliary Bishop Onesimo C. Gordoncillo, Msgr. Tomas Q. Avenido, Msgr. Benjamin Hiponia, Msgr. Antonio Ferreron, Fr. Elmo Luis Vergara, Fr. Andres Aguilar and Fr. Jose J. Agan who was chancellor and secretary.

### A discrepancy noted

In his 1991 book, however, Padre Cabarles detected a number of discrepancies in the resolution of the diocesan consultors’ board meeting. One impossibility, observed the Recollect author, was the physical presence of Fr. Elmo Luis Vergara at the 24 October meeting of the diocesan board of consultors, which was adjourned at 11:35 a.m. Padre Cabarles claimed that this diocesan consultor was never at that board meeting. Fr. Vergara could not have participated at the board deliberations in Dumaguete City because he was on that very day at San Carlos—over 150 kilometers away. The diocesan consultor had been staying as a guest at the rectory “since the beginning of October,” according to the Recollect writer.

On 23 October, the night before the board meeting, Fr. Vergara returned to the rectory with the parish-owned *Petromax*. He had returned from the accountant Antonio de la Cruz’s residence at the brownout-plagued city of San Carlos. At the rectory, he saw the catechists preparing sandwiches. On 24 October, a Thursday—the day of the board meeting at Dumaguete City—the diocesan priest partook of the hearty lunch with the Recollect priests of the parish and Santo Tomas, for it was the birthday celebration of Padre Cabarles.<sup>15</sup> At 2:00 p.m. Father Vergara watched the movie *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* at a downtown movie-house.

On 27 October, the diocesan guest said the 8:00 o’clock Sunday mass—which the Recollect coadjutor ordinarily celebrated—and developed the theme of his sermon on the Brocka classic. Consequently, according to Padre Cabarles, the diocesan consultor could never have been present at the momentous deliberations at the Negros Oriental capital for the simple reason that he was all the time at San Carlos.

---

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 45, note 22.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

### **More discrepancies**

Padre Cabarles noted more inconsistencies in the diocesan documents: alleged sufficiency of priests in the diocese mentioned in the episcopal letter to the Recollect provincial superior and the actual pressing need for a parish priest in the central-eastern Negros parish of Manjuyod, as disclosed in the minutes of the board meeting.

In another resolution, the diocesan board of consultors agreed to grant a grace period of three months after receipt of its resolution to vacate San Carlos Parish. Yet the bishop in his 5 November 1974 letter asked the provincial to act on the request “towards the end of the coming month of December this year.”<sup>16</sup> In less than two months, the curacy should be vacated as urged by the bishop, in contravention to the board’s three-month grace period. But then it was most probably within Bishop Surban’s competence to shorten the grace period.

### **Vicar Provincial convokes a meeting**

In a personal interview of a writer conducted on 18 March 1995 with Father Alejandro J. Remírez, then parochial vicar of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino Parish in Quezon City, the former vicar provincial said he had immediately summoned his vicarial councilors—Fr. José Antonio Calvo and Fr. Jesús N. Sobejano—to an emergency meeting on 7 December. The following day a telegram dispatched by the vicar provincial reached the rectory of San Carlos, informing the Recollect priests about a vicarial consultative meeting to be held on Wednesday, 11 December. The vicarial council had agreed to meet four days later at Colegio de Santo Tomas and consult all the Recollect parish priests assigned to the diocese of Dumaguete.<sup>17</sup>

In an interview, Padre Cabarles said that the Recollect priests were fetched from their curacies by the Toyota Hi-Ace van owned by Colegio de Santo Tomas. This information was corroborated in another interview with Fr. José María S. Martínez, who was the coadjutor of Sibulan. The vicar provincial and his councilors who arrived at the Dumaguete airport, geographically located at Sibulan town, joined the Recollect priests of Negros Oriental in the long ride to San Carlos City for the emergency meeting.

### **11 December 1974**

The momentous gathering took place at Colegio de Santo Tomas-Recoletos on 11 December 1974. In a tense atmosphere, some religious proposed that all the other parishes administered by Recollects in the Dumaguete Diocese be ceded to the Dumaguete diocese. The ministries included Calatrava, Zamboanguita, Sibulan, Valencia, and Barangay Quezon of San Carlos City. However, the proverbial cooler heads prevailed. Some believed that should they cede all the parishes, they would certainly merit a severe censure from the Holy See. Padre Pedro L. Ko, then curate of Valencia in Negros Oriental since 1960 and director of the parochial high school there, would not agree to part with his parish and his San Pedro Academy, a school he had founded and single-handedly administered.

---

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 44, note 17.

<sup>17</sup>*Interview with Father Alejandro L. Remírez OAR*, 18 March 1995, San Nicolás de Tolentino Parish, Quezon City.

At length, it was unanimously decided that the two parishes contiguous to San Carlos—San Pedro Apóstol of Calatrava and Santo Niño of Barangay Quezon—be turned over to the diocese as well. They deemed it improper for diocesan officials to get the better and more progressive parish [San Carlos] and “leave less prosperous ones behind.” Now, if the diocesan authorities had enough priests as the prelates and the consultors claimed and categorically stated in the resolution—the Recollect superior and parish priests reasoned out—let them have Calatrava and Barangay Quezon as well.<sup>18</sup>

### **The reply**

The official response redacted by the Augustinian Recollect Vicariate of the Philippines and China for the ecclesiastical authorities of the Dumaguete Diocese was terse, concise, and categorical. We reprint it below:

The Council of this Provincial Vicariate of the Philippines and China in a meeting held on 11 December 1974 at San Carlos City, Negros Occidental, after having listened to the opinion of our religious parish and assistant priests on the petition of the bishop and his consultors that the administration of San Carlos Borromeo parish is ceded to the secular clergy has unanimously approved the following resolution: ‘To turn over to the Bishop of Dumaguete the parishes of Santo Niño of Barangay Quezon and San Pedro Apóstol of Calatrava at the same time and date that the secular clergy assumes the administration of the San Carlos Borromeo parish of San Carlos City, Negros Occidental.’<sup>19</sup>

The vicarial council’s resolution bore the signatures of Fr. Remírez and his councilors Fr. Calvo and Fr. Sobejano. The three Spanish Recollects had affixed their signatures on the official document on 11 December 1974 at San Carlos City.

### **Two reasons for the cession**

The cover letter for the vicarial resolution was later prepared and typewritten at the San Antonio de Padua parish rectory in Sibulan, according to information personally conveyed by its former curate Fr. José María S. Martínez to the author. Two important reasons for giving up Barrio Quezon and Calatrava together with San Carlos parish were cited by Father Remírez in his 12 December 1974 cover letter for the vicarial council’s resolution:

1. The cession of the San Carlos parish to the secular clergy would leave the parishes of Quezon and Calatrava very isolated and our religious excessively isolated from the others who would go on working in the rest of the Negros Oriental parishes.
2. Our laws corroborated once more by the most recent General Chapter that ended a month ago, insist that our religious must not live isolated from another and that at least two must live in every parish or ministry. In this case, Quezon had only one priest for many years and would continue for many more years; with respect to Calatrava, this too would have only one religious due to resignation of

---

<sup>18</sup>*Interview with Father Alejandro L. Remírez.*

<sup>19</sup>CABARLES, *Centenary*, 44-45.

Fr. Esteban García for health reasons and, as of now, it would be impossible to substitute him for lack of personnel.

The resolution had the vicar provincial and his two councilors Father Calvo and Father Sobejano as signatories. Attached to the first resolution was a similar document signed by the vicar provincial, his two vicarial councilors, the parish curates and coadjutor priests: Víctor Celigueta, Esteban García, Eusebio Zabaleta, Herminio Alvarez, Faustino Paglinawan, Pedro Ko, Paulino Lerena, José María Martínez, Francisco Oviedo, Leovigildo Jaboni and Rafael Cabarles.

### **The rejoinder**

The cover letter for the dual resolutions revealed the vicar provincial's and his vicarial councilors' rejoinder of the Dumaguete prelate's letter. With reference to the alleged sufficiency of the secular clergy, the Augustinian Recollect vicar provincial maintained that:

We have been greatly surprised that the purpose—perhaps the primary one—for asking San Carlos parish from us should necessarily be the sufficiency of secular clergy when Your Excellency knows there are still many parishes in your diocese without priests and other parishes that have one priest but would have required the services of two or more.

Father Remírez and his councilors further answered two more points brought up in the episcopal letter:

We do find it irrelevant quoting at this moment the letter your Excellency had addressed on 2 April 1960 to the vicar provincial then when during the ten-year grace period—1960-1970—that your Excellency had set, the Recollect fathers ceded the parishes of Bacong and Dauin.

We do not believe the possibility that the continuance of the Recollect fathers would pose any obstacle to the creation of a new diocese in the future. Any difficulty that would arise therefrom could be easily remedied at any given moment.<sup>20</sup>

True enough, the parish of Dumaguete was turned over by the Augustinian Recollects to the secular clergy on the day the Dumaguete Diocese was erected in 1955.

What is tactfully but clearly underscored in the response is the undeniable fact that the selfless Recollects and founders of numerous towns, mission parishes and active missions in the whole Negros Island had gradually and consistently ceded the same ministries to the diocesan clergy whose number grew through the years:

We firmed up this decision with deep sorrow and despite our wishes to go on cooperating with your Excellency and with your secular clergy in the pastoral work in the diocese. The work accomplished by the Recollect Fathers in the diocese of Dumaguete and the entire Island of Negros is evident, and we are not remiss

---

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

in continuing our Recollect tradition. Never has our Order been opposed to the practice that secular priests would continue our work when we realized that the secular clergy was numerous enough to take over the reigns of our parishes. This is attested by the great number of parishes that were founded and administered by our religious and nowadays are in the hands of the secular clergy.

Apart from reciprocating the bishop's heartfelt gratitude for the Recollects' evangelization effort, the vicar provincial ended his letter expressing his request from the diocesan authorities to prepare the necessary contracts with respect to the remaining Recollect-managed parishes in the Dumaguete diocese:

All these circumstances make us less secured in your diocese. Therefore, even as we ask you to assume the administration of the parishes of Barrio Quezon and Calatrava together with that of San Carlos, we would like to express our desire to you that—in obedience to the ordinances of our last provincial chapter—the status of the remaining parishes we administer in your diocese be formalized through a contract stipulating the time period that your Excellency wishes for us to plan the transfer and preparation of our personnel ahead of time.

I do not wish to end [this letter] without sincerely thanking you for the laudatory words for the Recollect fathers your Excellency has expressed in your letter.

### **Trip to Dumaguete**

The next move was to inform the local ordinary of Dumaguete about the vicarial council's decision forthwith. Thus, together with Fr. Antonio Ramón A. Palacios of Colegio de Santo Tomas, the confreres assigned to Negros Oriental parishes and the vicar provincial then traveled in the same Toyota Hi-Ace to Dumaguete City, then a long drive of over five hours due to the rough and dusty roads. CST-R's Fr. Delfin A. Castillo and Fr. Palacios recalled that the Recollect delegation left for the Negros Oriental capital in the wee hours of 12 December.<sup>21</sup>

Father Remírez could still vividly remember in an interview how his group went to the bishop's palace before noon to personally deliver the vicarial letter and council's resolution. The Recollect delegation had come from a long way to seek an audience with the bishop. They did deliver the letter, but they failed to see Msgr. Surban personally.<sup>22</sup> Fr. Palacios said that same day, the priests of Santo Tomas trekked back to San Carlos.

The vicar provincial and his councilors spent the night at the parish rectory of Sibulan, located very near the airport, according to Fr. Martínez. Their scheduled flight to Cebu City was set for the next day. From the Central Visayan metropolis, they would board a Philippine Airlines jet that would fly them back to Manila.

### **Official announcement**

It was Padre Cabarles who broke the news to the parishioners at the Sunday mass of 29 December 1974 after the distribution of Holy Communion when public

---

<sup>21</sup>*Interview with Father Delfin A. Castillo*, 21 March 1995, Recollect Formation Center, Mira-Nila, Quezon City.

<sup>22</sup>*Interview with Father Alejandro L. Remírez*.

announcements were customarily made. That was the first official confirmation of the rumors that had spread like wildfire since early October. We react to a lay leader of long residence. It is culled from a rather long letter that the active leader and educator wrote on 30 December 1974 to a son studying in Europe. We quote below pertinent portions of the personal letter:

It breaks my heart to tell you that only now—after nearly a century—the Recollect fathers will leave San Carlos, or forced to vacate our parish. I did not want to believe the rumor during the Cursillo for men. According to Padre Víctor and company, the bishop of the diocese had prearranged the takeover as early as November. A letter from Madrid was read by Padre Sitô [a nickname of “Rafaelcito” Cabarles] after the afternoon mass of December 29 last Sunday.

I can’t believe it as the secular priests will not suffice the needs of our parish. We have three priests at present, yet the CST-R fathers extend help, go out to the haciendas for Masses, as you well know.<sup>23</sup>

### **Black is for mourning**

Aside from mentioning the dearth of priests in the Dumaguete diocese, the letter-sender had noted that the Filipino curate wore the black habit instead of the customary white tunic and cowl with a cincture:

Do you know what? Immediately after the Mass, I went up to the convent. No one was up there, but right after I sat in the *comedor* [dining room], Padre Sitô arrived. I was wondering why he wore the black *sotana*. Then beyond my control, I burst into tears, real honest ones, the pent-up emotions I had during the Mass. He was in the same state too, but his tears never fell.

Why? Why? Do you know that there are three towns in [Negros] Oriental with no priests because the supply of secular priests can’t fill the demand? What must be the real reason?

The white religious habit had been prescribed since 1882 for all the Augustinian Recollect friars working in this torrid country.<sup>24</sup> However, black is the traditional habit worn by Recollects in other parts of the world, which serves as a “sign of their consecration and as a witness to poverty.”<sup>25</sup> Padre Cabarles had worn the black tunic and cowl for its evident and opportune connotation of the color in the Philippine setting—mourning. He was grieving the eventual loss of the curacy where for decades, his confreres had really worked hard for the continued evangelization of the People of God.

---

<sup>23</sup>Corazon A. ROMANILLOS, *Letter to Emmanuel Luis A. Romanillos*, San Carlos City, 30 December 1974, from the author’s personal file.

<sup>24</sup>Manuel CARCELLER OAR, *Historia general de la Orden de Agustinos Recoletos XII* (Madrid 1974) 418-419.

<sup>25</sup>AR *Constitutions*, no. 99.

## 6 January 1975

Indeed, 6 January 1975 was like any ordinary day, not unlike any treadmill of a Monday. It was an uneventful day. Perhaps nobody knew then about its significance in the annals of the parish. The tens of thousands of San Carlos parishioners might have been unaware of the event that unfolded at the parish rectory.

It was at about four o'clock in the afternoon of the day after Epiphany Sunday when the last Augustinian Recollect parish priest waited in vain to turn over the canonical books of the curacy to Fr. Elmo Luis Vergara who represented the secular clergy. Both Fr. Cabarles and Fr. Palacios confirmed to this writer that Padre Víctor had earlier affixed his signature on all the parochial books in his room at the rectory he had built years back.

### The long futile wait

Fr. Antonio Ramón Palacios of Santo Tomas likewise waited for the diocesan priests since the morning of 6 January at the terrace of the rectory. No diocesan priests came for the turnover ceremony. Fr. Palacios then decided to leave for Santo Tomas at about four o'clock in the afternoon. After a long fruitless wait, Padre Víctor hired a pedicab—the foot-pedaled tricycle—at five o'clock and headed likewise for Santo Tomas. They were informed before long that Fr. Elmo Luis Vergara, the first diocesan parish priest, arrived at the rectory at the twilight of the same day, 6 January 1975.<sup>26</sup> No formal turnover ceremony took place. No official communication came from the diocesan authorities to formally notify the parish curate of San Carlos, Padre Cabarles, said in an interview in April 1995.

### Finis coronat opus

The great impact of 6 January 1975 was, of course, not felt by the parishioners at once. Maybe no one—except the last Recollect parish curates Celigueta, Cabarles, Zabaleta, and a handful of knowledgeable people—realized then that what was being written was the last page of a glorious chapter in the Augustinian Recollect annals of San Carlos Borromeo parish. *Finit coronat opus*, the end crowns the work.

It was the end of a total of 127 years of their spiritual administration of San Carlos as part of the matrix town of Silay, then of Escalante, and finally of Calatrava. It was a finale to eighty-four years of uninterrupted and fruitful parochial ministry where over forty of the most zealous and hard-working Recollect religious had labored for the material advancement and spiritual well-being of God's People at San Carlos Borromeo parish.

### Sum-ag example

In Sum-ag parish of Bacolod City, the thoughtful parishioners and religious association members adopted in February 1967 a fitting resolution “expressing their sincere gratitude for the unfailing spiritual and moral enlightenment given them by the Recollect priests for more than a century.”<sup>27</sup> The occasion was the cession of the curacy administered by the Recoletos since 1855 to the diocesan clergy.

---

<sup>26</sup>Interview with Father Antonio Ramón A. Palacios.

<sup>27</sup>Rafael GARCÍA, *Parroquia de Sum-ag, Negros Occidental, Filipinas*, in *Boletín de la Provincia de San Nicolás de Tolentino* 58 (1968) 83.

The historic resolution “embodying the sentiment and appreciation of the grateful parishioners of Sum-ag” for the Recollect religious “who have ministered to this parishes, for all the differences in their personalities and talents, have left indelible and precious traces and influences on the spiritual as well as practical lives of the people” was presented to the Augustinian Recollect prior general, to the prior provincial and the vicar provincial. Absolutely nothing of the sort has occurred hitherto at San Carlos since 1975. But then it is never too late if it does happen. A debt of gratitude endures forever. Gratitude, as the saying goes, is the memory of the heart.

### **The beginnings recalled**

Surely no one at that time grasped the momentous event that unfolded before a handful of people. Yet it was the conclusion of almost uninterrupted annals in the Augustinian Recollect history of the evangelization of San Carlos that saw Padre Pedro Chivite in 1891 as the first resident priest and in 1895 as the first parish curate. Who would ever remember him now? Who would remember now the undaunted Padre Eusebio Valderrama? Despite the myriad perils to his life in the wake of the Philippine Revolution, he chose to return to San Carlos and zealously ministered to the spiritually famished ecclesial communities of the entire eastern coast of Negros Island.

Unless something positive is done to perpetuate the memory of their great evangelization tasks and that of his confreres who planted and maintained the blessings of our Christian Faith, their memory would be forever lost to the coming generations of Catholics. With fervor and dedication, they served the spiritual needs of our ancestors and the first immigrants of San Carlos. If the memory of their evangelical efforts would not be perpetuated, their legacy of Christianity to us and our blessing of faith would probably be all for naught.

### **Seeds of faith**

It had fallen on these zealous Augustinian Recollect pioneers to sow the seeds of the Gospel and toil on the Lord’s most fertile vineyard. Who could remember how much with selfless dedication they had done to bring down the scattered families along the rolling hills and to convince them to live at the coastal settlement to enjoy the spiritual and moral benefits of their Christian faith?

In 1891, the settlement had only a thousand souls. Today the population of the progressive city has grown to over a hundred thousand Roman Catholics. Padre Pedro’s pastoral visits in 1899 amid the lurking revolutionary perils and Padre Eusebio’s early return in 1901 to his beloved parish had checked the furious onslaughts of schismatics and apostates into San Carlos parish. A schismatic fury that even mercilessly took the life of former San Carlos curate Padre Víctor Baltanás in Escalante in the early 1900s. The loving memory of these two great ministers of God—Padre Pedro Chivite and Padre Eusebio Valderrama—must live on.

### **Spiritual and material blessings**

Profound gratitude must be likewise due to their equally zealous Augustinian Recollect confreres for their unceasing spiritual nourishment and moral enlightenment to our forefathers. We now fully enjoy the non-tangible fruits of their labors in our firm



faith in Almighty God, strong marital commitments and family bonds, righteous ethical conduct, spiritual fulfillment, unflinching civic consciousness, social responsibility, and countless vocations to the priestly and religious life.

The commemoration of the San Carlos Centennial in 1995 acknowledged the Recollects' role in the evangelization and ministerial apostolate as well as in the great material advancement, economic progress, and social uplift almost every lay leader and every ordinary parishioner presently benefit. These are tangible fruits of the educational apostolate of both Augustinian Recollect sisters and priests since the 1930s.

### **Bishop Surban's note of gratitude**

Bishop Epifanio B. Surban did not fail to express his gratitude for the zealous evangelization done by all the Augustinian Recollect curates of San Carlos Borromeo parish. It was contained in his 5 November 1974 letter to Father Javier M. Pipaón, announcing his takeover of San Carlos. The relevant portions of the episcopal communiqué, written in Spanish and translated into English by this writer, fully acknowledge the pastoral endeavor and untold sacrifices of Recollect parish priests:

We profusely thank the services rendered and great sacrifices so admirably shown by the different parish priests. They had successively administered the aforementioned parish. May the Lord abundantly reward the apostolic zeal that had left so much well-being to the whole parochial jurisdiction of San Carlos. I reiterate my thanks, and may God bless your efforts.<sup>28</sup>

And in another letter to the Recollect major superior in the Philippines residing at Quezon City, the bishop of Dumaguete declared: "We wish again to express our thanks to the Recollect Fathers for their contribution to the evangelization of our people in the Diocese of Dumaguete, especially for San Carlos City."<sup>29</sup> It was a fitting grateful acknowledgment of the missionary effort of the Augustinian Recollects. They had sown the first seeds of Christian faith towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And it came from no less than the highest religious authority of the diocese. For, after all, Msgr. Epifanio B. Surban wanted only the best for the progressive San Carlos parish. He had envisioned a primordial role for this progressive parish, a status that would speak highly of the steadfast faith of its people and the zealous evangelization efforts of Augustinian Recollect missionaries. Bishop Surban wanted it to become a diocese. Together with Msgr. Antonio Y. Fortich, then Bishop of Bacolod, was an architect of the future episcopal see of San Carlos.

The cherished dream of the two bishops, aided by the Almighty God, would be crowned with complete success when the Holy See announced on 30 March 1987 the creation of San Carlos diocese, one of the four dioceses of Negros Island.

---

<sup>28</sup>Epifanio B. SURBAN D.D., *Letter to Father Javier Pipaón OAR*, Dumaguete City, 5 November 1974, in CABARLES, *Recollect Parish*, 16.

<sup>29</sup>Epifanio B. SURBAN D.D., *Letter to Father Alejandro Ramirez [sic] OAR*, Dumaguete City, 29 November 1974, in CABARLES, *Recollect Parish*, 15.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### I. Books

- Rafael E. Cabarles. *How the Recollect parish of San Carlos was taken by the secular clergy*. San Carlos City, 1988. 17pp.
- Rafael E. Cabarles. *The Centenary of the Recollects in San Carlos City, Negros Occidental, and the Golden Jubilee of the Colegio de Santo Tomas-Recoletos Foundation*. San Carlos City 1991.
- Germán F. Chicote [ed.]. *The Augustinian Recollects in Asia*. Quezon City 1992.
- Emmanuel Luis A. Romanillos. *San Carlos Parish Yesterday and Today*. Quezon City 1995

### II. Articles

- Rafael García, *Parroquia de Sum-ag, Negros Occidental, Filipinas*, in *BPSN* 58 (1968) 83.
- Meet our new parish priest: Father Pedro A. Escanillas*, in *Souvenir Program of Parish Fiesta Celebration of Our Lady of Consolation Parish, 2-3 September 1995* (Quezon City 1995) 8-9.

### III. Personal Interviews

- Msgr. Tomas Q. Avenido, 4 November 1995, San Carlos City.
- Fr. Rafael E. Cabarles, 13 April 1995, Our Lady of the Abandoned Parish, Valencia, Negros Oriental.
- Fr. Delfin A. Castillo, 19 March 1995, Recoletos Formation Center, Mira-Nila Homes, Quezon City.
- Fr. Germán F. Chicote, 24 March 1995, Provincial House. Quezon City.
- Fr. Pedro A. Escanillas, 16 August 1995, Our Lady of Consolation Parish, Mira-Nila Homes, Quezon City.
- Fr. Emilio L. Larlar, 15 April 1995, University of San Jose-Recoletos, Cebu City.
- Fr. José María S. Martínez, 12 July 1995, San Sebastian Convent, Manila.
- Fr. Antonio Ramón A. Palacios, 10 April 1995, University of Negros Occidental-Recoletos, Bacolod City.
- Fr. Alejandro L. Remírez, 18 March 1995, San Nicolás de Tolentino Parish, Quezon City.