“Subversion” in the Philippines

Negros is one of the largest islands in the Philippine Archipelago. The most populous of its two provinces is Negros Occidental, the main sugar-growing area of the country. Here, twenty-nine Columban Fathers—a foreign mission society of secular priests—serve a population of approximately two million Ilongo-speaking natives. And here have transpired some of the events that shape the increasingly adversarial relationship of Church and government in the Philippines today.

Agitation for the improvement of working conditions of sugar-workers began in Negros Occidental in the mid-1960s. It accelerated with the opening of the Bacolod Social Action Center under the patronage of Antonio Y. Fortich, appointed bishop of Bacolod in 1967. This office was soon involved in redressing injustices against the poor in Negros, and in this it had the aid of many priests who were encouraged by the bishop’s pastoralists.

In 1972, martial law ended the education of workers, farmers, and tenants. But gradually the Church again found ways to help organize the people. In 1975 the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines published the first comprehensive survey of conditions on the sugar farms. This brought an immediate attack by the sugar-planters on the Church in Negros and continued via a TV program every Friday night for several years. The actual living conditions of the people worsened.

The people have long been encouraged to become involved in Church activities. In 1967, Father Niall O’Brien built “Sa-Maria House” in Kabankalan—a business center for the whole south of the island—as a combination retreat and seminar center for the development of barrio leaders. There were ongoing education programs in cooperatives, community organization, labor unionization, self-help for tenant farmers, and legal aid.

All these Church-sponsored activities were the seeds for what became the Paninbahon. Formalized by the diocesan liturgical team, the Paninbahon is essentially a priestless service conducted by men from the neighborhood. In Kabankalan the Paninbahon spread to most of the barrios.

In January, 1980, at the request of Mayor Pablo Sola and the planters, the military came to Kabankalan. The town had to pay for the upkeep of some 200 members of the Long Range Patrol (LRP). In November, 1982, the LRP was incorporated into Task Force Kandra (TFK), headquartered in Barrio Dancalan under the command of Lt. Colonel Mario Hidalgo. TFK is composed of units of the Philippine Army, the Philippine Constabulary (PC), and troops of the LRP. The actual chain of command for the TFK is hard to establish and such confusion allows it to operate with broad freedom of action.

March 26, 1980: At the invitation of Columban Father Brian Gore—a native of Australia who has served in the Philippines for more than a decade—Bishop Fortich, Mayor Sola, and the then provincial commander, Colonel Lumongo, came to Kabankalan to hear the complaints of the residents living aroundOrmungao. Some ten thousand people assembled in the driving rain for the meeting, which lasted all day. They had complaints against the military, but most of their ire was directed at the activity of the barrio officials—all Sola men—and minor government and town officials. Several weeks previously Mayor Sola had called a town rally to support a government program and only a few people had turned out.

March 29, 1980: At about 3:00 A.M., led by an informer, fourteen armed men picked up seven farmers in Barrio Balicaoco. The armed men wore uniforms with name plates. Printed on their shirts and uniforms in Ilongo were the words “no mercy—forgiveness amnesty.” All tied together, the seven farmers were led off in the direction of Hacienda Station Isabel, owned by Mayor Sola. Later four shots were heard coming from the direction of Mayor Sola’s hacienda.

April 7, 1980: At about 11:30 P.M., German Moleta, a farmer and lay leader of the local Paninbahon for six years, left his house to talk to armed men wearing olive green uniforms and combat boots who wanted to be conducted to the house of the barrio captain. The men made Moleta take them to the house of Alex Garsales, another lay leader, who came out to speak to them. With Moleta and Garsales the men left in the direction of Suine, a nearby barrio, and about an hour later their wives heard the noise of a truck leaving.

April 8, 1980: Wives, neighbors, and priests advised the local authorities of what had happened, and over the next few weeks telegrams and letters were sent to military and civil authorities in Manila and to President Marcos, receiving no response. Bishop Fortich himself arranged a meeting with Colonel Lumongo to prevent the situation.

May 13, 1980: The badly decomposed bodies of Moleta and Garsales were discovered in a shallow grave. Their hands were tied behind their backs and one lay on top of the other.

May 17, 1980: The two men were buried in Kabankalan with the bishop and thirty-five priests concelebrating the Mass of Christian Martyrs.

June 30, 1980: In an interview in the Visayan Times, Sola accused Father Gore of weakening the faith of the people and said that the people were fed up with the priests of Kabankalan preaching about poverty, justice, and human rights. He repeated the accusation—one he had made earlier in the month—via printed leaflets dropped by plane over the hills of Kabankalan—that German Moleta was a criminal.

August 10, 1980: Jaime Cardinal Sin, archbishop of Manila and president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, came to Kabankalan with Bishop Fortich for a rally to reaffirm the Church’s commitment to family and human dignity. Over twenty thousand attended.

October 7, 1980: Major Jose Munjca of the Criminal Investigation Service and Captain Robelito Comilang, 332nd Company Commander, PC, led a group who found the mass graves of seven men; they were positively identified as the missing men from Barrio Balicaoco. The police medical officer said there were indications that some of the seven had been buried alive. The mass graves were found in Hacienda Isabel, owned by the Sola family.
October 11, 1980: The national daily, Bulletin Today, reported that Mayor Sola, Councillor Francisco Garcia, Captain Fernando Baliscao of the Long Range Patrol, and fourteen “John Does” were accused of the massacre. The paper reported that two of the accused asked for and received military protection.

February 20, 1981: To hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic Negrenses, Pope John Paul II delivered a stirring homily clearly stating the Church’s social teaching and involvement, especially with the poor. It was here that the pope used the phrase, “Yes, the preference for the poor is a Christian preference.” Pope John Paul II also met with the widows of Moleta and Garsales.

October, 1981-January, 1982: During this period several hearings were held in the Court of First Instance, Bacolod, in the trial of Mayor Sola and his co-accused. With a guarantee of protection from the military, the church presented witnesses who had been sheltered by the bishop.

March 8, 1982: The son of the prime witness against Mayor Sola, due to testify during the next session of hearings in Bacolod on March 19-22, was picked up by elements of Task Force Kalatong and taken away. When his body was found the same day, there was clear evidence he had been skinned alive.

March 10, 1982: Mayor Pablo Sola, his driver, farm manager, and two policemen were killed in an ambush shortly after leaving the Sola hacienda in Kabankalan. There were no suspects.

September 24, 1982: Father Gore, upon returning from a six month vacation, was informed that that very morning a member of the Kristianong Katilingban—Basic Christian Community—was picked up by the men of Lieutenant Mariano Gallo as he was walking in the marketplace. They had asked him if he was a member of the Kristianong Katilingban and told him to let Father Gore know they were there.

At around 10:30 that evening, Lieutenant Gallo and his men came to the convento, the parish house, where Father Gore was sleeping. Failing to gain admission to the convento, they left and entered an empty building on the other side of the church. An affidavit contains Lieutenant Gallo’s version of the incident: “We conducted a patrol at Ongao at around 11:00 that night, acting upon the information that the NPA [New People’s Army], the military wing of the Marxist Communist party] leaders would hold a conference with Father Gore...who...was suspected to be involved in subversive activities in Southern Negros. We saw suspicious persons armed with firearms loitering in the vicinity of the convento. In hot pursuit of these persons we met Teodurico Torreses and Rodrigo Cortes and inquired from them the whereabouts of the suspicious-looking armed men. They replied that these armed men went inside the convento. We entered the convento and while in the course of locating the subjects, we discovered one (1) fragmentation grenade, five (5) rounds of caliber .45 ammunition, and voluminous subversive documents, which were placed on the top of the steel cabinet. Before we took the illegal items, we called on anybody inside, particularly Father Gore, to witness the taking of the questionable items. Father Gore answered but did not open the door due to the reason that there was no search warrant. Instead of Father Gore, we took the two civilians to witness the same.”

September 28, 1982: A criminal case was filed in Kabankalan Municipal Court entitled “People of the Philippines vs. Father Brian Gore.” It was docketed as criminal case No. 4434, a violation of PD 885, Illegal Possession of Explosives and Ammunition.

Two affidavits were filed: the one already cited and another by Torreses and Cortes. The latter affidavit stated that they had always seen Father Gore sporting a firearm, caliber .45, “tucked in his waist” but they did not report this for fear of being liquidated by his groups.

October 5, 1982: An additional warrant for a second charge of “inciting to rebellion” was issued. This time six parish leaders were also accused.

October 18, 1982: General Alfonso Tronce, army chief of the region, served the warrants through Bishop Fortich in Kabankalan. The bishop, priests, and several hundred supporters accompanied Father Brian to the jail, where Bishop Fortich formally protested the arrest, calling it a “violation of human rights.”

October 19, 1982: Some 500 members of the Kristianong Katilingban in Ongao marched the fifteen kilometers to Kabankalan to stage a twenty-four hour hunger strike to protest the jailing of their priest and parish leaders. Later in the day they were joined by thousands from the outlying barangays of Ongao parish together with delegates from other parishes in Negros.

October 20, 1982: At dawn the Ongao people were back outside the jail in silent protest. A motion to transfer Father Brian to Bolo, a nearby island, to avoid the demonstrations in Kabankalan was protested by Bishop Fortich. The judge cancelled bail.

In the early evening the crowd learned that the judge had reconsidered his decision about bail and was dropping the transfer order. Within fifteen minutes the bail had been paid.

Headlines in the provincial newspapers and announcements on local radio stations later quoted Colonel Hidalgo’s even more incredible contention: “Murder charge poised against Fathers Gore and O’Brien.” This latest charge concerned the death of Mayor Pablo Sola. And on the national level there have been still other headlines: “Deportation Warning—Governor to Review Status of 4,000 Foreign Missionaries”; “20 Priests and Nuns Hunted.”

It appears that the government is preparing the people for more arrests of Filipino clergy and deportation of some foreign priests it classifies as “subversive.” It gives no definition of subversion, but the government seems to include anyone who speaks out against the brutal tortures and killings committed by some members of the military.

Father Gore was subpoenaed to appear before the Department of Emigration and Deportation on March 2, 1983. Owing to insufficient evidence, the hearing was postponed until March 7, the day of this writing.

As Father Gore views the situation: “The military are trying to paralyze the Kristianong Katilingban because it is giving more security and power to the people. What is happening is that communities are helping one another. They investigate claims of land grabbing, and if they see a man has a right to the land, even if it’s not titled, they defend him. And that is why we are being attacked. The military do not want the people to stand up.”

This article is drawn from the January, 1983, issue of Columbian Mission and updated by events.