

Dimasalang, The Masonic Life of Dr. Jose Rizal

Dr. Jose P. Rizal, a Philippine national born on June 19, 1861, died before a firing squad on December 30, 1896. Thus came to an inglorious end the life of a remarkable man and Mason. Martyr, patriot, poet, novelist, physician, Mason—he was all of these and more. In fact, he squeezed into a very few years, 35, an incredible array of activities. Further, he traveled extensively and affected profoundly lives far removed from his native land. As is often the case with great men, controversy surrounded his life and continues to surface today. In this article for the Journal, I am pleased to comment on a biography of Bro. Rizal by Reynold S. Fajardo. Titled *Dimasalang: The Masonic Life of Dr. Jose Rizal*, this book will be more thoroughly reviewed and excerpted from in a future issue of *Heredom*, the transactions of the Scottish Rite Research Society.

The Sovereign Grand Commander of the Philippine Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite, Ill. Rudyardo V. Bunda, 33°, writes in the preface to *Dimasalang*: "Most Filipinos know that Rizal was a Mason, but very few are familiar with the extent of his involvement in the Fraternity." The Grand Commander goes on to note that his Supreme Council "considers this book as a meaningful contribution to the scholarship on Rizal and is proud to publish it as its share in the commemoration of the Centennial [1996] of Rizal's martyrdom."

The 1800s were tumultuous years for the Spanish monarchy. Napoleon had invaded the Iberian Peninsula earlier in the century taking the royal family into exile and installing a puppet on the throne. Revolution had racked her western hemisphere possessions, and Spain lost all of them, except Cuba and Puerto Rico, by the end of 1824. Then she lost Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898. The economic life of Spain and her empire had been little changed by the industrial revolution. Intellectually, a sterility existed and did not change significantly until the Generation of 1898 writers and thinkers appeared.

Also, scandal tore at the very heart of the homeland when Generals Prim and Serrano removed Queen Isabel II from the throne for, among other things, gross immorality. They provided a military junta arrangement until the monarchy could be reestablished under more capable hands.

The 19th century produced volatility at home and abroad. Cuba experienced a ten-year civil war in the middle part of the century. Cuban expatriates as well as non-Cuban adventurers sought to wrest the island from the control of what they considered a fossilized monarchy and an absolutist church. Their efforts intensified in 1895 when José Martí returned to the island, losing his life but setting off a current of events which ultimately included an invasion by the United States and which resulted in Cuban independence. The Philippine Islands shared much in common with Cuba during the 19th century. It was in this environment that Jose Rizal made his appearance in 1861.

The Philippine hero was born to affluent parents in Calamba. He showed early academic promise and eventually obtained a licentiate in medicine specializing in ophthalmology. Few Masonic Lodges existed in the Philippines during Rizal's adolescence, and Lodge membership consisted primarily of European Spaniards with only a sprinkling of Philippine nationals. Rizal's uncle, Jose Alberto Alonzo, a Knight Commander of the Spanish Orders of Isabel the Catholic and Carlos III, had joined the Masonic Fraternity, possibly in Spain, certainly in Manila. Rizal lived in his uncle's home during part of his student days. Whether his uncle exercised a Masonic influence on Rizal is not clear; what is certain is that Rizal acquired a lasting positive memory of Masonry which was enhanced when he visited Naples in 1882. There he saw a multitude of posters and signs announcing the death of the great Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi, a 33° Scottish Rite Mason who had served as Grand Master. This impressed Rizal greatly for he wrote about this Masonic encounter in a letter to his family.

In Spain the young and highly impressionable Rizal encountered an intellectual environment with far fewer restraints than the one in his native land. Here he came under the influence of a host of outstanding thinkers, many of them Freemasons. For example, Grand Master Miguel Morayta helped to expand Rizal's historical mind-set, and ex-President Francisco Pi y Margal exerted a profound influence on Rizal's political evolution. Further, these republican liberals were staunch advocates of Philippine independence. Not surprisingly, Rizal petitioned Acacia Lodge No. 9, Gran Oriente de España, the very Lodge in which Morayta and Pi y Margal held membership. When initiated, Rizal selected Dimasalang as his symbolic name within the Craft, a custom prevalent at the time among Spanish Masons.

Rizal quickly became involved in Filipino expatriate circles in Spain and revealed a remarkable ability to write both poetry and prose. He soon commenced work on his famous novel *Noli Me Tangere* (Touch Me Not). In this seminal work, Rizal dissected the Philippine colonial government and placed particular blame for its repressive nature on certain religious elements. Rizal was convinced that conditions in the Philippines existed not because of Spain or the Catholic Church but because of the practices of certain regular clergy, namely Dominicans and Recollects. Spanish newspapers ran stories about the exciting Philippine firebrand, stories which soon made their way to Manila. There, government and religious authorities immediately took note and did not hesitate to label Rizal a subversive.

Bro. Rizal departed Spain in July 1885 to further his ophthalmology studies in France and Germany. For the next two years, he met and associated with the leading minds of Paris, Leipzig, Berlin, and Heidelberg. It was a heady atmosphere for the young Brother, and Masons in Germany, Dr. Rudolf Virchow and Dr. Feodor Jagor, were instrumental in his becoming a member of the Berlin Ethnological and Anthropological Societies. While in Germany, Rizal acquired additional Masonic Degrees.

When his novel *Noli Me Tangere*, came off the press in Europe, Rizal sent copies to, among others, the Governor-General of the Philippines and the Archbishop of Manila. The Governor-General, Emilio Terrero y Perinat, a 33° Mason, represented no problem, and he protected Rizal upon his return to the islands and for as long as he held the Governor-Generalship. The Archbishop, however, presented a problem which did not go away. Rizal had become increasingly convinced of his need to campaign in person for reform in the Philippines as opposed to propagandizing from afar. His friends cautioned him not to return but failed to dissuade the idealist. On August 5, 1887, Dr. Rizal stepped ashore in Manila.

Almost immediately, serious problems emerged. The Manila Archbishop put pressure on Governor-General Terrero to ban Rizal's book. Terrero, who had a real liking for Rizal, hesitated to suppress the book which rapidly circulated in the capital. The church authorities did not delay in publishing a condemnation of the work, but, to their chagrin, the condemnation only enhanced sales. Rizal also involved himself in a sticky matter which concerned a Dominican hacienda in Calamba. According to critics of the Dominicans, their hacienda holdings were excessive, and the friars had not paid their fair share of taxes. Rizal, when requested by the town council of Calamba, got involved in an investigation of the matter, and his report during a public meeting was highly critical of the Dominicans.

The church hierarchy did not take long to react. The Archbishop increased pressure on the Governor-General to suppress *Noli Me Tangere* as an inflammatory book and to arrest its author. Accordingly, Governor-General Terrero, fearing he might not be able to protect him, put pressure on Rizal to depart the country. Rizal heeded the advice and traveled to Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the religious authorities carried out reprisals against Rizal's family which included the arrest of his mother.

After a short stay in Hong Kong, Rizal traveled to Japan and then the United States where he enjoyed the experience of a coast-to-coast visit. New York, in particular, impressed him, and cryptic evidence in his diary suggests he may have visited the Grand Lodge of New York. From New York City, Rizal journeyed

to England and then on to the continent. While in Paris, Rizal published, with annotations, Antonio de Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (Events in the Philippine Islands). Financial pressure forced him to relocate from Paris to Belgium. There, he worked hard on his second novel, *El Filibusterismo* (The Subversives), in which he sounded clearly the tocsin for Philippine revolution.

During a visit to Spain, Dr. Rizal affiliated with an all-Filipino Masonic Lodge, *Solidaridad* (Solidarity) No. 53. At their annual communication, the Brethren elected him to a minor office, Supervising Architect. Before his departure from Spain, the *Gran Oriente Español* designated Rizal as its Grand Representative with authority to represent the Body in France and Germany. This was a distinct honor, for Rizal apparently had never served as Worshipful Master of a constituent Lodge.

Rizal's *El Filibusterismo* was published in September 1891, and in October he departed for Hong Kong. There he enjoyed a delightful reunion with family members. He wanted to return to Manila but desisted in view of the controversy his books had generated, especially his second, *El Filibusterismo*. While in Hong Kong, Rizal developed an extensive and lucrative medical practice. Meanwhile, a Lodge for Filipinos, *Nilad* No. 144, had been established in Manila. The Lodge membership honored Rizal in absentia by electing him "Honorable Venerable Master" and had the Secretary inform him by letter of his preferment. Soon after formation of *Nilad* Lodge, Masonic growth in the Philippines mushroomed, and when Rizal returned in 1892, Masonry was well established.

The Filipino Masons seized every opportunity to honor Rizal after his return, and the Spanish authorities, in turn, monitored his every movement. Worried about revolution, the authorities, constantly encouraged by Rizal's enemies among the friars, had him arrested and deported to Dapitan on July 6, 1892. Further, the authorities began to close Lodges and deport active Masons.

The Jesuits made a determined effort to influence Rizal in his Dapitan exile, even enlisting former college professors. Their effort failed. Rizal enjoyed family visits in Dapitan, and friends of his sought to arrange a flight to safety. Rizal, however, did not want to embrace the safety net of a fugitive. When José Martí and his compatriots launched the Cuban Revolution in 1895, Dr. Rizal offered his services to the Governor-General as a volunteer physician. Governor-General Blanco seized the opportunity to send Rizal out of the country and, hopefully, save his life. In fact, Blanco wrote to cabinet ministers in Spain requesting the Spanish government to pardon Rizal. When Rizal departed for Spain, he was unaware of the doom which awaited him. When Rizal's ship reached Spain, the authorities returned him to the Philippines to stand trial for treason, and he was executed on December 30, 1896. The story however does not end there. The subsequent Philippine Revolution proved successful and removed European Spaniards from all positions of authority. The scales of justice not only righted but tipped in favor of such revolutionaries as Bro. Jose Rizal. Recognized as the "George Washington of the Philippines," Bro. Rizal endures today as a national and Masonic hero.