‘First Easter Sunday mass was held in Limasawa’ — Nat’l Historical Commission

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by Hanah Tabios

After decades of debate, the long-standing issue of the exact location of the Easter Sunday Mass celebrated by Fr. Pedro Valderama during the Magellan-Elcano expedition on March 31, 1521 was finally resolved by the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP).

In a statement released on August 18, the NHCP affirmed the findings of the investigation conducted by the panel of scholars that the commission created in 2018, recommending the recognition of Limasawa, located in today’s Southern Leyte, as the site of the said event.
The date on which the Spaniards first set foot in the Philippines may have been well-established in history books. But there was controversy on the site of the first Easter Sunday Mass celebrated in 1521 that emerged in the last years of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century. This came about when both foreign and local historical research scholars of that period shifted their view from the traditionally recognized site of Butuan in Agusan del Norte to Limasawa island in Leyte.

Revisiting historical problem

According to NHCP, the issue as to the exact location of the said mass was first resolved by its forerunner, the National Historical Institute (NHI), through two panels of experts: the first headed by former Supreme Court Justice Emilio Gancayco in 1995 and the second by historian Dr. Benito J. Legarda in 2008.

“Both panels ruled that the site of the 1521 Easter Sunday Mass was Limasawa island, now a municipality in Southern Leyte,” it said.

In 2018, the NHCP received a number of requests from various institutions, including the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), to reexamine the earlier decisions of the NHI.

These requests were made in the light of new primary sources and pieces of evidence that surfaced recently which were not taken into consideration by the previous panels.

With the mandate to “actively engage in the settlement or resolution of controversies or issues relative to historical personages, places, dates and events,” based on Republic Act No. 10086 or Strengthening People’s Nationalism Act of 2009, NHCP chair Dr. Rene Escalante decided to reopen the historical problem in the interest of fairness and to further enrich historical literature.

Coincidentally, President Rodrigo Duterte signed Executive Order 55 on May 8, 2018, that announced the commencement of preparations for the 500th year anniversary (Quincentennial) of the Christianization of the Philippines.
In one of its provisions, EO 55 states that various entities have been proposing to the NHCP the conduct of certain activities for the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan in the Philippines, the celebration of the First Mass in the Philippines, the circumnavigation of the globe by Ferdinand Magellan-Juan Elcano, the victory of Lapu-Lapu in the Battle of Mactan, and other events associated to the matter.

The celebration began in 2019 and will end in 2022.

“It is in this context that the National Quincentennial Committee (NQC) through its Executive Director, NHCP chair Dr. Rene Escalante, reopened the case of a controversy in Philippine history,” a copy of a final report of the Mojares Panel on the Butuan-Limasawa controversy said, which was submitted to the NHCP on January 10, 2020.

**Creation of a new panel**

The NHCP created a new and highly distinguished panel of experts in November 2018 to reexamine the historical controversy and review the findings of the previous panels. It was created in such a way that each discipline in the said field of study will be equally represented.

It was headed by historian and National Artist for Literature Dr. Resil Mojares. Members of the panel included national and internationally recognized historians, paleographers, and translators from various academic institutions in the Philippines and Asia.

“NHCP chair Dr. De Rene Escalante made sure that no member of the panel came from either Agusan del Norte or Southern Leyte so that their decision would be based primarily on evidence and sound analysis, and not on regional or territorial biases,” the NHCP said.

The CBCP was also represented by other church historians as observers of the panel’s proceedings.
Mojares Panel’s Tasks

The six-person panel of scholars headed by Mojares was tasked to review the results of the earlier panels created by the NHI and the position papers submitted by the pro-Butuan and pro-Limasawa advocates.

They reassessed the studies and literature on the historical issue, gathered the extant copies of Venetian scholar and explorer Antonio Pigafetta’s chronicles and other accounts abroad.

They also surveyed the presumed sites of the event in Butuan and Limasawa and consulted experts in geology and cartography.

To note, among the best known accounts of the Magellan-Elcano circumnavigation was written by Pigafetta, who was one of the 18 Europeans aboard the Victoria ship at its return.

The Butuan-Limasawa controversy

Based on the Mojares panel report, a monument commemorating the first mass in the Philippines was erected near the mount of the Agusan River in 1872. The place is known today as the municipality of Magellan.

The report cited Jesuit historian Miguel Bernad’s essays on the reexamination of the evidence, citing that the “monument is a testimonial to the tradition that remained vigorous until the end of the 19th century, mainly that Magellan and his expedition landed at Butuan and celebrated there the First Mass ever offered in the Philippines.”

But as many writers tried to retell what transpired in the past, the panel said several versions of the Butuan tradition have been altered due to misinformation or, simply, the process of copying accounts from the previous historical versions that would, in turn, be copied anew by those who came after.
The report submitted by the panel also noted that Pigafetta gave a copy of his book about the first voyage around the world to the Regent Mother Louisa of Emperor Francis, who had it translated into French by philosopher Jacques Antoine Frabe.

But a scholar cited in the report said Fabre “made only a summary, leaving out the things that were too detailed, and which was printed in French with too many errors.”

Meanwhile, the shift to the Limasawa tradition happened following the publication of the Da Moto transcription and the examination of the log of Victoria’s pilot, Francisco Albo.

“The log appeared for the first time in the collection of documents published by Martin Fernandez de Navarette in 1837. Upon the study of these two sources, two Philippine scholars—Trinidad Pardo de Tavera and Fr. Pablo Pastelles, SJ—concluded that it was a historical error that Butuan was deemed the site of the First Easter Sunday Mass,” it said.

With this, Pardo de Tavera first published the findings in an article in El Comercio in 1895.

In 1921, in celebration of the Quadricentennial of the arrival of the Magellan Expedition in the Philippines, he wrote the program for the Limasawa Exhibit establishing the fact that the first mass was celebrated in Limasawa. Several scholars from the early 20th century then followed the same account affirming that the historical event happened in Limasawa, not in Butuan.

Three-decade contention

But the panel said the change of the site was not taken lightly, especially by Butuan residents and pro-Butuan scholars.

“The contention lasted for over three decades as these proponents wrote to the local and national government (including the President) petitioning for these authorities to issue a decision that would transfer the First Easter Sunday Mass Site back to Butuan,” it said.
The first official government action taken on this controversy was done through the NHI in 1980 and was followed by the formation of the aforementioned panels in 1995 and 2008.

Finally resolved

Just this year, the decades-long debate has ended.

The panel unanimously agreed that the pieces of evidence and arguments presented by the pro-Butuan advocates are not sufficiently convincing to warrant the repeal or reversal of the ruling on the case by the NHI, according to the NHCP.

On July 15, 2020, the NHCP Board of Commissioners also adopted Resolution No. 2, which cites the recommendation of the Mojares Panel that Limasawa Island In Southern Leyte be officially declared as the site of the first Easter Sunday Mass in the Philippines that was held in 1521.

But the panel recommended to the NHCP and to the Butuan-based scholars to explore further the historical significance of Butuan as a pre-colonial trading center.

“Butuan has a lot of archeological artifacts and cultural traditions that could be used to promote the city as a one of the country’s premier historic sites,” it said.


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