



THE BELLS OF BALANGIGA

An Appeal for Support

By Leonardo Y. Medroso, D.D.

THE Diocese of Borongan is bringing to the attention of the entire Philippine Church its struggle to recover the bells which one hundred years ago were taken as war booty from the church in Balangiga town. In its urgent appeal for support in this struggle, the Diocese is asking the bishops, the clergy and religious, and the lay faithful throughout the country to take a close look into the issue of the Balangiga Bells, and thereby appreciate its implications as a nation and as a Church.

The Issue

In a nutshell, the Bells of Balangiga are Church bells. They are religious artifacts with considerable significance in the Catholic tradition. Among many other uses, they call people to prayer and worship. As such they are inappropriate trophies of war. Hence, they should be returned to the place where they belong and to the purpose for which they were cast and blessed. And since these bells belong to the Roman Catholic Church of the Parish of Balangiga, they should be returned to the Catholic community of Balangiga.

The US government will not give up the bells. Its reason is simple: the bells are the property of the US government. Capt. Kathleen Cook of the Warren AFB public information office puts it this way: "The Catholic Church has no say in the matter. The bells are property of the US government. Only Congress can change the disposition of the those bells" (Marguerite Herman, *Wyoming Catholic Register*, December 1997)

These Church bells, seized as war booty in 1901 by the US troops in the Philippines and presently enshrined at Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, have taken on a special meaning both for the people of the Philippines, who seek their return, as well as those in the United States of America, for whom they are sacred to the memory of the troops who died in Samar nearly a century ago.

Currently the matter is under congressional investigation. Recently, Sen. Craig Thomas (R-Wyo), again attempted to stonewall the return effort by introducing language in the Defense Authorization Bill, S. 1055, that would prohibit "the return of veterans' memorial objects to foreign nations without specific authorization law." Without expressly naming either the object or the country this refers to the Bells of Balangiga.

Historical Background

The Bells of Balangiga issue goes back to the American involvement in the Philippines, which began with the Spanish-American War in 1898. The Philippines was then a Spanish possession. After the defeat of Spain, however, the United States decided to retain possession of the Philippines rather than grant the nation its independence. An insurrection followed, which lasted more than three years and cost the lives of 4,200 US troops and some 20,000 Filipino combatants. Thousands more Filipino died as a result of famine and disease caused by the war.

The most infamous incident of the war occurred on September 28, 1901, in the town of Balangiga, located some 400 miles southeast of Manila on the island of Samar. The church bells in Balangiga were reportedly used to signal a surprise attack by Filipino insurgents, many using machetes on an American garrison posted in the town.

The attack left more than 50 US soldiers dead and led to American reprisals. It was so severe that they resulted in the reprimand of the American commander, Gen. Jacob Smith. But it was also effective as it shortened the insurrection to six months.

Among the actions taken by the American troops during the reprisals was the razing of several Catholic churches in the area and the confiscation of the Bells of Balangiga as trophies of war. They now hang in a "trophy park" at the Warren Air Force Base.

Current Positions

1. The Diocese of Borongan, to which the Parish of Balangiga belongs, lays rightful ownership to the Bells of Balangiga. Bishop Leonardo Y. Medroso, in his letter to Bishop Joseph Hart of Cheyenne Diocese, wrote: "I, however, resolve to write you this letter of request for the simple fact that my people in the town of Balangiga have more reasons to reclaim and recover the possession of the said bells. Records tell that the bells were property of the local church in Balangiga when they were taken by the American forces. As such they kept my people in touch with lives of their parents and grandparents, their past, their origin, their religious sentiments, their culture. The market value of the bells may not be that high, but the collective sentiments that they have borne and symbolized are priceless. It is for this that through the years my people in Balangiga have been longing to retrieve their church bells.

2. The American legions, the Amvets (American military veterans), and some state legislators would not have any part of that claim. They say that they belong to the US government as they are legitimate spoils of war. These bells enshrined the memories of their dead ones, mercilessly massacred by treacherous attacks.

3. The Philippines delegation, led by former President Fidel Ramos and Ambassador Raul Rabe and supported by some American legislators, has taken a compromise position, namely, to have the two bells recast and then give one original and one replica to each country. This is the position that is accepted and supported by the members of the United States Catholic Conference (USCC). The Diocese of Borongan, with much reluctance, agrees to this arrangements.

During its Plenary Assembly held on July 10-12, 1999, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has taken the position of the Bishop of Borongan.

But the American veterans are adamant. The Bells of Balangiga have to remain in F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming. In fact, this is the reason for the action of Sen. Craig Thomas in introducing language in the Defense Authorization Bill, S. 1055, that would prohibit "the return of veterans' memorial objects to foreign nations without specific authorization in law."

Plea

The struggle to retrieve the Bells of Balangiga and to restore them to their rightful owner is raging on. The Diocese of Cheyenne is supporting us; the National Bishops Conference of America is behind us; some US legislators are sympathetic to our cause; our government is not only active in its support, its is initiating activities towards the return of the bells and closely coordinating with our own activities to retrieve them.

Now, we are asking, pleading for the support of the entire people of God in the Philippines.*

THE BELLS OF BALANGIGA
My Visit to Cheyenne, Wyoming
by Bishop Leonardo Y. Medroso

FIRST OF ALL I would like to express my sincerest thanks and appreciation to the great hospitality of Bishop Joseph Hart, the bishop of Cheyenne. He afforded me this opportunity to visit his area of jurisdiction and to see for myself the bells of Balangiga Church.

a) The Bells of Balangiga is Church's property; the rightful owner is the Diocese of Borongan, of which Balangiga is a parish. I am the Bishop of Borongan. I am here for a double purpose: 1) to see its status; 2) to appeal to the concerned to plead for the return of the Bells to the rightful owner, to the Diocese of Borongan; to the parish Church of Balangiga.

As the accepted adage has it, "res clamat dominum" that is, a piece of property that is not in the hands of the rightful owner is ever clamoring that it be returned to the original owner.

b) I am aware that there are some individuals or group of individuals who would insist on keeping the bells in F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne. It is argued that it is a war trophy, a booty. Hence, the right of the victor is invoked. I am also aware that they were used to signal the fateful attack a hundred years ago, that caused lives and so much tragedy.

However, it is my belief that a religious article should never be made as an instrument of war nor does it become a trophy of the victors. Religion transcends war; in fact, it always pleads for peace and reconciliation.

The use of a religious article, as the Bells of Balangiga was alleged to be used, to signal an attack does not, by that very act, fault the owner and deprive thereby that owner of his property.

The parish priest of Balangiga during the time of the attack, I believe, is innocent. In fact, he was not there during the actual encounter. Granting, but never conceding, that he was part of the plan of the encounter, the parish priest is never the owner of that piece of property. The Roman Catholic Bishop of the diocese is the owner; the parish priest is just an administrator of parish properties. His imprudent act in the use of such property will not deprive the Bishop from his right to the property. As Major Gen. James Franklin Bell, U.S. Army Chief of Staff 1906-1910, rightly commented: "In this connection it may be appropriate to question the propriety of taking (even as a souvenir) a bell belonging to the Catholic Church simply because a recreant native priest either used it or permitted it to be used to sound a signal of attack on American soldiers. The bell belonged to the church and not to the priest. It was not the fault of the church but that of the priest that it was misused."

c) Besides, and this is what I would like to stress, time is a great healer. Its passage gives all of us opportunities and enough space to look back into the past with a better and mature perspective. A tragedy had happened; lives had been lost; pains and sufferings had been inflicted. But they all are in the past. Let us do something about them to right the wrong. But let us be reconciled. To insist to keep on bearing these grudges within our own system is to condemn ourselves to the past. Let us be freed from that past by extracting out of ourselves those things that remind us of the past.

The bells of Balangiga, if they remain there, will always be a reminder of that fateful encounter and therefore fuels grudges and hatred. Let us do away with grudges and hatred. Return the bells to Balangiga. We will use them to call people to prayer.

Ref.: http://www.cbcponline.net/borongon/html/balangiga_bells.html