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Did Jose Rizal Die a Catholic?

Revisiting Rizal's Last 24 Hours Using Spy Reports

Rene Escalante*

There is one issue in Jose Rizal's life that historians have debated on several occasions but remains unsettled. That issue is whether Rizal, on the eve of his death, re-embraced the Catholic faith and disassociated himself from Masonry. The matter is controversial because parties on both sides are affiliated with an organization that promotes moral values and the pursuit of truth. The pro-retraction camp is represented by the Jesuits, the archbishop of Manila, and a few other members of the Catholic hierarchy. Since they are all ordained priests, they are assumed to be truthful in their pronouncements. Their opponents are the members of Masonry, an organization that promotes brotherhood, integrity, decency, and professionalism.

This paper resurrects the retraction controversy in the light of the emergence of another primary source that speaks about what happened to Rizal on the eve of his death. This document was never considered in the history of the retraction controversy because it was made available to researchers only in the past decade. The author of the report is a credible eyewitness because he was physically present in the vicinity of where Rizal was detained. His narrative is lucid and contains details that cast doubt on the credibility and reliability of earlier primary sources on which previous narratives were based. This document needs serious consideration and should be included in the discourse on Rizal's retraction.

Keywords: Jose Rizal, Philippine Revolution, Philippine Masonry, retraction controversy, *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* collection

Introduction

The Philippines is known in history as the country that waged the first anti-colonial revolution in Asia, which it did from 1896 to 1898. Other Asian countries declared their independence either before or after World War II. The Philippine Revolution was a long process, and its success may be attributed not to one person alone but to many individuals who fought heroically against the Spaniards. One hero of the Philippine Revolution

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was Jose Rizal. He is regarded as the national hero of the Filipinos as well as the “pride of the Malay race” (Palma 1949). His writings awakened his countrymen and inspired them to wage the first anti-colonial movement in Southeast Asia. Decades after the Philippines ended Spanish rule, neighboring countries staged similar movements that resulted in the liberation of Southeast Asia from European rule. Rizal is popular among Filipinos and non-Filipinos alike; there are numerous statues and monuments of him outside the Philippines, built through the initiative of his non-Filipino admirers. In the United States there are statues of Rizal in California, Hawaii, Illinois, Florida, New Jersey, New York, Alaska, and Washington State. There are also Rizal monuments in Spain, Argentina, Belgium, Canada, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Switzerland.

With Rizal being an international and national hero, his life story has been written and scrutinized by Filipino and foreign scholars for more than a century. Though there have been times when they agreed on their narrative, there have been instances where they differed significantly. One cause of disagreement has been the focus of the studies. Rizal was a versatile person, and his engagements were numerous. Hence, his biographers could not focus their narrative and analysis on just one aspect of his life. There have also been instances where researchers differed because they were viewing Rizal from different perspectives. Lastly, their differences may also be attributed to the primary sources on which the researchers based their narrative. All the variations are tolerable and sometimes even encouraged by the academic community because they give students various perspectives from which to understand Rizal.

There is one issue in Rizal’s life that historians have debated on several occasions but remains a hot topic even now. That is whether Rizal, on the eve of his death in 1896, re-embraced the Catholic faith and disassociated himself from Masonry. Scholars treated this as a fact, and it became controversial because the major protagonists were members of two organizations that both promoted moral values and the pursuit of truth. On the one hand, the pro-retraction camp was represented by the Jesuits, the archbishop of Manila, and other members of the Catholic hierarchy. Since they were all ordained priests, they were supposedly truthful and honest in their pronouncements. On the other hand, their opponents were members of Masonry, an organization that promotes brotherhood, integrity, decency, and professionalism. This paper revisits the retraction controversy in the light of a new primary source that gives an idea of Rizal’s activities 24 hours before he was executed. This document was not considered by previous retraction scholars because it was made available to researchers only in the past decade. The source of information seems to be a credible eyewitness because he was physically present in the vicinity of where Rizal was detained. His narrative is lucid and contains details that cast doubt on the credibility and reliability of earlier primary sources on which previous

narratives were based. This document needs serious consideration and should be included in the discourse on Rizal's retraction.

The Jesuit Version

Rizal's execution on December 30, 1896 was a major political event, closely monitored by local and international newspapers at the time. News reports that day covered not only his execution but also what happened in his prison cell on the eve of his death. A number of them reported that he had denounced his Masonic beliefs and re-professed his Catholic faith. Some even reprinted the retraction letter that he wrote, in order to prove that he did indeed die a Catholic. They also mentioned the Jesuit priests and other colonial officials who witnessed this controversial act by Rizal. The local newspapers that reported the retraction were *La Voz Española*, *El Español*, *El Comercio*, and *La Oceania Española*. The news correspondents of *La Voz Española* even claimed to "have seen and read his own handwritten retraction" (Cavanna 1956, 2). The Spain-based newspapers and magazines that covered the retraction were *El Imparcial*, *Heraldo de Madrid*, and *El Siglo Futuro*. They based their narrative on the testimonies of the Jesuits and other colonial officials who visited and talked to Rizal the day before he was executed.

The Jesuits figured prominently during the last 24 hours of Rizal's life because Manila Archbishop Bernardino Nozaleda asked them to take care of Rizal's spiritual needs while the latter awaited the hour of his death. In an affidavit that he issued in 1917, Fr. Pio Pi (the Superior of the Jesuits) declared that he had accepted the task because he considered Rizal to be Ateneo Municipal High School's "very distinguished and dear pupil" (Cavanna 1956, 15). The Jesuits he sent to Rizal's detention cell were Frs. Vicente Balaguer, Jose Vilaclara, Estanislao March, Luis Visa, Federico Faura, and Miguel Saderra (Cavanna 1956, 11). Fr. Pi instructed them to persuade Rizal to retract his anti-Catholic teachings as well as his affiliation with the Masons. The Jesuits were supposed to demand these two things before ministering the necessary sacraments. Fr. Pi also ordered that the retraction should be in writing using either of the two sample retraction templates approved by the archbishop.

Fr. Miguel Saderra (rector of Ateneo Municipal) and Fr. Luis Visa were the first emissaries to visit Rizal. Fr. Visa brought with him the figurine of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that Rizal had carved while a student of Ateneo Municipal. Rizal allegedly took it gladly, kissed it, and put it on his desk. In the course of their conversation, Rizal asked the visitors whether he could see his former teachers at Ateneo Municipal. The Jesuits

replied that only Fr. Vilaclara¹⁾ was in town (Arcilla 1994, 122). They added that Fr. Balaguer,²⁾ the Jesuit missionary whom Rizal had met in Dapitan, was also available in case he wanted to meet him (Arcilla 1994, 121). Rizal answered positively, and the Jesuits left to fetch their two confreres.

Of all the Jesuits whom Fr. Pi commissioned to deal with Rizal, it was Fr. Vicente Balaguer who wrote extensively about what happened in Rizal's detention cell the day before he was executed. His version of the story is narrated in a letter he sent to Fr. Pi in 1908 and in an affidavit he executed in Murcia, Spain, on August 8, 1917 (Cavanna 1956, 6–10, 260–266; Arcilla 1994, 121). In both documents, Fr. Balaguer used the first person pronoun, which suggests that he was personally present and involved in the negotiation. He even claimed that he “was the one who assisted Rizal most of that sad day's hours. I argued with him and demolished his arguments” (Cavanna 1956, 115). He also persuaded everyone to take his affidavit as a primary source because he had personal knowledge of Rizal's retraction. In his sworn affidavit he wrote:

Of all that has been narrated, I am positive by personal knowledge. I have personally intervened and witnessed it myself; and I subscribed and *confirmed* it with an oath. And lest, perhaps, someone may think that I could not remember it with so many details, after twenty years. I testify that on the very day of Rizal's death, I wrote a very detailed account of everything. The original of this account I have preserved, and from it I have taken all the data of the present narration. (Cavanna 1956, 10)

According to Fr. Balaguer, he and Fr. Vilaclara arrived in Rizal's prison cell around 10 o'clock in the morning. He mentioned in his letter and affidavit that their encounter with Rizal started with a discussion of some articles of Catholic faith. They debated on issues such as the supremacy of faith over reason and the dogmatic differences that divided Catholics and Protestants. Since time was not on their side, they persuaded Rizal not to spend so much time discussing faith-related issues and focus instead on how to die in the state of grace so that he could enter heaven. They explained to him that they could not

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- 1) Fr. Jose Vilaclara was born in Barcelona, Spain, on November 27, 1840. He entered the Society of Jesus on October 4, 1862 and arrived in the Philippines in 1874. He was assigned to Ateneo Municipal, where he taught Logic, Metaphysics, Ethics, Physics, and Chemistry. Later, he became the director of the Manila Observatory. In 1877 he was assigned to Dapitan, but he was recalled to Manila around the time of Rizal's trial and imprisonment. He left for Spain because of ill health on September 2, 1897 but died at sea off the coast of Aden 16 days later.
 - 2) Fr. Balaguer was born in Alicante, Spain, on January 19, 1851. He joined the Society of Jesus on July 30, 1890 and went to the Philippines in 1894. His first missionary assignment was in Surigao, and he was transferred to Dapitan in 1896. A year later, he was assigned to Davao. After the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1898, he founded the catechetical center in Tondo. He returned to Spain in 1899 and died in Orihuela on October 1, 1922.

administer the sacraments he needed without him signing a retraction letter and making a profession of faith. Fr. Balaguer mentioned that Rizal softened a bit when he warned him that his soul would go to hell if he did not return to the Catholic fold. He reminded him that outside the Catholic Church, there was no salvation (*Extra Ecclesiam Catholicam nulla datur salus*) (Cavanna 1956, 8). The two Jesuits left Rizal's prison around lunchtime, with Rizal still undecided over whether to sign the retraction letter or not. The Jesuits went straight to the archbishop's palace and informed their superiors of what had transpired during their first meeting with Rizal.

Frs. Balaguer and Vilaclara returned to Rizal around 3 o'clock in the afternoon and tried until sunset to persuade him to recant. They were still not able to convince him to sign the retraction document. Their third meeting with Rizal took place at 10 o'clock that night, and it was during this meeting that they showed Rizal the two retraction templates Fr. Pi had given them. According to Fr. Balaguer, Rizal found the first template unacceptable because it was too long and its language and style were not reflective of his personality (Arcilla 1994, 114). So Fr. Balaguer withdrew it and offered the shorter one. Rizal did not sign it right away because he was uncomfortable with the statement "I abominate Masonry as a society reprobated by the Church." He said he had met Masons in London who had nothing against the Catholic religion. Rizal wanted to emphasize that Philippine Masonry was not hostile to Catholicism and that Masonry in London did not require its members to renounce their faith. The Jesuits allowed Rizal to revise the retraction template, and his final version read, "I abominate Masonry as the enemy of the Church and reprobated by the same Church" (Cavanna 1956, 9). After making other minor changes to the draft, Rizal signed his retraction letter before midnight. Fr. Balaguer handed it over to Fr. Pi, who in turn submitted it to Archbishop Bernardino Nozaleda (Guerrero 1971, 459). The text of the retraction states:

Me declaro católico, y en esta Religión, en que nací y me eduqué, quiero vivir y morir. Me retracto de todo corazón de cuanto en mis palabras, escritos, impresos y conducta ha habido contrario á mi calidad de hijo de la Iglesia. Creo y profeso cuanto ella enseña, y me someto á cuanto ella manda. Abomino de la Masonería, como enemiga que es de la Iglesia, y como Sociedad prohibida por la misma Iglesia.

Puede el Prelado diocesano, como Autoridad superior eclesiástica, hacer pública esta manifestación, espontánea mía, para reparar el escándalo que mis actos hayan podido causar, y para que Dios y los hombres me perdonen

Manila, 29 de Diciembre de 1896

José Rizal

Jefe del Piquete
Juan del Fresno

Ayudante de Plaza
Eloy Moure (Retana 1907, 426–427)

I declare myself a Catholic and in this Religion in which I was born and educated I wish to live and die. I retract with all my heart whatever in my words, writings, publications, and conduct has been contrary to my character as son of the Catholic Church. I believe and I confess whatever she teaches, and I submit to whatever she demands. I abominate Masonry, as the enemy which is of the Church, and as a Society prohibited by the Church.

The Diocesan Prelate may, as the Superior Ecclesiastical Authority, make public this spontaneous manifestation of mine in order to repair the scandal which my acts may have caused and so that God and people may pardon me.

The Chief of the Picket
 Juan del Fresno

Adjutant of the Plaza
 Eloy Moure (Guerrero 1971, 458–459)

Challenges to the Jesuit Version

Days after Rizal was executed, some individuals expressed their doubts over the veracity of the news that Rizal had retracted and repudiated Masonry. For instance, Friedrich Stahl wrote to Ferdinand Blumentritt in January 1897, informing him that people did not take the retraction account seriously because “nobody has ever seen this written declaration in spite of the fact that quite a number of people would want to see it” (Cavanna 1956, 145). In a letter that Jose Alejandrino sent to Filipino expatriates in Hong Kong dated March 6, 1897, he expressed the same point. He wrote, “the Spaniards want to persecute him even in the tomb, since they slander him by imputing to him confessions and retractions which he himself could not have done” (Cavanna 1956, 147). Trinidad, Rizal’s sister, also attested that after her brother’s death the Jesuits invited their family to attend a Mass offered for the eternal repose of his soul. The Jesuits promised that after the Mass they would show them the original retraction. Until they parted ways, the promise did not materialize (Pascual 1959, 50–51).

After the Americans had assumed full control of the government, members of Masonry and some of Rizal’s followers started to question openly the veracity of the claim that Rizal had retracted. In the December 29, 1908 issue of *El Renacimiento*, Manuel Artigas y Cuerva considered the retraction document as “apocryphal.” His arguments

against it are summarized in the following lines:

It does not exist . . . It does not appear in the trial nor can anyone give an account of it in the Arch-episcopal Palace of Manila. Even in the Ateneo itself of the Fathers of the Society of Jesus it could not be found, although it was positively affirmed that it was there. And what is most exceptional is that, while documents about Rizal during all the time he had been in the Ateneo, are preserved, only the one of some twelve years ago cannot be found. (Cavanna 1956, 150)

From 1908 onward, Filipino Masons conducted a sustained campaign against the claim that Rizal had retracted. Every time they celebrated Rizal Day, they would come up with activities that debunked and ridiculed the retraction story. For instance, Don Juan Utor y Fernandez staged a drama in the Manila Opera House reenacting Rizal's death. Here the retraction story was explicitly rebuffed. Herminigildo Cruz wrote an article in *La Vanguardia* where he openly attacked the Jesuits. He could not understand how the Jesuits and the archbishop could have misplaced such a priceless document. Other Masons used the character of Rizal as their main argument against the retraction. They argued that Rizal was a strong-willed man of deep conviction and would not easily flip-flop even in critical times. They could not understand why Rizal would retract knowing that it would in no way affect the court's verdict. These arguments were popularized in the succeeding years, and because of this the Jesuits and the Catholic hierarchy were forced to come up with affidavits and other forms of proof to counteract the Masons.

In 1935 the archdiocesan archivist Fr. Manuel Gracia, C.M. was sorting through folders of documents that he would later transfer to a newly acquired fireproof vault. While doing this, he found the "original" retraction document about Rizal in a bundle titled *Masoneria* (Garcia 1964, 31–43). Right away he called Manila Archbishop Michael O'Doherty, who at that time was in Baguio. The next day Fr. Gracia gave the document to the archbishop, who in turn showed it to President Manuel L. Quezon. That same day they asked Teodoro M. Kalaw, a Mason and the director of the National Library at the time, to examine the document. Kalaw declared that it was "authentic, definite and final" (Pascual 1959, ix). Then they summoned Carlos P. Romulo, who was then the editor of the newspaper *Philippines Herald*, to evaluate the veracity of the document. Romulo agreed with Kalaw's findings, and on June 15, 1935 he published the news in the *Philippines Herald* under the banner headline "Rizal's Retraction Found." To give more credibility to the newly found document, Doherty requested H. Otley Beyer, a professor of anthropology at U.P. Diliman and a known handwriting expert, to examine whether the document was genuine or not. Beyer concluded, "there is not the slightest doubt that every word on that sheet of paper was written by Jose Rizal" (Garcia 1964, 34).

The Masons regarded the retraction document that came out in 1935 as a fact, but

whether it was indeed written and signed by Rizal was for them a big question. The discourse during this time was no longer over whether Rizal had retracted or not. The debate was whether the newly found retraction document was genuine or not. Nonetheless, contrary to what the Jesuits expected, the document did not eliminate doubts about Rizal's retraction. Instead, it further put the pro-retraction advocates in a bad light because of the numerous doubts and objections it generated.

Rafael Palma, former president of the University of the Philippines and a prominent Mason, disputed the veracity of the document because it did not reflect Rizal's true character and beliefs. He regarded the resurrected retraction story as a "pious fraud" (Nido 2013). Dr. Ricardo R. Pascual, one of the persons who was given permission by the archbishop to examine the document, wrote: "it is better that such document should not have been discovered at all" (Pascual 1959, 4). Pascual scrutinized the document thoroughly and came up with a book that questioned its authenticity. First, he scrutinized its handwriting and compared it with other documents that Rizal had written days before he was executed. These included the *Mi Ultimo Adios*, the letter he wrote on December 15, 1896 titled "To My Countrymen," the *Defensa* that he wrote on December 12, 1896, and the dedicatory note found on the title page of the book *Imitacion de Cristo*, which Rizal gave to Josephine Bracken. Pascual identified inconsistencies in the slants of the handwriting, Rizal's signature, the inks used, the font of some words, the margin, and the way individual letters were formed (Pascual 1959, 7–30). All these observations led him to conclude that the newly found retraction document was a forgery.

Another objection raised against the authenticity of Rizal's retraction was the differences between the text of the 1935 document and the version of the retraction that Fr. Balaguer had presented. In the 1935 document *calidad* is spelled with a "u," while in Fr. Balaguer's version the spelling is *calidad* (without the "u"). Second, Fr. Balaguer's version does not have the word *Catolica* after the word *Iglesia*. In the 1935 and the newspaper versions, the word *Catolica* is present. Third, in the Jesuits' copy the third *Iglesias* is preceded by the word *misma*. This word cannot be found in the 1935 document. Fourth, with regard to paragraphing, Fr. Balaguer's version does not begin the second paragraph until the fifth sentence while the 1935 version starts the second paragraph immediately after the second sentence. Finally, the text of the 1935 retraction has 4 commas, while the text of Fr. Balaguer's has 11 (Retana 1907, 426–427).

Pascual concluded that the 1935 retraction document was a forgery, but he was not able to identify the forgers. It was Ildelfonso Runes who would do so in a book that he published in 1962. Runes wrote that on August 13, 1901, Antonio Abad celebrated his 15th birthday in San Isidro, Nueva Ecija. Roman Roque, a close neighbor of the Abads, was among the celebrant's well-wishers. On this occasion, Roque disclosed that he had

been fetched by Lazaro Segovia in San Isidro, Nueva Ecija, and later taken to Manila. He had stayed in the Hotel Quatro Naciones in Intramuros and been employed by the friars for 10 days. He was given the equivalent of his salary for two months in the government. For several days he studied Rizal's handwriting. According to him, he made about five copies of the retraction letter based on a draft prepared by the friars. He thought of keeping one for himself, but when he was searched upon departure, his copy was taken from him (Runes and Buenafe 1962, 107–128).

The saga of the retraction controversy continued even after World War II. It surfaced again as a side issue when the Rizal Law was under consideration during the 1950s. Known historians, such as the Jesuits Horacio de la Costa, John Schumacher, and Jose Arcilla, insisted that Rizal had retracted. The Masons, on their part, remained adamant in their stand and refused to accede to the arguments and evidence presented by pro-retraction advocates. Since there was no new evidence or primary sources presented, the debates during the postwar era were mostly philosophical and interpretative in nature.

The *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* Collection

Years before the celebration of the centennial of Philippine independence in 1998, Señor Enrique Montero offered for sale his *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* collection. These were archival documents that he had acquired from a descendant of a Spanish general who was assigned to the Philippines during the twilight years of the Spanish period. Octavio Espiritu, an executive of Far East Bank and Trust Corporation, was the first Filipino to express interest in buying the collection. Its original selling price was \$160,000, but for unknown reasons Espiritu did not buy the collection. A few years later, Philippine Ambassador to Spain Isabel Caro Wilson brought the collection to the attention of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Executive Director Carmen Padilla took the offer seriously and considered the collection a valuable addition to the existing body of literature that the country had on the Philippine Revolution. On December 12, 1995, NCCA commissioners passed Resolution No. 95-285 approving the purchase of the *Cuerpo* documents. The NCCA negotiated with Señor Montero to lower the price, and the two parties agreed to close the deal at \$145,000 (Escalante 2017, 453–458).

The *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* de Manila (Security Corps of Manila) was the intelligence service that the Spanish colonial government created in 1895. It was organized primarily to gather information on the activities of Katipunan members and supporters. *Cuerpo*

agents were tasked to monitor the activities of suspected Katipunan members. They were supposed to report all sorts of rumors, collect news reports, identify the financiers of the Katipunan, compile revolutionary papers, gather photographs, and intercept mail. The agents were also instructed to monitor foreigners who were sympathetic to the Katipuneros. In a span of three years, they were able to collect almost 3,000 documents containing eyewitness accounts of the activities of individuals fighting for Philippine independence.

NCCA officials labeled the *Cuerpo* collection as “Katipunan and Rizal Documents,” but this should not create the impression that the bulk of the collection deals with Andres Bonifacio—a prominent Katipunan leader—or Rizal. If one surveys the collection, one discovers that documents dealing with Rizal and the Katipunan form only a fraction of the total and do not exceed 30 percent of the collection. Among the Filipino heroes, it is Emilio Aguinaldo who figures prominently in the *Cuerpo* collection and was closely monitored by *Cuerpo* agents. For instance, the reports covering the negotiation for the Truce of Biak na Bato and the activities of the Hong Kong junta are more than the documents dealing with Rizal and Bonifacio combined. Aguinaldo’s prominence may be explained by the fact that Rizal and Bonifacio died four and nine months after the outbreak of the revolution respectively. Aguinaldo, on the other hand, outlived all his enemies and was considered the mortal enemy of the Spaniards until their regime ended. It was not surprising, then, that the resources of the intelligence community were concentrated on him.

The original title of the collection is *El Movimiento de Independencia de Filipinas*, or “The Movement for Independence in the Philippines.” The collection gives a detailed account of the revolution from the perspective of the rebels, Spaniards, and foreigners. It offers eyewitness accounts of actual events as well as major developments from March 1895 until the surrender of the Spaniards to the Americans in August 1898. Agents of *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* consisted of mestizos and native Filipinos under the command of Inspector Jefe Federico Moreno. The latter reported directly to Manuel Luengo, the civil governor of Manila, who in turn relayed the information to the governor-general. Initially, the *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* operated separately and independently from the Guardia Civil Veterana and Ejercito de las Islas Filipinas. But in August 1897, the *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* was put under the supervision of the chief of the Guardia Civil Veterana (Churchill 2011, iii).³⁾

Of the more than 1,000 reports found in the *Cuerpo* collection, around 30 are about

3) In the early 1990s, the NCCA requested the Committee on Historical Research to come up with a catalog that would serve as a finder’s aid to the *Cuerpo* documents. After almost a decade of delay, the catalog was finally completed and published by the NCCA in 2011.

Jose Rizal. Some of them deal with him directly, while others are about Josephine Bracken, Jose's elder brother Paciano Rizal, their parents, and some of Jose's in-laws. The bulk of the documents about Rizal focus on his trial and what transpired in his prison cell the day before he was executed. After the court convicted Rizal, colonial officials posted Cuerpo agents who watched him closely and monitored the individuals who visited him. There are at least eight *Cuerpo* documents that may be considered of great importance because they may be used as primary sources in clarifying certain controversies connected with Rizal's alleged "retraction" and other interrelated issues. These documents include a surveillance report written by Federico Moreno, two documents allegedly written by Rizal, and five newspaper clippings from *Diario de Manila* and *La Voz Española* (National Archives of the Philippines [NAP] Manuscript A-1, Doc. 81).

The *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* Version

The report of Moreno (NAP Manuscript A-6, Doc. 1) presents another eyewitness account of what transpired in Rizal's prison cell before he was executed. It contains several details that could be used for and against the claim that Rizal returned to the Catholic fold and renounced Masonry. The account may be considered more objective than earlier ones because Moreno was neither a member of the Catholic hierarchy nor a known Mason. He was in Fort Santiago not to serve a particular interest group but simply to perform a function connected with his work. Moreover, the fact that his report was written a day after the event lessened the possibility that it was edited to please a particular group. Since the report is not very long, a translation of it will be presented first before analyzing it:

Most Illustrious Sir, the agent of the Cuerpo de Vigilancia stationed in Fort Santiago to report on the events during the [illegible] day in prison of the accused Jose Rizal, informs me on this date of the following:

At 7:50 yesterday morning, Jose Rizal entered death row accompanied by his counsel, Señor Taviel de Andrade, and the Jesuit priest [Jose] Vilaclara. At the urgings of the former and moments after entering, he was served a light breakfast. At approximately 9, the Adjutant of the Garrison, Señor [Eloy] Maure, asked Rizal if he wanted anything. He replied that at the moment he only wanted a prayer book which was brought to him shortly by Father [Estanislao] March.

Señor Andrade left death row at 10 and Rizal spoke for a long while with the Jesuit fathers, March and Vilaclara, regarding religious matters, it seems. It appears that these two presented him with a prepared retraction on his life and deeds that he refused to sign. They argued about the matter until 12:30 when Rizal ate some poached egg and a little chicken. Afterwards he asked to leave to write and wrote for a long time by himself.

At 3 in the afternoon, Father March entered the chapel and Rizal handed him what he had

written. Immediately the chief of the firing squad, Señor [Juan] del Fresno and the Assistant of the Plaza, Señor Maure, were informed. They entered death row and together with Rizal signed the document that the accused had written. It seems this was the retraction.

From 3 to 5:30 in the afternoon, Rizal read his prayer book several times, prayed kneeling before the altar and in the company of Fathers Vilaclara and March, read the Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity repeatedly as well as the Prayers for the Departing Soul.

At 6 in the afternoon the following persons arrived and entered the chapel; Teodora Alonzo, mother of Rizal, and his sisters, Lucia, Maria, Olimpia, Josefa, Trinidad and Dolores. Embracing them, the accused bade them farewell with great strength of character and without shedding a tear. The mother of Rizal left the chapel weeping and carrying two bundles of several utensils belonging to her son who had used them while in prison.

A little after 8 in the evening, at the urgings of Señor Andrade, the accused was served a plate of tinola, his last meal on earth. The Assistant of the Plaza, Señor Maure and Fathers March and Vilaclara visited him at 9 in the evening. He rested until 4 in the morning and again resumed praying before the altar.

At 5 this morning of the 30th, the lover of Rizal arrived at the prison accompanied by his sister Pilar, both dressed in mourning. Only the former entered the chapel, followed by a military chaplain whose name I cannot ascertain. Donning his formal clothes and aided by a soldier of the artillery, the nuptials of Rizal and the woman who had been his lover were performed at the point of death (*in articulo mortis*). After embracing him she left, flooded with tears.

Rizal heard mass and confessed to Father March. Afterwards he heard another mass where he received communion. At 7:30, a European artilleryman handcuffed him and he left for the place of execution accompanied by various Jesuits, his counsel and the Assistant of the Plaza. Father March gave him a holy picture of the Virgin that Rizal kissed repeatedly.

When the accused left, I noticed he was very pale but I am very certain that all the time he was imprisoned he demonstrated great strength of character and composure.

God grant Your Excellency.

Manila 30 December 1896.

Chief Inspector Federico Moreno (Harper 1997)

Moreno's report contains details that are not consistent with Fr. Balaguer's affidavit. The most serious and obvious discrepancy is that Moreno never mentioned Fr. Balaguer in his report. All throughout the history of the retraction controversy, Fr. Balaguer consistently claimed that he was present in Rizal's prison cell and actively involved in convincing him to retract. All other pro-retraction advocates who came after Fr. Balaguer took his account as historical fact and argued their case using him as their primary source. The Masons attacked Fr. Balaguer's narrative, but they never questioned his claim that he was a witness to this event. However, in Moreno's account only two Jesuits are identified: Fr. Jose Vilaclara and Fr. Estanislao March.

In his affidavit, Fr. Balaguer declared that he talked to Rizal three times on December 29, 1896. The first time was in the morning, from 10 to 12:30. It was during this meeting that he presented the retraction template to Rizal but the latter did not sign. Moreno

confirmed this meeting, including the presentation of the draft retraction. But he reported that Rizal was talking not to Fr. Balaguer but to Frs. March and Vilaclara. Moreno also confirmed that Frs. March and Vilaclara returned to Rizal around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Fr. Balaguer claimed in his affidavit that he was one of Rizal's afternoon visitors. Fr. Balaguer continued that the third time he talked to Rizal was around 10 in the evening. He had another lengthy and passionate discussion with him for more than an hour. It was on this occasion that Rizal finally signed his retraction letter. Moreno confirmed that Rizal had visitors after dinner, but the persons he identified were Señor Andrade, Señor Maure, and Frs. March and Vilaclara. Again, Fr. Balaguer was not mentioned, and the time of the meeting was 9 o'clock and not shortly before midnight. Neither did Moreno's report mention that they discussed issues concerning faith and the retraction. The narrative is short and ends with Rizal going to bed.

Moreno's report is a big blow to the credibility of Fr. Balaguer. The fact that Moreno never mentioned him in his report casts a cloud of doubt on the veracity and accuracy of the affidavit that he executed. If we are to believe Moreno, Fr. Balaguer did not have personal knowledge of what happened to Rizal the day before he died. If his affidavit contains accurate historical details, he might have gotten them from those who were with Rizal on December 29, 1896. If Fr. Balaguer was the chief negotiator who convinced Rizal to recant, and if he talked to Rizal three times that day, Moreno would surely have inquired who he was. There is a remote possibility that Moreno did not know Fr. Balaguer because he was a priest and not an ordinary visitor. Since Moreno was able to identify the names of Rizal's relatives and the other visitors who talked to him, there is no reason why Moreno would not mention Fr. Balaguer in his report if indeed he talked to Rizal three times.

Moreno's report may have damaged the credibility of Fr. Balaguer, but it did not refute the claim that Rizal retracted. It mentions that when Fr. March returned at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Rizal handed him a document. Then it says that Rizal, together with Juan del Fresno and Señor Maure, signed the document. In the retraction document that Fr. Gracia found in 1935, one sees that the three persons Moreno identified were signatories of the document. Moreno did not provide details on the contents of the document, probably because he was witnessing the event from a distance. But that did not prevent him from presupposing that the document was Rizal's retraction letter. He simply wrote, "It seems this was the retraction [*parece que el escrito era la retractación*]."

The latter part of Moreno's report confirmed a few other controversial events that occurred before Rizal was executed. Moreno reported that right after Rizal signed the alleged retraction letter, he read the Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity as well as the Prayers for the Departing Soul. While kneeling in front of the altar, he also read his

prayer book in the company of Frs. Vilaclara and March. Moreno also reported that in the early morning of the following day, Rizal and Josephine Bracken got married. The ceremony was done *in articulo mortis* (at the point of death), and there were no sponsors or witnesses present. Moreover, Moreno did not mention that the couple signed a marriage contract. This should explain why this document remains unaccounted for until today, and therefore people should stop looking for it. All these details in Moreno's report are indirect forms of proof that Rizal retracted. Archbishop Nozaleda and Fr. Pio Pi's instructions were clear that Rizal should not be given the sacraments unless he retracted his anti-Catholic beliefs. The fact that the marriage took place is a confirmation that Rizal re-embraced his Catholic faith. Lastly, Moreno also reported that minutes before Rizal was brought to Luneta, he heard Mass, confessed to Fr. March, received Holy Communion, and kissed the image of the Blessed Mother. All these acts suggest, and may be considered evidence supporting the claim, that Rizal died a Catholic.

There is another thing Rizal did that is recorded in many history books and also confirmed by Moreno. He handed his family members his personal belongings when they visited him the day before he died. Unfortunately, Moreno did not specify the person to whom Rizal gave his personal belongings. Specifically, he did not mention to whom he gave the stove (others say lamp) where Rizal put his *Mi Ultimo Adios*. A number of biographies state that Rizal gave it to his sister Trinidad with the message "there is something inside" (Craig 1913, 240; Guerrero 1971, 480). Moreno simply wrote that his weeping mother left the chapel carrying "two bundles of several utensils belonging to her son." One can easily assume that the stove was one of the utensils that Teodora Alonzo brought home.

Aside from Federico Moreno's report, there are other documents in the collection that can enrich further the narrative of Rizal's final 24 hours. For instance, the collection has several newspaper clippings of what happened to him before and after his death. One is the account of *La Voz Española*, dated December 26, 1896, which reports the meeting of the Consejo de Guerra on the trial of Jose Rizal (NAP Manuscript A-1, Doc. 25). *El Diario de Manila* has a similar account of this topic and event (NAP Manuscript A-1, Doc. 26). On the day of his execution, the newspaper *La Voz Española* reported what happened in Luneta, and it also printed the text of the retraction letter that Rizal allegedly signed (NAP Manuscript A-1, Doc. 27). The *Cuerpo* collection also has a photograph of Rizal and the members of the execution squad (NAP Manuscript A-1 [9], Doc. 307). Finally, the collection has a three-page letter written by Juan Ferrer to a person he simply calls "Apolinario," dated two weeks after Rizal died. The writer states that Rizal was very brave during his execution. He also asks Apolinario to inform his friends in Imus that they will not stop fighting the Spaniards until Manila is independent. The

author claims that he was tasked to monitor Manila and buy clothes and arms. Moreover, he offers his help to Apolinario in case he organizes meetings in Vigan. He ends his letter warning Apolinario not to tell his parents about his involvement in the revolution and that he accepts that he will be arrested one day (NAP A-12, Doc. 9).

Conclusion

The controversy over Rizal's retraction is a recurring issue in Philippine history because the protagonists are members of well-established institutions that have been actively involved in the writing of Philippine history. The debate has persisted for more than 100 years because succeeding generations of protagonists took turns reviving it for various reasons. Since each side argued with so much interest at stake, each ended up uncompromising and close-minded to the evidence presented by the opponent. In cases like this, it is ideal to look for evidence outside the circle of the interest groups involved. It is in this context that Federico Moreno's report plays a vital role. Moreno's account may be considered more credible than the affidavits and evidence given by the Catholic Church and the Masons. Moreno was a neutral eyewitness and had no interest in protecting this particular issue. His presence in Fort Santiago was a call of duty, and the report that he submitted was a requirement connected with his job.

Moreno's report casts a negative light on both the Catholic Church and the Masons. On the one hand, it reduces Fr. Balaguer's affidavit to a secondary source by insinuating that Fr. Balaguer was not an eyewitness of Rizal's last 24 hours. For several decades, this affidavit served as the primary basis of people claiming that Rizal had retracted. Nonetheless, while Fr. Balaguer may not have been physically present in Rizal's prison cell, the substance of his affidavit is the same as Moreno's report. Both reported that Rizal retracted, although they expressed it in different terms. On the other hand, Moreno's report is a big blow to the Masons because it offers an eyewitness account that disproves their claim that Rizal remained a Mason until he died. Moreno may not have said anything about the contents of Rizal's retraction, but he provided the context for it. He also enumerated numerous events that occurred in Rizal's prison cell that would not have occurred unless Rizal had been converted back to Catholicism. These include the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony, his confession, his attendance at the Mass, his request for a prayer book, and his act of venerating the Blessed Mother. All of these acts are closely associated with the Catholic faith. Hopefully this paper has contributed to the settlement of the retraction controversy and enriched the existing literature on the Philippine national hero.

Going beyond the retraction controversy, it is interesting to note that some documents in the *Cuerpo* collection do not jibe with the present and popular knowledge about the Philippine Revolution. For instance, there are documents about the Katipunan that if proven true may lead to a revision of some details about the organization. Philippine history textbooks mention that the complete name of Katipunan and the meaning of the acronym KKK is Kataastaasan Kagalang-galang na Katipunan ng manga Anak ng Bayan (Agoncillo 2012, 156). But there is a document in the *Cuerpo* collection that says the name of the secret society is Katipunan, Kataastasan, Kalayaan ng mga tunay na anak ng bayan (NAP Manuscript A-1 [4], Doc. 162). There is another document, which allegedly came from Fr. Mariano Gil, saying that the name of the secret organization is Kataastaasan Katipunan Katagalugan (NAP Manuscript A-1 [1], Doc. 14). These two documents deserve serious consideration because they are primary sources and the second one is a document taken by Fr. Mariano Gil from the lockers of the Katipuneros in the Diario de Manila printing house.

Users of the *Cuerpo* collection should be cautioned that the reports of the *Cuerpo* agents have positive and negative attributes. On the one hand, they may be regarded as objective sources of information because they were written immediately after the event was heard or witnessed. Unlike the memoirs of participants in the revolution, which are mostly self-serving and written decades after the event, the reports of the *Cuerpo* agents were contemporaneous accounts of informants who were just doing their duty. Most of the reports are unedited, unadulterated, and not tailored to serve a particular interest group. On the other hand, scholars should be forewarned to use the *Cuerpo* collection critically because not all the reports are historically accurate. For instance, Agent Heriberto Fernandez reported that Aguinaldo returned from Hong Kong aboard a British ship on March 29, 1898, while in fact he arrived in Manila on May 19, 1898 (NAP Manuscript B-17, Doc. 12). Similarly, one *Cuerpo* report states that on February 18, 1898 Aguinaldo was allegedly murdered by his comrades who were not satisfied with the way he was running the Hong Kong junta (NAP Manuscript B-20, Doc. 37). There is another report stating that Aguinaldo was assassinated by forces loyal to Mariano Trias a few days after he returned from Hong Kong (NAP Manuscript B-17, Doc. 13). As recorded in history books, Aguinaldo died of natural causes six decades after the end of the revolution. Taking these facts into account, one can conclude that the *Cuerpo* reports should not be regarded as gospel truth.

The repatriation of the *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* collection and the subsequent decision of the National Archives of the Philippines to make the reports available to researchers will surely result in more studies on the Philippine Revolution. Aside from Rizal, the collection also has several documents on Bonifacio and Aguinaldo. Of the three known

heroes of the Philippine Revolution, Aguinaldo was the one most closely monitored by Cuerpo agents. This could be explained by the fact that Rizal and Bonifacio died four and nine months after the outbreak of the revolution respectively, while Aguinaldo lived longer than most other revolutionary leaders. Furthermore, he was considered the mortal enemy of the Spaniards, so naturally the attention and resources of the intelligence community were concentrated on him. It is hoped that this article will encourage more scholars to use the *Cuerpo* collection in enriching the narrative of the Philippine Revolution.

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Postscript

From the point of view of historiography, the discovery of the *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* collection invites contemporary scholars to explore nontraditional sources of history in their respective research projects. There is a big possibility that, like the Spaniards, other colonial and postcolonial powers may have created secret organizations tasked to monitor the whereabouts and activities of their enemies. There might well be similar undiscovered spy reports on Ho Chi Minh, Aung San, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sukarno. The historiographical value and importance of spy reports rest mainly on the fact that they are contemporaneous accounts and therefore promise a higher degree of accuracy and objectivity. Unlike the self-serving memoirs and biographies that are recounted years or decades after the event, spy reports are written immediately after the event was heard or witnessed. Spy agents are required to submit their report as soon as they witness or hear an event, and this gives them very little time to sugarcoat or think about the implications of their accounts. Ordinarily, agents do not analyze events. They are expected to report to their superiors on developments in the places where they are posted. Thus, their narratives are objective, unadulterated, timely, and not tailored to serve a specific interest group.

Nevertheless, it behooves scholars to use spy reports cautiously and critically. They should not be taken as gospel truth and therefore must be validated and subjected to further verification. There is always a possibility that because of their excitement and their commitment to submitting dispatches on time, agents ended up submitting reports that were historically inaccurate. The *Cuerpo de Vigilancia* collection has several erroneous reports. For example, Cuerpo agents had inaccurate reports about Emilio Aguinaldo. Agent Heriberto Fernandez, for instance, reported that Aguinaldo returned from Hong Kong aboard a British ship on March 29, 1898. The truth is that he arrived from Hong Kong aboard the American ship *McCulloch* on May 19, 1898. Interestingly, Cuerpo agents reported the death of Aguinaldo on two occasions. The first was on February 18, 1898, when he was allegedly murdered by his comrades who were not satisfied with the way he was running the Hong Kong junta. The second was a few days after Aguinaldo returned from Hong Kong, when he was assassinated by forces loyal to Mariano Trias. Both are inaccurate, because Aguinaldo lived a full life and died on February 6, 1964 at the age of 94.

It is hoped that after reading about the background, contents, value, and loopholes of the *Cuerpo* reports, more scholars will be stimulated to mine the collection and enrich the narrative of the Philippine Revolution. This article also invites non-Filipino scholars to follow a similar approach by looking for undiscovered primary sources that could enrich the life story of their respective revolutionary hero, in particular, and the grand narrative of their national history in general.

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