

HISTORY  
**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1937**

By **Bertrand Roy, p.m.é.**

We are on the sea in the south of the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. A passenger boat having left the city of Zamboanga the day before is entering the bay of Davao. Clovis Rondeau and his four companions have left Montréal on September 14 and their long trip is coming to an end. A few more hours and they will have reached their destination. It is Thursday, October 21, 1937.

Two weeks earlier, on October 9, while entering the bay of Manila, they had discovered the capital of the Philippines. That archipelago of southeast Asia, first under the Spanish domination, is an American colony since the beginning of the century. Our travellers were expected in Manila by Bishop Luis del Rosario, bishop of Zamboanga, a diocese in the south of the Philippines. He was there to welcome them, since it was him who in 1935 had invited the priests of the Seminary of Pont-Viau to come and work in his place.



**On the way to Davao, stopover in Cebu (October 18, 1937)** (from left to right : name, age, diocese) **Omer LeBlanc**, p.m.é., 27 years old, Gaspé; **Clovis Rondeau**, p.m.é., 55 years old, Joliette; **Bishop Gabriel Reyes**, archbishop of Cebu; **Bishop Luis del Rosario**, s.j., bishop of Zamboanga; **Ulric Arcand**, 37 years old, Montréal, Canadian missionary attached to the diocese of Lipa; **Clovis Thibault**, p.m.é., 27 years old, Sherbrooke; **Léo Lamy**, p.m.é., 26 years old, Sherbrooke. Behind the camera: **Conrad Côté**, p.m.é., 28 years old, Québec. PHOTO Archives SMÉ

In Manila, our travellers had also met with the archbishop Michael O'Doherty. In 1932, he had already asked for Canadian priests for pastoral work among the Chinese in Manila. This initiative made through the Missionaries of the Immaculate Conception already on the spot never materialized.

On October 16, these five had returned to sea with Bishop del Rosario and Father Ulric Arcand, a priest from Montreal who was missionary in the Philippines since 1931. After a stopover in the city of Cebu, where they were the guests of the archbishop, they went to the city of Zamboanga for a short visit at the centre of their new diocese. And then, very early in the morning, they were back at sea towards Davao.

Today, they are approaching the purpose of their trip. On the starboard side, it is the open sea. On the port side, the coastline comes near or moves back according to the depth of the bays that run into the mountainous jungle. Fishing villages spread out between the coconut plantations.

### In Abaca Country



Bishop del Rosario has covered this region very often. He shows them at the horizon Mt. Apo, the highest peak in the Philippines, while talking about the culture of the abaca, a plant similar to the banana plant, very important in the region. The fibre that is taken from the leaves of the abaca, called here the Manila hem, is used in the fabrication of boat cables

and fishnets since it resists to the damages due to salt water.

Abaca called the attention of many Japanese companies. Since its harvest needs a large workforce, the Japanese immigration continues to increase in Davao. The economic and political influence zone of Japan widens all the time, emphasizes the bishop of Zamboanga, and its military power is very threatening, especially in China.

Listening to Bishop del Rosario, Clovis Rondeau thinks about the confreres who live in the state of Manchukuo set up and controlled by Japan since 1932. The apostolic vicariate of Szepingkai, under the leadership of Bishop Louis Lapierre, is growing fast in spite of all the political uncertainties. Last May, a new apostolic prefecture, that of Lintung, was even set up on a territory detached from the vicariate of Szepingkai. Today, 52 priests of the Society are at work in these two missions.

### **What a development in fifteen years!**

In Pont-Viau, 38 seminarians are studying, among them 11 new students. What a development in just 15 years! Since 1921, when the bishops of Francophone Canada decided to found a seminary for the foreign missions, Clovis Rondeau is the travelling companion of Canon Joseph-Avila Roch, a priest from Joliette like him and first superior of this new project. The canon had written to him to hire him as a propagandist and he very well remembers a passage in that letter: « I would like very much to have you with me! You could help us greatly by doing some writing. »

Since he has a talent for writing, he then wrote a whole collection of pamphlets and articles in the newspapers about the foreign missions. He also took care of the bursarship, and then the general Secretariat of the new Foreign Mission Society. Last June, when the Central Council chose Davao as an apostolic field in the Philippines and he was appointed superior of that new mission, many were surprised to see him leave at his age, he will be 56 years old next week, especially since his health has always been fragile.

## Why that new mission?



**Church and presbytery (*convento*) of San Pedro in Davao in 1937.** (Handwritten text on the back of the picture) Catholic Convento, Davao, 26/10/37. Arrived in Davao on October 21. Cordial welcome. Band at the boat. Te Deum and Salute of the Blessed Sacrament in the church. Bishop del Rosario accompanied us. Show by the girls of the Catholic school in the evening, and the following day by the boys. We are in a civilized country with its own habits and customs. We had no time yet to go out. Rather hot temperature. On the map, church and residence. Thanks for your prayers, and keep on praying. We are residing with three Jesuit Fathers: two old and one younger, a Filipino. Yours in Xto. Clovis Rondeau priest. PHOTO Archives SMÉ

But the real question came from elsewhere. While the needs were growing in the mission of China where the Christians make up a small minority, why open another mission? Most especially in the Philippines, a stronghold of the Catholic presence in Asia since the Spanish colonization?

The question came from Rome in 1935 when we learned that Bishop del Rosario was asking a few missionaries from the Seminary of Pont-Viau to fill in a great need for priests in his diocese of Zamboanga. According to the Canon Law of the Church, the Philippines is not a mission territory under the jurisdiction of the Propaganda Congregation, the Roman dicastery to which the Society falls under. By answering to that request, were we not taking the risk of diverging from the missionary objective of the Society?

Even if the mission in Manchuria remained a priority, Canon Roch wished to give a positive answer to the request of Bishop del Rosario, more precisely for the province of Cotabato. There we could find a Catholic minority living among a Muslim majority population, which respected the Society's goal of working in a non-Christian country. Clovis Rondeau remembers having archived a letter from Canon Roch addressed to the Prefect of Propaganda:

*« We understand that Manchuria is capable of receiving again many missionaries. But the climate is cold and life there is rather harsh. A few of our young missionaries had a hard time to acclimate themselves. Also, currently we now have six who are sick with lung problems.*

*Two died last year. We would like to have hotter climate and a mission that would not ask too many missionaries and not too many expenses. After careful consideration and serious study of the documents sent by Bishop Luis del Rosario, the province of Cotabato would fulfil these conditions. » (Canon Roch, Letter to Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi, March 19, 1935.)*

Pope Pius XI having intervened at Bishop del Rosario's request, permission was granted to go to Cotabato. Yet, the project did not materialize in 1935 because of the lack of personnel to answer to the immediate needs of the missions of Szeping kai and of Lintung.

### **To Organize the Church**

The project was to come back in the agenda at the beginning of the year. In February, Bishop Louis Lapierre went to the Philippines to participate in the Manila International Eucharistic Congress and he visited Davao on the pressing invitation of Bishop del Rosario. In a letter to Canon Roch, he recommended accepting a mission territory in this region of Mindanao, also in the diocese of Zamboanga.

« An assault was mounted on me with reasons that did not lack of merit. The work to be done in that region answers perfectly to the purpose of our Society. It is about organizing the Church this time in Davao, no more in Cotabato in the neighbouring province, so that it can, in the more or less distant future, be self-sufficient there and for its clergy, regarding the organization of the religious life and its subsistence. » And he added, in conclusion: « We hope that our Society will accept to send there its missionaries: prayers were addressed to heaven for that intention by religious congregations, and we believe, as a grace from the Congress, that the Jesus of the Eucharist will grant this favour to these so many souls without a pastor. » (Bishop Louis Lapierre, *Letter to Canon Roch*, Manila, February 22, 1937.)

That recommendation coming from another companion of the first hour led Canon Roch and his counselors to decide for good to send five priests to Davao. And they arrive there by the end of this day in October 1937. The mayor is there to welcome them and the city is decked with flags to greet them. We can already smell the odour of the durian and of dried fish and hear the sound of the band that awaits them as they disembark.

## A MISSIONARY TURNING POINT



*Foto 1 Clovis Rondeau, p.m.é., in Davao in October 1937.*

Clovis Rondeau will return to Canada in 1938 for health reasons and will be replaced as superior of the mission of the Philippines by Joseph Geoffroy, his co-parishioner of St-Félix-de-Valois (Joliette) and director of the Seminary of Pont-Viau since 1924.

If at the beginning, it was something about a mission that did not request «too many missionaries and too many resources», that choice of going to the Philippines will give a direction in a significant way to the commitments of the Society just after the war in the Pacific and the Maoist revolution in China.

In 1937, there were 52 missionaries of the Society in China and five others in the Philippines. In 1952, fifteen years later, they will be 5 in China, 44 in the Philippines and 25 in Cuba. This reversal of the situation will give material for many other chronicles to come. We will be back.