

MURDER

IN THE MISSIONS

A True Story



JEAN HARRINGTON

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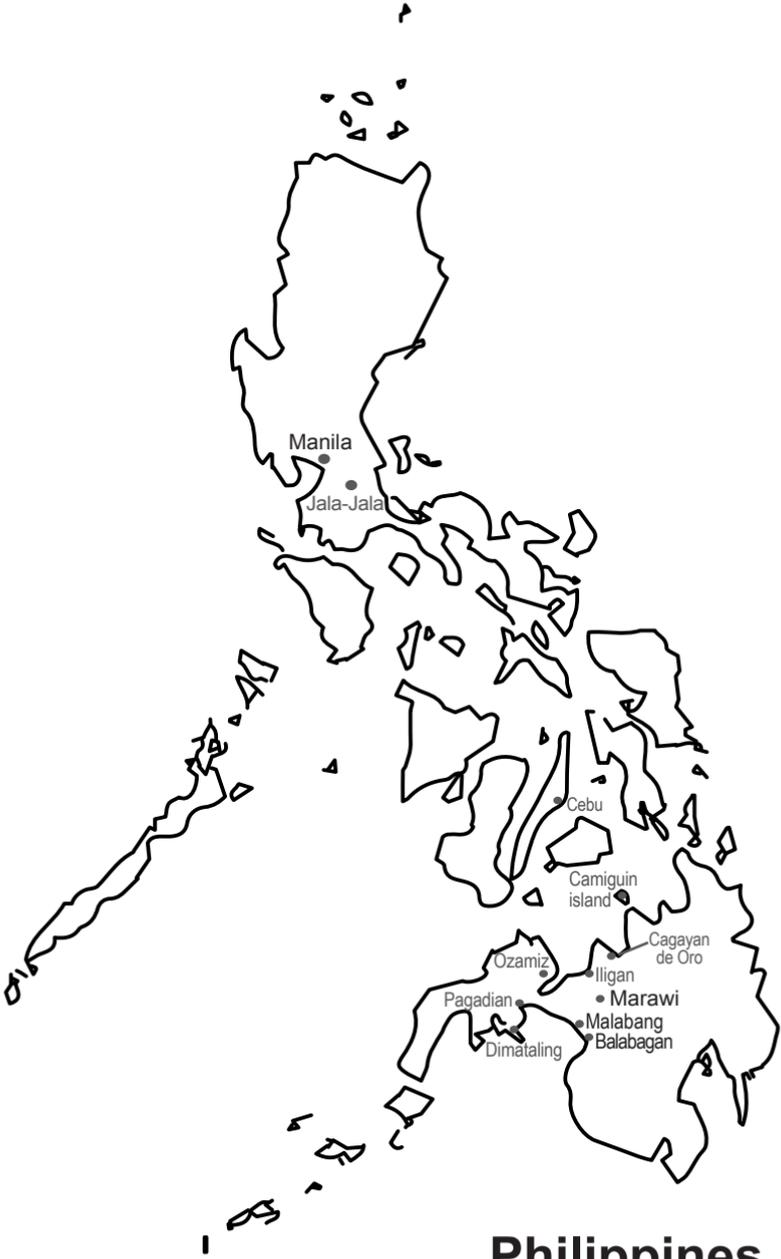
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MERCIER PRESS



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INTRODUCTION

Many people ask why and how I got involved in Fr Des Hartford's and Fr Rufus Halley's stories. What would prompt someone who had no connection with the Catholic Church or the Philippines to start researching a complex tale of religion, politics and Muslim–Christian conflict, which spans four decades and crosses the world?

There is no simple answer to that question, except to say that I believed their stories needed to be told. In August 2001, I read an article in *The Irish Times* about an Irish priest who had been murdered while working in conflict resolution in the Philippines. The warmth of the murdered man, Fr Rufus Halley, was palpable from the way his friends and family members spoke about him. He knew he was living in a dangerous situation, and yet he remained there because he believed it was the right thing to do – that his actions of living peacefully would somehow influence his neighbours to lead a more peaceful life. This intrigued me.

The article went on to describe other Columban priests who were working in Muslim–Christian dialogue while living in the Philippines, and referenced how another Irish priest, Fr Des Hartford, had been kidnapped a few years previously. I was captivated by these men and wanted to know more. In late 2003, I rang the Missionary Society of St Columban in Navan and learned that Fr Des was now living there. To my surprise, I was put straight through to him, and I briefly outlined my idea about writing a book about his life. He was very polite but a little reserved about the concept. He said he would 'like some time to discern', so I promised to send him a letter with my proposal.

Some weeks later he contacted me and said he would be

happy for me to go ahead, and he would do whatever he could to give me access to everything I needed. There was a complication, however. He had advanced cancer at the time, and he knew he would not live to see the book completed. To this end, he introduced me to several of his friends and colleagues, knowing they would look after me when I travelled to the Philippines. I discovered a network of people who facilitated and supported my research, writing and editing. I spoke to as many as I could, and they all gave generously of their time and energy. Without the Columban Fathers, this book could not have happened. It is their story, as much as it is that of Des and Rufus.

It is also the story of the Philippines, a stunningly beautiful archipelago that has been devastated by corruption and greed since the Spanish invaded hundreds of years ago. The story of the conflict and violence is told through a narrative that wraps around these men's lives. It recreates the events and dialogue from interviews, diaries, letters and testimony.

Situated in south-east Asia, the Republic of the Philippines, named after King Philip II of Spain, is comprised of over 7,100 beautiful and exotic islands. The waters that surround it are all branches of the Pacific Ocean: the South China Sea lies to the west, the Sulu Sea and Celebes Sea are in the south and the Philippine Sea lies to the east. Approximately 105 million people live there, with 53 million living on the largest island, Luzon, which holds the capital city of Manila. Much of this book is based on the island of Mindanao, the second largest island in the archipelago, with a population of approximately 20 million people. There are eight major languages and almost one hundred dialects across the region.

Behind the outstanding beauty of the country lies a troubled

history. Being under colonial rule for almost 400 years has left a mark on the Filipinos and their culture. First the Spanish and then the Americans invaded.

Spanish explorers arrived in the archipelago in the sixteenth century and, under Spanish rule, they attempted to convert the inhabitants to Christianity. Islam was already an established religion in the archipelago at the time, having first arrived around the fourteenth century via Arab migrants and traders. The Spanish halted the further spread of Islam in the central and northern regions by driving existing Muslims out of those areas and forcibly converting those who remained. The most notable legacy of the Spanish colonisers, and one which still causes ripples today, was the Christianisation of the Philippines. Approximately ninety-two per cent of the current population is Christian – predominantly Roman Catholic – while Muslims represent less than five per cent of the remaining population.

The Spanish failed to conquer the Muslim strongholds of Mindanao and Sulu in the south, where the people had strong pride in their cultural heritage and fought to maintain their independence. The Spanish named these Filipino Muslims ‘Moros’ after the Moors of northern Africa. The treatment of the Muslims at the hands of the Spanish led to centuries of tension and mistrust between Muslims and Christians, with many Muslims coming to resent the general population of Christians for their treatment.

A revolution against the Spanish colonisers from 1896 to 1898 ended Spanish rule, but this outcome coincided with the Spanish–American war in 1898.¹ The result of this war was the Treaty of Paris, signed on 10 December 1898, which ceded the Philippines to the United States.²

Filipino nationalists did not want to move from one coloniser to another and, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, sought

their independence from the United States. Another revolution and open warfare broke out in February 1899.³ The US tried to brutally suppress this movement, and the war continued for three years. Approximately 200,000 people died from violence, famine and disease.

Despite this intense resistance from the Filipinos, with the Cooper Act of 1902 the Philippines became an American colony. The Americans took over the country with gusto. Not content with merely settling on the largest island, they encouraged their people to move and take over the native lands.

Governor Leonard Wood espoused the resources of the island of Mindanao in particular. 'It is difficult to get a more beautiful place than Mindanao,' he said. 'People should plod to this island, just as they did to the wild American west. Their example will inspire and their work will educate the locals.'⁴

Prior to the American invasion, no one had personal title to the land they were using in Mindanao. The use of land was under the stewardship of the *datu*, the leader of the community. However, at this point in time, the *datu*s sold the land to the foreign Christians, selling out their own people.

Over the next two decades, the American attitude towards the Philippines' desire for independence gradually changed and the United States passed several pieces of legislation towards returning the country to its people. In 1934, the Philippine Independence Act, also known as the Tydings-McDuffie Act, provided for an independent Philippines, subject to a ten-year transition period. In 1935, the transitional government approved a constitution, which included a political system that was almost identical to that of the United States in its structure. This limited the elected president to a six-year term, without the opportunity to run for re-election.⁵ In 1940, the 1935 constitution was amended by the National Assembly of the Philippines. This

changed the term limit of the president to four years, with the possibility of being re-elected for a second term.⁶

The drive towards independence was halted between 1941 and 1945, because the Japanese invaded and occupied the Philippines during this period. When the Japanese were eventually expelled, plans for independence resumed. On 4 July 1946, after nearly 400 years of bloodshed and battle, the Philippines became an independent nation.

For the Muslims in the southern Philippines, however, being governed by Filipino Christians was even less agreeable than living under foreign rule. The new government encouraged Christians in the northern and central regions to move to the south, where the land was more fertile and less densely populated. As a result, the Muslims became a minority in their own homeland.

The memories of former injustices burned deep in the minds of the people who were displaced during this period, and at the same time the Muslim and Christian communities found themselves in competition for land and resources. Not long after the Filipinos had fought for freedom from colonial rule, they took up arms against one another, particularly on the island of Mindanao.

I

DIALOGUE AMID
RISING TENSIONS

CHAPTER 1

A life unlike your own can be your teacher.

St Columban

It was April 1973 and the island of Mindanao in the south of the Philippines was descending into a war between the Muslim population and their Christian neighbours. No one was safe, not even the priests who worked in the locality. Fr Peter O'Neill from Co. Tyrone had taken to sleeping between sandbags on the floor, as he feared an attack from the Muslim rebels who were targeting Christians in Dimataling.

One night, gunshots blazed through his bedroom window on the second floor of his two-storey residence, which was located between the church and the school. He lay there, terrified, quietly trying to still his breathing until they had gone, and thanking God for his foresight with the sandbags.

As soon as he was sure the gunmen were gone, Peter ran downstairs to check on the two schoolboys who were staying there. He found them alive, thankfully, but traumatised. Quickly, they prepared to leave, gathering water, supplies and as many of their belongings as they could carry. After all, the gunmen could come back at any moment.

In the dead of night, they fled towards Colojo, a small village in the hills that was a trek of an hour and a half from Dimataling. Colojo felt like the safe option, as it was the boys' home and was populated only by Christians. There were no proper cement or tarmac roads out of Dimataling, a remote town on the large island, so they trekked instead along dirt tracks and even through jungle in places, in case they came across more trouble. They

travelled quickly, refusing to take a break. Still, it was near dawn by the time they reached the village.

Peter spent the next few weeks there in hiding. As the violence intensified, he began to send a constant stream of refugees away from the mountains of Mindanao. And there was only one place he could think of to send them: to his friend and colleague from the Missionary Society of St Columban, Fr Des Hartford, who resided in Pagadian city, a three-hour boat trip away. Des would help them, Peter was certain.

Although he had not personally witnessed the terror the villagers were fleeing, Des Hartford, from the small town of Lusk in north Co. Dublin, knew what had driven the evacuees to abandon their homes in the mountain villages and seek sanctuary. The tension in the air was palpable.

One day a young woman arrived with her three children. Distraught and overwhelmed by unimaginable grief, she broke down while trying to speak about the horrors she had witnessed. Her husband, she said, had been shot dead. Her home was burned to the ground and she'd lost everything.

Perhaps for the first time in his ministry, Des, a tall, quiet Irishman, could not think of any comforting words to say, so he just listened.

The members of the Missionary Society of St Columban were among the few to bear witness to the murderous carnage which, at times, threatened to engulf the entire island of Mindanao but remained largely unknown to the outside world.

In the days that followed the initial attacks, Des listened to more villagers recount stories of how Muslim gunmen had murdered, tortured and maimed Christians in cold blood. To Des, the deaths represented the demise of the last vestiges of

trust and charity among the island's different cultures, which had slowly eroded over the past few decades.

While the killings terrified Des, he was more frightened by the utter hatred and mistrust that such murders caused. This was best illustrated by the language each side used to describe the other. The Muslim bandits were referred to as *barracuda*, 'the fighting fish', by the Christians, while the Muslims called the Christians who took up arms against them the *ilaga*, a derogatory word that means 'rats'.

Des didn't believe hatred alone was the cause. He was a rational person who knew there was always an underlying motive for the violence. The killings weren't truly sectarian in nature; their cause was more complicated than that. The roots of the murderous terror that threatened to engulf the island, he felt, lay in the political corruption that infiltrated almost every facet of society in the Philippine archipelago.

On 21 September 1972, months before this spate of killings began, President Ferdinand Marcos issued Proclamation 1081, which imposed martial law on the whole country and also closed the Philippine Congress.¹ It had a catastrophic effect on democracy. Journalists, student leaders and trade union activists were arrested, along with those who opposed the president. A further effect of Proclamation 1081 was to shut down newspapers and bring the mass media under the control of the president.

Marcos put the military in charge and gave them permission to do whatever was necessary to keep him and his cronies safe. Seventy thousand people who had connections with the workers' movement and tenants' rights were arrested and imprisoned. Marcos's circle of supporters took trading companies and government agencies for themselves. The country's wealth was going to a small selection of powerful people, who sent the

money offshore to foreign banks, all the while overseen and protected by the military.²

Like other dictators, Marcos defended his decision to effectively abolish democracy by claiming to be protecting it. He said martial law was necessary to counteract the threat posed by the New People's Army (NPA), a communist-inspired group, and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a paramilitary organisation dedicated to the creation of an independent Muslim state in Mindanao.

The MNLF was formed in 1971 by Nur Misuari, whose radical interpretation of Islam and proclamations against the Marcos regime attracted a groundswell of support among the island's Muslim population. It was a disciplined organisation that had a profound influence on other rebel groups because of the tight way it was run.³ Misuari wanted all Muslim insurgents to unite and align under the MNLF umbrella. Many insurgent groups did join the MNLF because they were allowed to maintain their individual identity while joining with the larger, more disciplined organisation. Others remained outside the MNLF, but they too were taking up arms against the government's troops.

The number of armed insurgents in 1973 was estimated at between 15,000 and 30,000.⁴ While their fight was with the government, it was the ordinary citizens of the Philippines who suffered the most in this protracted conflict. By the end of the century, more than 100,000 had been killed by the violence.

The motivation behind Marcos's decision to suspend democracy was not, as everyone knew, to protect the Philippines against a Muslim insurgency; the order was aimed at ensuring that Marcos could retain absolute power. The Philippine constitution limited the presidential reign to no more than eight consecutive years in office. Having held the presidency already for eight years, Marcos was out of time. Martial law allowed

him to suspend the constitution and gave him the extension of power he so badly desired.

There were many societal changes under Marcos's rule. From 1975 to 1983, the country's debt increased threefold and the local currency, the peso, lost half its value. The government had borrowed money from international banks, allegedly to build dams, motorways and factories, but many of these projects never materialised. The money disappeared into the president's pockets.⁵

The size of the military also increased hugely during this time, and high-ranking officers became rich and powerful. They attacked the Catholic Church, especially the clergy and lay people who spoke out against them. Soldiers defended land barons and logging and mining companies, and removed people from their lands with little or no compensation. They imprisoned people without trial. They used local people to go into the mountains to negotiate with the NPA, and if a villager refused to help, they burned down every house in the village. They covered their tracks by saying the villagers were part of the NPA.

In response to Proclamation 1081, the MNLF launched what was to become a fully fledged armed insurgency in Mindanao. They first focused on the city of Marawi, the inhabitants of which were almost all of Muslim faith and culture. After Marawi, the fighting quickly spread, and the MNLF campaign soon descended into an overwhelming assault, particularly in rural areas. The insurgents murdered those of other faiths and cultures whom they had lived alongside in peace for generations, possibly because the military was viewed as Christian.

Des, along with his fellow Columbans, watched in horror at the slaughter that ensued.

The Missionary Society of St Columban's relationship with the archipelago began in 1929 when, at the request of the Archbishop of Manila, it sent two priests, Patrick Kelly and Michael Cuddigan, to serve in the parish of Malate, in Manila.⁶

The Philippines was not 'in the missions' as outlined by Roman Catholic canon law, because approximately ninety per cent of its inhabitants were recorded as being Roman Catholic. It was seen as an unusual choice for the Columbans, who were intended to do 'apostolic work among infidel peoples'.⁷ So going to a country where, on paper, the vast majority of people were Roman Catholics was not an obvious choice. The truth was, however, that hundreds of parishes had been abandoned and some had been left vacant since the Spanish ceded the Philippines to the United States of America in 1898 as part of the Treaty of Paris.⁸ The Archbishop of Manila, Michael O'Doherty, needed priests and had pleaded with the Columban superior general, Michael O'Dwyer, to send help.

About a quarter of Roman Catholics in the country at this time had left the Roman Catholic Church to join the Philippine Independent Church, presided over by Gregorio Aglipay, who had led a campaign to free the church from Spanish dominance.⁹ Many saw very little difference between the two churches. However, the Columban priests were disheartened when they saw that former Roman Catholics were content to burn candles before statues and seemed to know nothing about the Eucharist.¹⁰

The missionaries had their work cut out for them. Over the next few years, more and more Irish missionaries arrived and began to care for the spiritual needs of the Roman Catholic inhabitants of the islands. The Columban mission, as the missionaries saw it, was to rekindle the faith of the people, rebuild churches and train catechists.

This work ground to a halt for a period during the Second World War, when the Japanese invaded the archipelago. The Columbans suffered greatly during the war and many were forced to leave the country.

For those who were able to stay, many suffered deprivation, living in the mountains where they were protected, fed and sheltered by friendly Catholics. Others were tortured and killed, however. One Columban, Francis Douglas from New Zealand, was hauled away in the middle of the night on 27 July 1943. He was never seen again and, even today, the Columbans are still trying to learn of his fate and the details of his presumed martyrdom.

The missionary work of the Columbans began again once the invaders were defeated and had left the Philippines. Their mission was successful because the Columbans placed great emphasis on training lay people to work in their own local parishes. Missionary zeal for the spiritual upliftment of the parishioners was not the only purpose of the Columban missionaries, though. The Columbans were also social advocates, whose religious beliefs were grounded in the struggle for social justice.

It was this underlying aspect of the Columbans' work that Des Hartford was passionate about. By the time he arrived in the archipelago in 1968, the Columbans had developed an advanced theological approach to their mission. They recognised that the poverty they encountered in the Philippines was structurally related to decisions and behaviour not only in the Philippines, but also in other parts of the world.

Des came to realise, like the other priests of his generation, that attempting to strengthen the people's spiritual life alone was not sufficient. The Columbans had to support their congregation in all their needs. He and his colleagues believed the injustices and poverty their parishioners were experiencing could not be

ignored. They became a part of their communities and took action to help their parishioners in all areas of their lives. When he was a young boy in Ireland dreaming of joining the missions, however, he had no idea how complex his life would become as a priest.

Irish missionaries Fr Des Hartford and Fr Rufus Halley travelled to the Philippines, a country divided by violence and sectarianism, in the late 1960s. For many years they lived peacefully in the Muslim-dominated areas of the island of Mindanao, working to bring about a positive dialogue between the Christian and Muslim communities there. But in a volatile environment where kidnappings and attacks were everyday fears, both priests ultimately found themselves caught up in the conflict, to terrifying effect.

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ISBN 978-1-78117-712-9



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