

A Dominican and a Historian: A Narrative on Life and Selected Historical Writings of Fr. Fidel Villarroel, O.P.

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript examines the life, writings, and historiographical significance of Fr. Fidel Villarroel, O.P., a Dominican priest, archivist, and historian whose scholarship occupies a distinctive place in Philippine historical studies. The study situates Villarroel within the broader tradition of clergy-historians in the Philippines and argues that his intellectual formation, archival stewardship at the University of Santo Tomas (UST), and sustained engagement with documentary sources enabled him to make substantial contributions to ecclesiastical, institutional, and biographical history. Through a narrative and analytical assessment of selected works, the manuscript evaluates the studies of José Rizal, Apolinario Mabini, Marcelo H. del Pilar, José Burgos, and the historical development of UST, the Dominicans, and the Philippine Revolution. Attention is given to his use of primary sources, his recovery of neglected materials, and his effort to introduce perspectives often absent from nationalist narratives without collapsing into uncritical apologetics. The assessment contends that, although Villarroel's position as both Spaniard and Dominican might invite suspicion, his scholarship is marked by archival rigor, interpretive restraint, and a sustained commitment to historical clarification. Rather than narrowing the field of interpretation, his work broadens understanding by complicating inherited assumptions about colonialism, religion, and national formation. The manuscript concludes that Fr. Villarroel made an enduring contribution to Philippine historiography by preserving documentary heritage, improving scholarly access to archival collections, and producing studies that illuminate the intersections of Church history, university history, and the lives of major historical figures. His body of work demonstrates the continuing value of source-based and interdisciplinary research and merits further critical engagement within the broader development of Philippine historiography and historical scholarship today.

Keywords: Fidel Villarroel, University of Santo Tomas, Dominican, Church history, Philippine history, Institutional history

I. Introduction

The Philippines is fortunate to have produced many historians who help us understand the country's rich and complex history. Many of which address several aspects, including politics, economics, culture, society, and more, to help bridge gaps in the vast body of knowledge about Philippine history. Notwithstanding the political spectrum, Philippine historiography has consistently introduced new ideas and knowledge, challenging future historians to push the limits and boundaries of the field.

While most Philippine historians are academics or intellectuals, there are also men of the cloth, or clergy, who have joined their ranks. Early missionaries, such as Pedro Chirino, Juan de Plasencia, and Francisco Colin, were responsible for chronicling the early life and people of the Philippines, providing us with a glimpse of a society before Spanish Colonization. Chirino's *Relación de las Islas Filipinas* was a pioneering historical account of early Filipino society.¹ Juan de Plasencia's *Relación de las Costumbres* detailed the pre-Spanish Tagalog society, its political system, and social classes.² Lastly, Fr. Francisco Colin's *Labor Evangelica* presented a comprehensive account of early Filipino society.³

One notable Filipino clergyman, Fr. Horacio de la Costa, S.J., is considered a leading figure in the study of ecclesiastical history in the Philippines. His works on the history of the Jesuit order in the Philippines are considered among the most comprehensive accounts of the Jesuits' contributions in the Philippines, from the Spanish era to the contemporary period. His work, "*The Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581 – 1768*", is considered his most significant historical work and is regarded as one of the leading works of church history in the Philippines.⁴

The clergy-historians mentioned above also belong to various religious orders, notably the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans). These religious orders were the earliest missionaries to arrive in the Philippines during the early Spanish colonization and the

¹ Manuel Ruiz Jurado, S. J., "Fr. Pedro Chirino, S.J. and Philippine Historiography," *Philippine Studies* 29, nos. 3 & 4 (1981): 350.

² Juan de Plasencia, *Customs of the Tagalogs*. In *The Philippine Islands, 1493–1898*. Vol. 7, edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1903), accessed April 21, 2026. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13701/13701-h/13701-h.htm>.

³ Jose S. Arcilla, "Jesuit Historians of the Philippines." *Philippine Studies (Ateneo de Manila University)* 44, no. 3 (1996): 381. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42634615>.

⁴ Arcilla, *Jesuit Historians*, 375.

Christianization of the Philippines.⁵ Another religious order to arrive in the Philippines and make significant contributions is the Order of Preachers, also known as the Dominicans.

Among the Dominicans came Fr. Fidel Villarroel, O.P., a Spaniard who served as the archivist of the University of Santo Tomas (UST). While he is well-known within UST, he remains relatively obscure to many, particularly younger historians. One probable reason is that it is rare for a member of the clergy in the Philippines to be a well-known historian, especially when writing on topics outside the Church. The researcher, aware of Fr. Villarroel's works, aims to explore his historical writings and acknowledge his contributions to the understanding of Philippine history.

II. A Short Biography of Fr. Villarroel

According to his personal files provided by Dr. Augusto de Viana in his paper, *A Dominican Pillar in Philippine Historiography: Fidel Villarroel, O.P.*, Father Fidel Villarroel was born in Tejerina, Leon, Spain. He took his primary and secondary schooling at La Mejorada and Santa Maria de Nieva, both Dominican academic institutions. In 1929, He began his spiritual journey and joined the Dominican Order. In 1945, he actively pursued ecclesiastical studies at the Dominican convent in Avila, Spain, where he studied philosophy and Theology. And in 1953, he was ordained as a Dominican priest.⁶ He completed his master's studies at the University of London, earning his Master of Arts degree in 1957. In 1972, he earned his doctoral degree in history from the same university. In 1974, he was inducted into the Academia Filipina de la Lengua Española for his outstanding contributions to the Spanish language and literature.⁷

In the same year he earned his Master's degree, he was assigned to the Philippines to begin his work. By starting as a professor at the University of Santo Tomas (UST), he held the position for many years, such as the head of the Spanish Department from 1957 to 1982, Prefect of Libraries from 1978 to 1991, and a professor of Church history from the UST Faculty of Theology from 1962 to 2009. Perhaps the most important appointment of

⁵ Malcolm W. Mintz, "Monograph 1: The Philippines at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century," Chap. 3 in *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, Accessed November 25, 2025. http://intersections.anu.edu.au/monograph1/mintz_christianity.html.

⁶ Augusto V. de Viana, "A Dominican Pillar in Philippine Historiography: Fidel Villarroel, O.P." *PHILIPPINIANA SACRA (University of Santo Tomas) LI 152* (2016): 118,

⁷ Ruben Jeffrey A. Asuncion, "UST Archives Director Fr. Fidel Villarroel, O.P. MASTER KEY to UST's Past." *The Varsitarian*, Last modified July 19, 2007, <https://varsitarian.net/ust-archives-director-fr-fidel-villarroel-op-master-key-to-usts-past/>.

Fr. Villarroel at UST was his appointment as the Archivist of the University of Santo Tomas. He held the post twice, from 1958 to 1991 and again from 1995 to 2006.⁸

Outside UST, he also served as an assistant secretary to the Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines from 1959 to 1991. He also became the Provincial Promoter of the Canonization Causes in the Dominican Province of the Holy Rosary from 1977 to 2009. He was also the author of numerous journals at the university, including *Boletin Ecclesiastico de Filipinas*, *Philippiniana Sacra, Unitas*, and *Life Today Magazine*.

As the Provincial Promoter, he wrote two *Positiones* (positions) – one in 1977 and one in 1995. The 1977 Positio was a historical account of the martyrdom of the 16 Dominican martyrs in Nagasaki. While in Rome, he worked to include the account of the martyrdom of Lorenzo Ruiz, a Chinese-Filipino who was also martyred in Nagasaki. This positio paved the way for his beatification, along with the other Dominican martyrs of Nagasaki in 1981 and eventual canonization in 1987. Additionally, Fr. Villarroel collaborated on the beatification causes of Francisca del Espiritu Santo, the founder of the Beaterio de Santa Catalina, producing two volumes of historical documents related to her life and works. His recent position was on the Dominican martyrs during the Spanish Civil War, especially those who were once assigned to UST and to Colegio de San Juan de Letran.⁹

For his outstanding service at UST and the Dominicans, Fr. Villarroel was a recipient of the prestigious *Pro Ecclesiae et Pontifice* award in 1984, presented by Pope St. John Paul II, and the Cross of Isabella the Catholic in 1985, bestowed by King Juan Carlos I of Spain.¹⁰ Fr. Villarroel stated that, “It is a rare honor, especially nowadays, to be a recipient; one must have shown exemplary performance in scholarly pursuits.”¹¹

Fr. Villarroel passed away in 2016, at the age of 87, due to natural causes. His intellectual legacy is profound and diverse, and many praised his outstanding contributions to Philippine historiography. It is his historical writings that truly attest to his dedication to the Catholic faith, education, Philippine history, and the preservation of the cultural heritage of the University of Santo Tomas. According to Dr. Augusto de Viana, Fr. Villarroel’s passion for writing was, “Since I arrived in the country in 1957,

⁸ de Viana, *A Dominican Pillar*, 118.

⁹ Lito B. Zulueta, “Fr. Fidel Villarroel, OP, Acclaimed Historian and Prolific Saint-Maker; 87. October 25,” *Lifestyle.INQ*, October 25, 2016. <https://lifestyle.inquirer.net/241676/fr-fidel-villarroel-op-acclaimed-historian-and-prolific-saint-maker-87/>

¹⁰ Zulueta, *Fr. Fidel Villarroel, OP*.

¹¹ de Viana. *A Dominican Pillar*, 119.

I have always had the history of the Philippines in mind. Most of my books and my research have been about Philippine history and also Church history.”¹²

III. Written Historical Works of Fr. Villarroel

As a historian and archivist at UST, he has written numerous books, articles, and essays. Perhaps one explanation for his prolific historical writings was his role as archivist at the UST Library, where he had access to UST’s vast collections spanning from its foundation until his passing. The researcher decided to study and analyze selected historical works by Fr. Villarroel, grouping them by themes as follows: biographical, ecclesiastical, and institutional history.

a. Ecclesiastical-themed Historical Writings

As a Dominican, Fr. Villarroel has delved into the writings of ecclesiastical history, particularly those on the Dominicans in the Philippines. Among his writings are *Cruzada Española en Vietnam*, *Campaña de Conchichina*, *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas; Nagasakiensi, seu Macaonenis Manilensis Beatificationis Severorum Dei Dominici Ibáñez de Erquicia O.P. et XIV Sociorum, in odium fidei, uti fertur, annis 1663-1637 interfectoru, POSITIO super introductione Causae et Martirio ex officio concinnata*; *Lorenzo Ruiz, the Protomartyr of the Philippines, and his Companions*; *El Padre Antonio Gonzáles, Mártir*; *Pien Cheng-Chiao Chen-Ch’uan SHIH-LU, Apologia de la Verdadera Religión* (Testimony of the true Religion); *Un siglo de apostolado, Religiosas Misioneras de Santo Domingo, 1887-1987*; *Martritensis Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei Bonaventurae Garcia Paredes, ex Ordine Praedicatorum, O.P., Michaelis Leiba e Societae Mariae, et Quadraginta Sociorum, in odium fidei, uti fertur, interfectorum*; *Iglesia y Convento de la Santísima Trinidad en Via Condotti, Perspectiva histórica*; *The Beaterio de Santa Catalina: The Cradle Years of the Dominican Sisters in the Philippines*; *A Brief History of the Foundation, by Fr. Juan de Santo Domingo, its Founder*; *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution*; and *Miguel de Benavides, O.P. (1550-1605), Friar, Bishop, and University Founder*.

Among these works, four were selected for accessibility reasons: Shih-Lu, *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution*, and the *positios* of Fathers Domingo Ibáñez de Erquicia and Buenaventura Garcia Paredes and their companions.

¹² de Viana. *A Dominican Pillar*, 119.

Shih-Lu is a rare book, written entirely in Chinese characters, and is one of the first three printed in the Philippines, alongside the well-known *Doctrina Christiana*, published in 1593. The printing of this book, a modern discovery unknown for over four centuries, has been made possible by recent discoveries, including the only surviving copy, found at the Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid. It has been edited into facsimile by Fr. Villarroel. He translated it into Spanish and English versions to help readers understand the content of this book. It also features a detailed dialogue between a Spanish missionary and a group of Chinese scholars, most probably the Confucian scholars, on philosophical and religious topics.

The UST Press republished this book, incorporating Fr. Villarroel's edits. Fr. Villarroel comprehensively edited and translated the work to ensure the original text's readability. In the original work, the book was printed using xylography, a technique employed by the Chinese to carve characters directly into wood, then apply ink to the etched panel, which was pressed onto the paper. The language of this work is a unique colloquial Fookien language, which, unfortunately, is not easily understandable. The writing style is traditional Chinese, written from top to bottom and read from right to left.¹³

The rationale of the translation of this work is stated by Fr. Villarroel, translated from the original Spanish:

"The book of what do I know? This publication was incredibly rich in every bibliographical sense when it was written about. That's what the distinguished Spanish orientalist is about to say. It is the most important bibliographical jewel. Overseas, in the book of maximum value and existence in our Spanish libraries, public or private. It's almost unbelievable that the statement is so strange. To explain that in a happy discovery of this overseas jewel in the National Library of Madrid that same year, the orientalist and bibliographer's enthusiasm. Because it is a book, the Chinese character is printed in the Philippines, which has the merit of having been the first scientific cultural source between East and West, between China and Europe, by means of the printed word and the additional merit of being, if not the first, one of the first three books printed in the Philippines."¹⁴

Fr. Villarroel also added these words in his introduction to the reprinted work of Fr. Cobo to signify the importance of this book to the readers, translated from the original Spanish:

"Today, the story of the Foundation and its early development. Printing in the Philippines holds a certain intriguing quality. This is due to the profound mystery that has surrounded the intense search for the first printed materials for four

¹³ Juan Cobo, *Bian zheng jiao zhen chuan shi lu*. Minxila: [s.n.], 1593. Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE Digital), accessed May 13, 2026, <https://bne digital.bne.es/bd/en/card?oid=0000165702&site=bdh>.

¹⁴ Cobo, *Shih-Lu*.

centuries. Founded in 1593, Philippine printing can today boast of a venerable and meritorious antiquity, comparable to that of other European countries, following the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg. It surpasses, in the world, only Mexico and Peru in the Americas, and Goa, Macau, and Japan are older than Manila. Several European printing presses, such as those in Norway and Finland, were later.

Now, for those unfamiliar with the history of Philippine printing, it is essential to begin by distinguishing between the known printing systems. In the Magellanic Islands, at the end of the century, these were primarily graphic or printing using engraved wooden tablets, a method known to the Chinese before the 19th century.”¹⁵

Another work by Fr. Villarroel, *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution*, is a faithful and comprehensive translation of many original documents relevant to the Philippine Revolution, published in 1998 to mark the centenary of Philippine Independence. This book discusses the Dominicans’ involvement in the Philippine Revolution. With over 59 documents related to the Philippine Revolution, Fr. Villarroel attempted to analyze them objectively through careful examination, interpreting them to the best of his ability.

According to Fr. Villarroel, the historiography of the Philippine Revolution is, at best, a one-sided narrative. Although a Spaniard himself, he acknowledged that such a historical narrative is essential to fostering nationalism among Filipinos. Speaking from a Spanish perspective, he believed that other narratives of the Philippine Revolution, particularly those of Spanish colonial officials and friars, should be considered in its historiography. Fr. Villarroel hoped this book would help expand on a perspective often ignored by Filipino historians.

As expected, Fr. Villarroel’s challenge in writing this book is to balance the narrative so that the Spanish perspective, particularly that of the friars, is presented in a moderate manner. He provided examples of friars serving as peacemakers or mediators during the Philippine Revolution. He cited Fr. Evaristo Fernandez Arias, a former Dominican professor of Jose Rizal, as one of the most respected professors at UST. While he implored students not to be too bold in their demands, he also admonished Emilio Aguinaldo during the Philippine Revolution not to subscribe to ideologies incompatible with the Catholic faith.¹⁶

Fr. Villarroel believed that the narrative and historiography of the Philippine Revolution are merely rehashing old sources rather than

¹⁵ Cobo, *Shih-Lu*.

¹⁶ Fidel Villarroel, O.P., *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution (1896 - 1930)* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2012), 229.

incorporating new ones to better understand it. He wanted historians to engage and to bring new insights into the hows and whys of the 1896 Revolution. He acknowledged that it was the very thing that the friars feared, which was the result of a sense of natural maturity among Filipinos capable of establishing their own nation.¹⁷

Fr. Villarroel also acknowledged the challenges and difficulties of writing this book, as he is not only a Spaniard but also a Dominican, both of whom were agents of Spanish colonization. His concern was that he might be criticized for engaging in historical revisionism and be perceived as an apologist for the Spaniards. In the foreword of the book, Fr. Rolando dela Rosa, O.P., said:

“This work by the author is neither apologetic nor condemnatory but rather serves as a vehicle for the 19th-century Dominicans to present their perspective. Brought to you by 59 documents, some of which are confidential; they are now translated into English for the benefit of non-Spanish speakers. The author admitted that the friar openly opposed the Philippine Revolution and its eventual independence. He believed that the religious gains of 400 years of missionary work were in danger. The future would show that this explicable fear was actually boundless. The author stated that what the missionary failed to realize was that it was precisely that magnificent enterprise which led the Philippines to its maturity and its capacity for claiming the status of nationhood.”¹⁸

As mentioned earlier, Fr. Villarroel was called a “saint-maker” due to his *Positiones*, which helped many candidates for sainthood. His first positio, *Positio Super Introductione Causae*, was for the causes of St. Lorenzo Ruiz and his companion martyrs in Nagasaki. Fr. Villarroel’s search for sources regarding Lorenzo Ruiz originated from an unexpected source: the Jesuit Archives in Rome. It was at the Jesuit Archives that an eyewitness account of Lorenzo Ruiz’s trial surfaced, helping Fr. Villarroel’s research. Together with Lorenzo Ruiz were Fr. Antonio Gonzalez, a former rector and professor in UST, Fathers Domingo Ibañez de Erquicia, Lucas del Espíritu Santo, and Guillaume Courtet.¹⁹

Another *positio* written by Fr. Villarroel for the causes of Bishops Domingo Henares and Jose Mariz Diaz, Vicente Liem de la Paz, San Jurio, and Pedro Almato. All of them were martyred in Vietnam during the Catholic

¹⁷ Villarroel, *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution*, 229.

¹⁸ Villarroel, *The Dominicans and the Philippine Revolution*, iii.

¹⁹ Fidel Villarroel, O.P., *POSITIO - Nagasakien, Seu Macaonen, Seu Manilen Beatificationis Seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei DOMINICI IBAÑEZ DE ERQUICIA, O.P. ET XVI SOCIRUM in odium fide, Uti fertur, Annis 1633-1637 interfectorum*. (Rome: Super Introductione Causae et Martyrio ex Officio Concinnata, 1979).

persecutions. All these Dominicans, written by Fr. Villarroel, were canonized on June 19, 1988.²⁰

For his last *positio*, he wrote extensive research on the Dominicans who served in the Philippines, both UST and Letran, and who were martyred during the Spanish Civil War. Among them were Buenaventura Garcia Paredes, a former Master of the Order of Preachers; Jesus Villaverde Andres; Pedro Ibañez Alonso; Manuel Moreno Martinez; Fernandez Mariñas; and Jose Maria Lopez Carillo. In 2007, they were beatified as part of the 498 Martyrs of the Spanish Civil War.²¹

b. Biographical works of Thomasian Alumni

As the University Archivist, Fr. Villarroel has access to the pertinent records of prominent Thomasian alumni. For 400 years, UST has been the university of many of the well-known Filipino heroes who have shaped the course of Philippine History.

The most crucial biographical work by Fr. Villarroel was about the nation's most prominent hero, Dr. Jose P. Rizal. In 1984, Fr. Villarroel published *Jose Rizal and the University of Santo Tomas*. Fr. Villarroel was aware of the controversies surrounding the alleged mistreatment of Dominican friars of Rizal during his university years at UST. For Fr. Villarroel, this book served as a defense against the so-called *Leyenda Negra* (Black Legend) of the friars during the Spanish period.²² This book is not a biography per se, but can be considered as a memoir, the limitation of which is Rizal's academic life at UST. According to the book's foreword:

“Father Villarroel labors hard so that the complexities of his subject do not prevent him from shedding new light on a critical phase of Dr. Rizal's life. He has diligently ploughed through the archival materials of the University of Santo Tomás and Archivo de la Provincia del Sto. Rosario evaluated them in a thoughtful and neatly written work. His well-written and documented study has certainly filled a long-felt need. He has solved many difficult questions and the piece of work.”²³

Contrary to popular belief, UST was, in fact, reviving the scholasticism of St. Thomas Aquinas, which has served as the benchmark for many European

²⁰ Villarroel, *POSITIO - DE ERQUICIA*.

²¹ Fidel Villarroel, O.P., *POSITIO - Matriten. Beatificationis Seu Declarationis Martyrii Sevorum Dei BONAVENTURAE GARCIA PAREDES ex Ordine Praedicatorum MICHAËLIS LEIBAR e Societate Mariae et Quadraginta Sociorum in odium fidei, Uti Fertur, Interfectorium*. Vol. 1. (Rome: Congregatio de Causis Sanctorum, 1995)

²² Jose S. Arcilla, “Jose Rizal and the University of Santo Tomas,” *Philippine Studies* 33, no. 4 (1996): 546, <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.1709>.

²³ Fidel Villarroel, O.P., *Jose Rizal and the University of Santo Tomas* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2020), xi.

universities.²⁴ Additionally, while Jesuits were friendly to Rizal during his Ateneo days, the Dominican professors of Rizal were also pleasant to him to the point that Bernardino Nozaleda, the last Spanish Archbishop of Manila and a Dominican himself, tried his best to win back Rizal to retract his statements against the Roman Catholic Church before his execution.²⁵

His grades during his stay in Santo Tomas were released on UST's social media accounts, making Rizal's grades public. It shows that, while Rizal was not an outstanding student as many expected, but this was not due to perceived discrimination by the Dominicans. Rizal was, in fact, an excellent student. Also, the Dominicans even waived some basic requirements so he could take advanced classes in preparation for his medical program, or *Ampliacion*.²⁶ Fr. Villarroel noted during his research that Rizal never failed a subject. In fact, medical subjects were not his area of expertise, but rather in the arts and letters.²⁷ While the criticism against UST in the teaching of the natural sciences has not yet been formally integrated into UST's curricula, Fr. Villarroel admitted that:

“... including the University of Santo Tomas, partly as a measure of protection against the dangers of liberalism and partly in strict adherence to the letter of the Encyclical Aeterni Patris and other Papal directives, were so obsessed with keeping their students safe from unchristian principles that they failed to instill in the students proper incentives for positively facing the challenges presented by liberalism, to update their teaching methods and to meet the new currents with more modern weapons.”²⁸

Fr. Villarroel also added that during Rizal's medical studies in UST, the Dominicans employed lay professors to teach medical and pharmaceutical courses, something that the Dominicans admitted they did not know how to teach. Additionally, the university acquired state-of-the-art equipment and dedicated facilities specifically for medical subjects, including a surgical theater. Medical professors were also sent to Spain to further enhance their expertise in teaching medical subjects.²⁹

The corruption of the friars during Rizal's time was further exacerbated by his two novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. Fr. Villarroel clarified that while Rizal was right in doing so, as he intended to expose what

²⁴ Villarroel, *José Rizal*, 55.

²⁵ Villarroel, *José Rizal*, 172.

²⁶ José, Regalado Trota, “The truth about Rizal's ‘poor’ grades in UST,” Lifestyle.INQ, Last modified June 13, 2011, <https://lifestyle.inquirer.net/3292/the-truth-about-rizal%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98poor%E2%80%99-grades-in-ust/>; Villarroel, *José Rizal*, 75.

²⁷ Villarroel, *José Rizal*, 100.

²⁸ Villarroel, *José Rizal*, 187.

²⁹ Villarroel, *José Rizal*, 55.

Rizal called social cancers, these books are propaganda and fictional works. As a novelist and propagandist, Rizal used historical circumstances to suit his literary needs, effectively presenting his ideas.³⁰ One infamous chapter in the Physics class is often cited as based on Rizal's personal experience, when in fact Rizal never took physics at Santo Tomas but rather at Ateneo.³¹

Fr. Jose Arcilla stated that the book neither diminishes nor detracts from its objective. While the book contains factual errors and inconsistencies, it is worthy of study by many scholars and students to gain a deeper understanding of Rizal's educational years. Fr. Arcilla stated in his book review of Fr. Villarroel's, "Aside from an occasional hispanism, the book is well written. Father Villarroel deserves our congratulations. This could have been an obnoxious apologia for the Dominicans and the University of Santo Tomas, but he is too much of a historian for that!"³²

Another illustrious alumnus of UST was Apolinario Mabini. Fr. Villarroel's work, *Apolinario Mabini - His Birthday and Student Years*, discusses Mabini's university years, much as the book about Jose Rizal does. The purpose of this work by Fr. Villarroel is to trace at least a long period of Mabini's student years and his participation in the Philippine revolution. Liberties were taken from this article so that this narrative could be as lively as an autobiography. Also, this work was done in preparation for the centennial of Apolinario Mabini's birthday in 1964. Fr. Villarroel stated that, unlike Jose Rizal, he did not find in Mabini the adventure, romance, or poetry of martyrdom that so easily captivated popular sentiment. Fr. Villarroel noted that Mabini was a superior student compared to Rizal. He was diligent, despite having been born into poverty himself. Yet Mabini's role in the Philippine Revolution, typically intellectual, was so important and lasting that it can hardly be surpassed by any other.³³

Additionally, Augusto de Viana noted one of Fr. Villarroel's significant contributions during the writing about Mabini, specifically the correct date of his birth. Instead of the widely accepted date of 23 July, it was in fact 22 July 1864. According to Fr. Villarroel's research, the term "*Un niño de un dia*" mentioned on his baptismal certificate means he was born a day old already. Mabini himself acknowledged his birthday as 22 July 1864.³⁴

³⁰ Villarroel, *José Rizal*, 210.

³¹ Villarroel, *José Rizal*, 233.

³² Arcilla, *José Rizal*, 548.

³³ Arcilla, "Jose Rizal," 545-548 ; Fidel Villarroel, O. P., "Apolinario Mabini - His Birth Day and Student Years," *Unitas* 37, no. 2 (June 1964): 163-195.

³⁴ Villarroel, *Apolinario Mabini*, 5.

Mabini's role in the revolution was that of a leader who imposed authority and gained prestige through his intellectual capacity to apply principles and exert influence in any situation. He was one of the most prolific contemporary writers of political articles, authoring most of the messages and memoranda of the first Philippine Republic. He challenged and confronted the whole Congress on issues of importance to the country single-handedly. He may be physically disabled, but in almost every aspect of his mind and actions, he was sublime.³⁵

Another famous UST alumnus was Marcelo H. del Pilar. Fr. Villarroel's *Marcelo H. del Pilar at the University of Santo Tomas* was a written account of one of UST's most famous heroes. Fr. Villarroel wrote this on the centennial death anniversary in 1996; it also forms part of a paper presented to the International Conference on the Centennial of the 1896 Philippine Revolution, held at the Manila Hotel. In this work, Villarroel disclosed previously unknown information about del Pilar's formative years, secondary education at his former high school, university life, and his later career as a lawyer, which later defined him as a national hero. Fr. Villarroel's findings showed that Marcelo H. del Pilar was a prolific writer and journalist who did not hesitate to oppose his former professors at his alma mater, as well as other friars who ruled the Philippines during the colonial era.³⁶

It is the central argument of Fr. Villarroel that del Pilar, as in the case of Rizal, after having strayed from the Catholic Church for some years, returned to the Catholic faith before their death. After arriving in Spain in 1888, Marcelo joined Freemasonry, an act that led to his being penalized for leaving the Catholic faith. Fr. Villarroel also noted an interesting aspect of del Pilar as a writer and journalist, as culled from *La Solidaridad*, the Propagandist's mouthpiece. Marcelo del Pilar's most forceful and destructive tirades were directed not against his friar professors nor against his alma mater, but against the friar parish priests, whom he considered the long arm of the colonial government and the main obstacle to the reforms sought by the Propaganda Movement.³⁷

Fr. Villarroel noted that Marcelo del Pilar considers himself a deist. Though a Mason, del Pilar clearly stated that it is not a religion. He upheld certain general principles of religiosity deemed essential to the only acceptable form of religion: Deism. Deists are akin to the fellow travelers of Masonic lodge members, who incorporate some religious elements into their

³⁵ Villarroel, *Apolinario Mabini*, 1.

³⁶ Fidel Villarroel, O. P., *Marcelo H. Del Pilar at the University of Santo Tomas*, (Manila: UST Publishing House, 1997), i.

³⁷ Villarroel, *Marcelo H. del Pilar*, 23.

Masonic initiations and secret rituals. Del Pilar said that Masonry is tolerant of all faiths; for him, the Church is an oppressive institution. Fr. Villarroel quoted a passage of the retraction by Del Pilar: "Masonry does not invade the Infinite; it does not determine the attributes of the divinity; it does not limit in heaven or on earth the sphere of action of the Great Architect of the Universe. All Christians of the world, except the Papists, accept Masonry."

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The return to the Catholic faith and subsequent retraction of del Pilar has a weakness in the field of historical evidence. Fr. Villarroel does not have any testimony coming from Del Pilar himself about his final conversion back to the Catholic faith or about his willingness to die as a Roman Catholic. He left no last will and testament, no letters, and no signed statement of retraction from Masonry or from religious errors in his writings. If the thought occurred to him to repent and ask forgiveness before God, it likely arose from his free will and clear conscience.³⁹ Therefore, Fr. Villarroel resorted to secondary sources regarding del Pilar's retraction and confirmed that he died as a Roman Catholic, based on the records and historical sources available to him.⁴⁰

For example, Fernando Canon, a former classmate of Rizal, appears to have witnessed Del Pilar's death, spoken to him, and received a final message from him. This information was obtained by Fr. Villarroel in *El Debate* in 1962, according to the news article, Canon said, "In his last moments, as testified by Fernando Canon, in whose arms Del Pilar breathed his last, this hero was thinking of his country and of his family, to the point of entrusting Canon to tell his daughter that he had confessed and received Holy Communion."⁴¹

Fr. Villarroel doubted the interview's credibility because it was obtained in an unorthodox manner, though he also noted that his statement matched the available sources.⁴² Another piece of evidence, according to Fr. Villarroel, is that del Pilar was buried at the Cementerio del Sud-Oeste in Barcelona. The cemetery was divided into four sections: Catholic, Free, Protestant, and for aborted babies. Del Pilar was interred on July 5, 1896, in a vaulted Hypogeum, No. 28, vía de San José, Group 2, at the Catholic cemetery lot. Mariano Ponce, a fellow propagandist, also corroborated the burial site of del Pilar.⁴³

³⁸ Villarroel, *Marcelo H. del Pilar*, 25.

³⁹ Villarroel, *Marcelo H. del Pilar*, 39.

⁴⁰ Villarroel, *Marcelo H. del Pilar*, 37.

⁴¹ Villarroel, *Marcelo H. del Pilar*, 45.

⁴² Villarroel, *Marcelo H. del Pilar*, 44.

⁴³ Villarroel, *Marcelo H. del Pilar*, 45.

Another biographical work by Fr. Villarroel is *Jose Burgos: University Student*, his doctoral dissertation at UST in 1971. It was monographed in time for the centenary of Fr. Burgos's execution in 1972. This dissertation and monograph discussed the scholastic life and achievements of Fr. Jose Burgos at Letran and UST. Alongside Fathers Mariano Gomez and Jacinto Zamora, Villarroel does not need to emphasize the high relevance that the death of three martyred priests has for Philippine history and their legacy in the country, as the events can stand as a divisive line between the Philippines before 1872 and the contemporary Philippines.⁴⁴

The significance of this work was not simply to present Fr. Burgos's academic achievements at Letran and UST, but also to serve as a rallying point for the general awakening of the national spirit that ignited the generation of Jose Rizal, who helped build the country on its march towards independence.⁴⁵

The reconstruction of Fr. Burgos' formative years presented significant challenges for Fr. Villarroel. UST archival records are formalistic, dry, and repetitive documents that, despite the security they provide, fail to offer insight into students' lives at UST. The problem then is not just producing grades or academic degrees, but bringing Fr. Burgos to life. To avoid concerns later, it should be made clear that, until further documents appear, Fr. Villarroel can only know him as a student, albeit only insufficiently, as the student he was.⁴⁶

Examining the documents found by Fr. Villarroel at the UST Archives, it is evident that Fr. Burgos had an interesting knowledge and mental discipline. This archival research of Fr. Villarroel concluded that Fr. Burgos was an outstanding student and an erudite, beloved priest. His degrees in Civil and Canon Law demonstrated that Fr. Burgos was a brilliant and dedicated student. It is lamentable, according to Fr. Arcilla's review of Fr. Villarroel's work, that Fr. Burgos was unable to further exercise his priestly duties and ministries due to his execution in 1872.⁴⁷

What is also commendable in this work by Fr. Villarroel is that he makes the scholastic records of Fr. Burgos available to the general public. Unlike

⁴⁴ Fidel Villarroel, O. P., *Father Jose Burgos: University Student*, (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 1971), x.

⁴⁵ Villarroel, *José Burgos*, x

⁴⁶ Villarroel, *José Burgos*, x.

⁴⁷ Jose S. Arcilla, "Villarroel: Father Jose Burgos," *Philippine Studies* 20, no. 2 (1972): 351, <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.2036>.

Rizal's portrayal of UST in his novel, *El Filibusterismo*, Fr. Villarroel presented UST in a way that shows UST nurturing its students to excel in their chosen courses. It also proves that native priests – *insulares*, *creole*, or even an *indio* – can be trained to be good clergy.⁴⁸ Fr. Arcilla concluded that, despite some perceived editing errors and the lack of an index of all sources used in this work, Fr. Villarroel produced an impressive job of making Fr. Burgos's achievements more accessible and worthy of being required reading for students.⁴⁹

c. Historian of the University of Santo Tomas

Having served as the University's chief archivist for a long time, it is no surprise that Fr. Villarroel will lead research and studies on the university's rich history. Fr. Villarroel published a two-volume history of UST in 2012, a year after the quadricentennial celebrations. The foundation for this work began in 1982 with his research, *The University of Santo Tomas – A Historical Outline*. This article focuses not only on the beginnings of UST but also on the growth of the UST Library. This is no surprise as Fr. Villarroel's interest is in librarianship and archival documents.

He started the article by presenting the last will of Archbishop Miguel de Benavides. In his will, he bequeathed 1,000 pesos and his personal library as a start for the foundation of a college he planned. When the Benavides will was finally executed, and it took eight years to build a campus located near the convent of Santo Domingo in Intramuros.⁵⁰ During the Galleon Trade era, galleons from Acapulco, Mexico, brought additional books from Europe to expand the college's library collection. In Spain, the Dominicans assigned a Procurator to recruit fellow Dominicans to be sent to the Philippines and to serve as professors at the college. These Dominicans also donated their book collections to the college's library later on.⁵¹ In the 18th century, following the suppression and expulsion of the Jesuits from the Spanish colonies, UST acquired the vast book collections from the closure of the Colegio de San Ignacio.⁵²

During the 19th century, with the opening of the Suez Canal, books arrived faster through this route, bringing new knowledge that compelled UST to expand its college courses into the practical sciences, such as medicine and

⁴⁸ Villarroel, *José Burgos*, 111.

⁴⁹ Villarroel, *José Burgos*, 121.

⁵⁰ Fidel Villarroel, "The University of Santo Tomas - A Historical Outline." *Philippinana Sacra* XVII, no. 2 (1982): 76, <https://doi.org/10.55997/ps1000xvii49a2>.

⁵¹ Villarroel, *The University of Santo Tomas*, 77.

⁵² Villarroel, *The University of Santo Tomas*, 79.

pharmacy.⁵³ In 1886, a confidential report by Frs. Norberto del Prado and Evaristo Fernández Arias expressed concern about the condition of the UST Library. They stated that:

“There are hardly any books on History, Literature, Philosophy, the exact and natural sciences, published in the present century, and we must have and know them so as not to speak from heart or from mere reference about matters of the most significant importance. We possess none of the famous authors of rationalist philosophy; we have only a few and rudimentary works on History, on Criteriology, on Literature; in the Faculty of Law, we lack many works, as we have heard from the lips of the professors themselves.

“If the annual amount of roughly one thousand Pesos allowed by our Constitutions were spent for this purpose, the Library could be provided with the necessary things, making use of good catalogues and requesting the professors to submit a list of the best works they know, etc., and caring to subscribe to scientific reviews of Europe and America, exchanging publications with other libraries and with Library centers, a practice so common today and so advantageous.”⁵⁴

However, Fr. Villarroel noted that while this report was accurate, it is highly exaggerated. The reason for this exaggeration was the funding needed to make new acquisitions for the library. By exaggerating their report, Santo Tomas can further modernize the Library and augment its existing collections. Fr. Zeferino Gonzales, the most prominent UST professor during this period, also acknowledged the need for newer books.⁵⁵ Because of these reports, the Dominican Provincial Chapter and the colonial government in Manila decided to expand the University’s library collection. This resulted in over 12,000 books related to medicine, surgery, and pharmacy, making them the most up-to-date sources in the Library.⁵⁶

Following American colonization, the Library expanded its acquisitions to include works written in English. The older Latin and Spanish books were now archived to make way for these acquisitions. In 1927, the UST main campus was relocated from Intramuros to Sampaloc; consequently, the Library was also moved to the new and larger Sampaloc campus.⁵⁷ This move saved many of the UST Library’s collection items that were destroyed during World War II, which also destroyed the Intramuros Campus.⁵⁸

To summarize, this article also discussed the vast collections of the UST Library, introducing the main sections of the Library and its most important

⁵³ Villarroel, *The University of Santo Tomas*, 80.

⁵⁴ Villarroel, *The University of Santo Tomas*, 81.

⁵⁵ Villarroel, *The University of Santo Tomas*, 81.

⁵⁶ Villarroel, *The University of Santo Tomas*, 82.

⁵⁷ Villarroel, *The University of Santo Tomas*, 83.

⁵⁸ Villarroel, *The University of Santo Tomas*, 86.

collections. This article showcased the rich history not only of UST but also of its Library, which is unparalleled in the Philippines.

As mentioned earlier, this article paved the way for his 2-volume historical work, *A History of the University of Santo Tomas: Four Centuries of Higher Education in the Philippines*. This work spans 400 years of UST's history, recounting its story from 1611 to 2011. According to the foreword of this work, no one is qualified to author it but Fr. Villarroel himself. Fr. Villarroel took pride in writing this work and found the experience to be the culmination of his lifetime of work as the archivist at UST. This was, accordingly, his magnum opus dedicated to UST as it celebrated its quadricentennial in 2011, and he intended this work to provide scholars and historians with a comprehensive history of UST and its place in Philippine History.⁵⁹

This book by Fr. Villarroel presented facts that shed new perspectives on UST. For example, Fr. Villarroel's historiography situated UST within the context of Philippine and world history, as well as the university's responses to the internal and external challenges of the times. He also included the significant contributors to UST's history – the administrations, faculties, staff, and students.⁶⁰ A testament to this contribution is the “Royal” title of Santo Tomas that she earned after four companies of students and professors fought alongside the British invasion of the Philippines during the Seven Years' War. In recognition of this show of loyalty, King Charles III granted the title in 1785.⁶¹

Another university milestone that Villarroel interpreted was the mandate UST earned in 1865 when Queen Isabella II granted UST the authority to supervise all secondary education in the colony, to award degrees and various academic titles, as well as to administer all examinations in higher education, similar to the current Department of Education (DepEd) and Commission on Higher Education (CHED).⁶² Contrary to many detractors and skeptics Villarroel highlighted that UST is constantly modernized its campus, its curriculum, and its facilities. In 1879, UST opened the Escuela Matronas y Parteras (School for Midwives), thus opening the way for women's education at UST. Fr. Villarroel also discussed the campus life experiences, particularly the admission of non-Spaniards to UST during the 1700s. Fr. Villarroel, ever the biographer, also once again discussed important UST alumni, such as

⁵⁹ Fidel Villarroel, O.P., *A History of the University of Santo Tomas: Four Centuries of Higher Education in the Philippines*, Vol. 1 (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2012), Foreword.

⁶⁰ Fidel Villarroel, *A History of the University of Santo Tomas: Four Centuries of Higher Education in the Philippines*, vol. 2. (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2012), 302.

⁶¹ Villarroel, *A History of the University of Santo Tomas Vol. 1*, 254.

⁶² Villarroel, *A History of the University of Santo Tomas Vol. 2*, 302.

Jose Burgos, Jose Rizal, Marcelo del Pilar, and Apolinario Mabini, as proud students who were shaped by the ideas instilled in UST. Also, he discussed the saints produced by UST, such as Vicente Liem de la Paz from Vietnam.

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In Volume 2 of this work, Fr. Villarroel devoted an entire chapter to UST's most illustrious alumnus, Jose Rizal. Fr. Villarroel not only defended but also corrected misconceptions about Rizal's mistreatment at UST. Like his earlier works on Rizal and his UST days, Fr. Villarroel reiterated that Rizal was never discriminated against but was highly regarded during his student years, with archival records to support these claims. Fr. Villarroel also noted other UST alumni who paved the way for Philippine independence and the establishment of the First Republic, with many Thomasians leading the new nation.⁶⁴

In the closing chapter of this work, Fr. Villarroel finally concluded his work with this statement:

"I regret to say, however, that as far as the University's written history is concerned, this is **THE END** of my narrative about this beloved university. The writing of his book has been my joyful obsession, and it has given me an unparalleled sense of fulfillment, aside from the satisfaction I derive from teaching Church History in the Ecclesiastical Faculties of the university and my duties as Archivist. Now at the dawning of my eightieth year, I have to realize how wise the Sapiential Books are in warning us that 'our life lasts for seventy years, eighty for those in good health. Ill health has become a daily visitor and companion. This notwithstanding, and although I succeeded in writing only up to the first half of the 4th century of the university, I am filled with gratitude for God's unending grace and loving guidance. And so it is with great joy that I say with the venerable Simeon of the New Testament, **Nunc dimittis servum tuum Domine. (Now, you are dismissing your servant, O Lord.)**"⁶⁵

Dr. de Viana cited Villarroel's poor and declining health as the reason he left Volume 2 with a 65-year gap until 2011. Fr. Villarroel was unable to write about the Filipinization of UST and the appointment of Fr. Leonardo Legaspi, the first Filipino Rector of UST. He could have discussed the 1960s counterculture, the First Quarter Storm, and UST's response during the Martial Law era. He could have written more vividly about the papal visits of Pope Paul VI in 1971 and Pope John Paul II in both 1981 and 1995, given UST's status as a Pontifical and Catholic University of the Philippines. De Viana noted that whoever continues the works begun by Fr. Villarroel has a significant responsibility.⁶⁶

⁶³ Villarroel, *A History of the University of Santo Tomas Vol. 1*, 254.

⁶⁴ Villarroel, *A History of the University of Santo Tomas Vol. 2*, 101.

⁶⁵ Villarroel, *A History of the University of Santo Tomas Vol. 2*, 446.

⁶⁶ de Viana. *A Dominican Pillar*, 137.

IV. Assessment of Fr. Villarroel's Life and Works

While Fr. Villarroel remained a Spaniard, he was very Filipino at heart, having served for a long time in the Philippines. The main criticism on Fr. Villarroel was not only that he was a Spaniard, but also that he was a Dominican clergyman. As both a Spaniard and a Religious priest, he was meant to be an apologist for his nation, his religious order, and the Roman Catholic Church itself regarding the perceived shortcomings of Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines. However, it turns out that he was not an apologist but a constructive and prudent historian. His archival and librarianship experiences provided access to sources unavailable to most historians, and these primary sources were allowed to speak for themselves. Fr. Villarroel's historiography brought perspectives that are unique to Philippine historiography – the history from “the other side”.⁶⁷

Villarroel struck a balance between nationalist and colonial views of Philippine history by utilizing extensive archival documents to support his historiography. His inputs created a broader perspective on Philippine history, something, according to de Viana, contrasted with the views of prominent nationalist historians such as Teodoro Agoncillo and Renato Constantino.⁶⁸

As UST's Archivist, he developed a system that made the UST Archives more accessible not only to those affiliated with UST but also to scholars interested in UST and its extensive archival collections. He was not shy about guiding historians and researchers, leading them to the archives and even translating Spanish and Latin documents into English.⁶⁹ Fr. Rolando dela Rosa, a former Rector of UST, said that Fr. Villarroel's passing is “a challenge to the young Filipino Dominicans to continue the mission of writing about history.”⁷⁰ Fr. Angel Aparicio, Fr. Villarroel's successor, proudly paid tribute to his predecessor, saying that “he chose to live and die in a place of his mission (the Philippines).”⁷¹

⁶⁷ de Viana, *A Dominican Pillar*, 138.

⁶⁸ de Viana, *A Dominican Pillar*, 138.

⁶⁹ Zulueta, *Fr. Fidel Villarroel, OP*.

⁷⁰ “Pre-Eminent Historian and Longtime Archivist Fr. Villarroel Laid to Rest,” University of Santo Tomas, last modified October 1, 2016, <https://www.ust.edu.ph/pre-eminent-historian-and-longtime-archivist-fr-villarroel-laid-to-rest/>.

⁷¹ University of Santo Tomas, “Pre-Eminent Historian and Longtime Archivist.”

Conclusion

Fr. Fidel Villarroel produced writings unmatched in their perspectives on the most critical milestones in Philippine history using primary sources from the archives. His biographical works on prominent Thomasian alumni and national heroes offered fresh insights into lesser-known aspects of these figures. As a priest and a Dominican, he brought a broader appreciation for the contributions—both positive and negative—of the Dominicans to the Philippines. He was also responsible for advancing the causes of sainthood for many of them, giving the Philippines its first Filipino saint, San Lorenzo Ruiz. Fr. Villarroel's example can be emulated not only by scholars, historians, and researchers, but also by his fellow clergy, who can be historians and clergy at the same time. While bias in writing history is unavoidable, Fr. Villarroel showed that the extensive use of primary sources can support an argument to dispute previously revered historical facts. *

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