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## Homonhon Island the Correct Site of the First Mass in the Philippines: A Book Review

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### ABSTRACT

This review intends to examine the merits of the book entitled, *Homonhon Island: The Correct Site of the First Mass in the Philippines* written by Msgr. Lope C. Robredillo, SThD. The author presents his arguments using a sociological-theological approach against proponents of Butuan, Limasawa and Bolinao Islands, who earlier were claimed to be the correct site of the first Mass, respectively. The book contains 4 chapters the first of which deals with a historical background of the current sites of the first Mass while the rest focus on the author's arguments backed up by logical reasoning and a revisit of Antonio Pigafetta's accounts. Content analysis revealed themes of diversity, regionalism, and dynamism characterizing the historian's representations of their narratives. The rich discussion and well-organized layout of interesting data that are rarely found in other theological books make this masterpiece a must-read for historians, scholars, teachers, and students probing into the controversy behind the true site of the first mass in the Philippines.

**Keywords:** Homonhon Island, Correct site, First mass, Historians, Book review, and Philippines.

### INTRODUCTION:

*Homonhon Island: The Correct Site of the First Mass in the Philippines* is a book written by Msgr. Lope C. Robredillo, SThD aimed not only to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the first Mass in the Philippines but to contribute to the solution if not to terminate the controversy over the location of the first mass in the Philippines which began in the early 1600s. In presenting his arguments, he uses a socio-logical-theological style in contrast to the geographical and topographical approach used by opposing proponents. His contention is supported by rare and diverse set of hand-down materials linked to the Magellan-Elcano circumnavigation of the world. Robredillo, (2021) traces back history to uncover fresh arguments aimed to debunk previous claims.

The book contains 4 chapters, the first of which deals with historiography and present-day claims of UniversePG | [www.universepg.com](http://www.universepg.com)

the first mass in the Philippines. It is to be noted that currently, there are four groups of historians vying for the title of their chosen locality as the *venue of the first mass in the Philippines*, particularly Butuan, Limasawa, Bolinao and Homonhon which the author is advocating for in his book.

In an attempt to promote balance in reporting, the author presents the arguments of the pro Butuan proponents comprising the following scholars: (Francisco Colin, 1663; Gaspar de San Agustin, 1565-1615; Juan de la Concepcion, 1788-1792; Jean Mallet, 1846; Jose Montero y Vidal, 1886; Juaquin Martinez de Zuñiga, 1893; Felipe Redondo, 1886; Fred Washington Atkinson, 1905; John Foreman, 1906). All these authors point to *Masao*, the old name of Butuan as the venue of the first Mass officiated by Fr. Pedro de Valderrama on April 8, 1521,

believed to have fallen on Easter Sunday. The book offers a detailed discourse on this argument.

Meanwhile, the pro-Limasawa proponents were led by a notable scholar, James Alexander Robertson (1906), who, after translating the Ambrosian Codex that was originally created by Andrea da Mosto (1894), declared *Mazaua* as Limasawa where the first mass was held opposing Colin's (1663) previous claim that Mazaua referred to Masao, Butuan's old name. In supporting Robertson's (1906) claim, other historians tried to establish that "*Magellan never visited Butuan*" (da Mosto, 1894; de Tavera, 1895:6; Colin & Pastells, 1903), implying clearly that the first mass could never have happened in Butuan, but in Limasawa. Pro Butuan historians argue that Colin's findings are not consistent because he simply relied on fragments from the summary of Pigafetta's original text written by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1536). They claim that the documents used by Colin are too weak to claim Butuan as the true venue of the first Mass. Due to the unrest among Butuan proponents who insisted on their claim, the Gancayno Commission was formed to evaluate the documents but their final verdict was in favor of Limasawa, not Butuan (Eno, 2022).

The third contender, the pro-Bolinao group, proposes that the earliest Mass was not officiated by Fr. Pedro de Valderrama but by an Italian Franciscan Missionary, Odoric Pordenone in early 1324 in Bolinao Bay in Pangasinan, 200 years before Magellan set foot on Philippines shores. This claim was unfortunately ignored by scholars, in particular, William Henry Scott, (1982) who argued that Odoric could not have landed in the Philippines because records show that he docked at the islands of *Dondiin* which is believed to be a part of Borneo and Hainan (Rodriguez, 1965).

Recently, a new set of contenders, the Homonhon proponents have asserted that a relevant portion of Pigafetta's account provides a background for claiming that the first Mass was held in Homonhon, formerly called *Humunu*, an uninhabited island that Magellan labeled as the *Watering Place of Good Signs* (Pigafetta, "*Primo viaggio*" 33, 103-107) because it is where they found gold. Using the writings of Francisco Albo (1519) in his *Derrotero*, a section from Pigafetta's account tells that Magellan landed in an island named *Zamal*, assumed to be *Samar* which Magellan labeled as *Archipelago de* UniversePG | [www.universepg.com](http://www.universepg.com)

*San Lazaro* due to the many surrounding islands nearby. Albo's claim was supported by notable historians such as (Percy Hill, 1934; Jose Vicente Braganza, 1965; Cantius Kobak, 2006; Tomas Gomez III, 2014; Danilo Madrid Gerona, 2016) who all advocated that the first Mass was held in Homonhon Island.

One point of interest is the author's use of investigative inquiry in probing into the reasons why Magellan called Samar and its adjacent Islands *Archipelago de San Lazaro* (Sobredillo, 2021) from which sprouted another controversy- a question of when exactly the first Mass was celebrated. Magellan's account as an answer to that question has always been interpreted in 2 ways: one is that the islands were discovered on the feast day of St Lazarus which in 1521 fell on March 16 as opposed to (Neil Tenefrancia's, 2021; Rolando Borrinaga's 2008) claim that it was on March 17, 1521, Lazarus's Sunday. The author asserts that before the Council of Trent in 1545-1567, the liturgy, rites, and calendar were characterized by diversity, as opposed to Tenefrancia's and Borrinaga's assertion that the church has always celebrated the feast of St. Lazarus on March 17. He likewise denies the claim of historical revisionists that Magellan landed in Calicoan Islet, Guiuan, Eastern Samar saying that there is no mention of Calicoan in the Magellan's 6 primary sources.

Chapter II highlights the author's grounds for upholding Homonhon as the correct site of the first Mass throwing off powerful arguments as follows: 1) based on primary and secondary sources the Mazaua mass was neither the first Mass nor the first Easter Mass; 2) the first proponent of Butuan neither witnessed nor joined Magellan's expedition; 3) the absence of an event (like the first mass in Homonhon Island) in the chronicles of Pigafetta does not mean it did not happen; 4) the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Feasts presupposes the holding of the mass; 5) Daily Masses and Communion and observance of religious observations in the fleet; 6) celebrating thanksgiving Mass after a perilous journey; 7) and the argument that the first thanksgiving Mass was not in Mazaua but in Homonhon (Sobredillo, 2021). In Chapter III, the author strengthens his claims by proposing that Magellan provided avenues to satisfy Sunday and Feast Day Mass obligation and reception of sacraments by establishing *Chaplaincies*

or the office of a priest attached to a private chapel. The *Parishes at Sea* referred to a group of people under the pastoral care of an assigned priest within the fleet which provides further clues about the masses being held regularly. In addition, he presents evidence describing Magellan as a pious, deeply religious, and devout Christian who certainly would hold a Thanksgiving Mass after landing safely. In fact, the entire chapter is dedicated to Magellan's religiosity and the many variables connected to his religious influences and advocacies.

However, the book fails to mention the Mozarabic Rite assumed to have been used in the first mass in Homonhon based on the premise that Fr. Valderrama was a Spanish secular priest from Seville, Spain. It can thus be construed that his orientation and formation and the way he celebrated the liturgy of the mass would be in Mozarabic Rite (cite source). This is an issue spotted that needs further probe by future researchers.

Chapter IV puts emphasis on the author's inquiry into Pigafetta's inability to include the holy masses assumed to have been celebrated on Homonhon Island. The author uses the works of Antonio Lombardo (in Pigafetta, 1493) who examined the specific intention of Pigafetta in writing the diary including his ordinary interactions in the social world. Lombardo opines that what Pigafetta wrote may have been based on his purpose, subsequently affecting how he wrote history. In fact, a historian selects which data to write from among large volumes of data (Fulda, 2005). With Lombardo's account that Pigafetta rarely recorded Masses held in the fleet, the author deduced that the record of the first Mass in Homonhon may have been deliberately omitted because it was something regarded as ordinary; something they normally do. However, I find this argument weak because, from a sociological point of view, humans commonly tend to document the *firsts* in their lives. Having sailed for a long time in a perilous journey and finally settling in an island, the crew must have offered a Thanksgiving Mass which historians would consider significant because it is the *first* Mass in the newly-conquered territory. The author continues to add that Pigafetta's possible interest in gold may have been the primary intention for writing the accounts. He inferred that reports about sources of wealth in the islands would interest the King of Spain more than a few pages about the

Mass. Arguably, a historian who embraces the empiricist dictum *-to see is to believe* would always find the essence in novelty.

#### CONCLUSION:

In sum, we find a highly engaging *opus* reflecting a potpourri of historical accounts where each team of proponents brings to the arena its own gem seeking to be heard, acknowledged, and recognized. The author utilizes dialectical inquiry aimed at verifying the truth by probing into ideas, arguments, and perspectives of other historians that compete with his own. What makes the book stand out is the presence of a platform where historians lay their cards on the table exposing their vulnerability to critiques and controversy. The author attempts to strike a balance in reporting; however, there is no guarantee that all the arguments of the opposing parties were reflected in the presentation. The narratological analysis will tell us that history can come from a "*quasi-readerly or selective narrativization*" (Fulda, 2005:1), implying that historians tend to select what contributes more to their purpose, leaving out some data which others may find useful.

The book highlights *diversity* among historians in judging and interpreting facts, persuasiveness, sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization of evidence. They battle over the landscape and uses of history and how they depict it to young people whom they all agree know little about the past (Coleman, 1985; Gibbon, 2018). It is likewise a challenge to have Pigafetta's account as the only primary source relative to the first Mass which through time underwent reconstruction and translation that may have distorted and mutilated some contents causing diversified interpretations. It is a good thing then that the book presents a well-organized chronology of events which makes it easier for scholars and students to conduct comparative analyses of the historians' varying perspectives on the *first Mass* phenomenon.

Another theme shows *regionalism* as a latent agendum in historians' advocacies. For instance, it is no coincidence that the author of this book comes from Eastern Samar where Homonhon is located while other Homomhon supporters come from other parts of Samar. Incidentally, this, too, is observable among Butuan and Limasawa native proponents. Having distinct linguistic, religious, and cultural

qualities, these regions typically experience tensions as they compete with each other in seeking recognition as the correct venue of the first Mass for local and global prominence and tourism boom. However, it is worth noting that the author of this books expressed his pure intention to rebrand their place from being a region scarred by violence and rebellion to becoming the true venue of the first Mass in the Philippines (Robredillo, 2021).

Finally, I ask the question: Is Homonhon the correct site of the first Mass in the Philippines? Based on the arguments presented, there is a possibility. However, it is only a matter of time before the next historian attempts to nullify this claim. Among the challenges historians probably often come to grips with are the elements of *impermanence* and *dynamism*. They can alter the viewpoints of historians. In fact, this book demonstrates how our fast-paced society has influenced historians' insights, giving us a hint that this long-debated issue is here to stay until a collective consensus is attained declaring the only one true site of the first Mass. Overall, this book carries powerful arguments that bring about feasible, but not conclusive, logical support for its claims. While reading, one feels like watching a live debate where scholars actively construct, refute and rebuild their case. For historians, scholars, teachers, and students who love this kind of ambiance, this masterpiece is highly recommended.

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#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:

I declare no conflict of interest that may have influenced the writing and publication of this manuscript.

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