

July 1945---Hawaii: #

Rest STOP

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It was a simple little church--wooden, white with the conventional plain small altar at the front of the barren nave. The few wooden kneeling benches, the small statue of the Virgin, a little confessional box tucked away humbly in a corner, even the round-arched windows with yellow opaque glass confirmed the picture of any small rural American church structure.

But it wasn't American--it was Catholic and being Catholic it just happened to be tucked away in a small native village in Hawaii. The church prefaced a short gravel street that was bounded by a few ramshackle stores--much of their delapidation obscured by coke advertisements---and by a half dozen or more clapboard hovels of the natives. Except for the Protestant church a block down the road by itself, it was the only semblance of cleanliness and dignity in the place.

I hadn't expected to find a Catholic church here--the village was small like most clusters of civilization in Hawaii--but a brisk walk into the little group of buildings from the officers rest home where I was staying overnight rewarded my hopes. The neat bulletin post in the spacious yard announced daily Mass at seven.

At 6:30 I was sitting on the bench in the Church yard patiently waiting for the doors to open, vexing at my watch which had lied to me, and aimlessly glancing down the little street that as yet showed no signs of life other than the raucous "good mornings" of a multitude of roosters.

I didn't see the "padre" first, he saw me--probably from one of the dusty windows of his little shack set to the side and back of the church. He glanced a little quizzically at me as he entered the back door of the church and announced he'd be ready in a jiffy. I stretched and went inside relieved that my wait had not been in vain. He asked me if I wanted to go to confession. I replied in the negative and he disappeared behind the little altar to don his vestments. At the time I wondered momentarily why he had taken the pains to assure me Mass would be said---he seemed eager to have me. When Mass began and I was the only one in church I knew why. It began that way and ended that way---just the padre and me, and I served my first Mass in five years.

Afterwards I stepped outside and he seemed pleased that I had served for him and apparently was eager for speech. So was I--especially about this little village, the church, himself. A small man the "padre" at first seemed part of a plain pattern that included the simple church, the dusty village, the hot, motionless countryside,----quiet, humble, not self-confident but with a deep faith in the inevitability of justice and earth. He was all of this I learned--except part of the pattern. Under the merciless prodding of my inquisitive tongue he began talking freely and I just as freely

kept interjecting new areas of discussion racing against our scheduled departure set an hour hence.

He wasn't a simple, naive country priest--this little American of Hawaiian or Philippino extraction. And his tale wasn't the glowing and warm account of the rewards of devotion to duty such as many an American country priest can bask in. Rather it was a tale of disappointing texture----one I could only hope would have a happy ending sometime. No disillusionment here about missionary work--or about people. My bundle of conjectures that he was a native boy glowing with a strong, simple, blind faith, completely satisfied ~~was~~ was pricked suddenly when he mentioned casually that after being ordained a Maryknoll priest in the United States he had served nine years in the Orient, three of them as a Jap prisoner.

In a business-like way this little priest told me how in May of 1941, seven months before Pearl Harbor, he had been arrested by the Japanese and grilled as a spy when he inadvertently walked into a Jap arsenal area. He escaped the "Water treatment" torture, he said, which by implication left me with the feeling he had undergone other "persuasive" measures in an attempt to extract non-existent information from him. From a Tokyo prison window he witnessed Doolittle's raid and shared the great joy and excitement of all the prisoners. Thereafter, he said, the Jap guards lightened their ill-treatment of the internees because their superman complex had been partially deflated. It was on the basis of this and his past experience with the Japs in China that he believed the Nipponese psychology might swing towards sudden peace once our raids convinced them that they are beatable. In view of latter events his conjectures now seem almost prophetic. Among the first to be repatriated from Japan his judgement on the country was firm;;;the island could be blown into the sea for all of him.

His prisoners numbered about 600 and he acted on the side as chaplain to the boys in the nearby amphibious training center. The parish was comparatively new--within several years--and it was apparent that he had hard sledding in more ways than one. His tale is a typical one that can characterize any small parish in any backward country---really a list of things that must be plodded through before the parish can really operate effectively.

First, with the American camp near at hand he had to get the military restriction off his village by cleaning out a few of the local "five and ten cent" girls, as he termed them. He sighed just a little when he spoke of one of his failures---the village problem down the road a bit with her ten or twelve children of mysterious heritage and hues. Then there was the American USO girl who far from Iowa was lonely and had married outside the faith and was now unhappy; and her irrate sergeant

husband who accused the "padre" of scheming against him ; of the many mixed marriages and the scrambled racial and religious lines that so muddled his attempts to whip out an orderly coterie of parishoners; the lacadaisical attitude of so many of his "children"--he was loath to admit this but the empty church had already done it for him; the attempts to break foul language habits among the American soldiers in order to protect his mixed flock of little ones; of the increasing pressure on the Church in Hawaii by the "big five", island industrialists of English extraction who run the island, pay the wages, and want church differences "toned down".

These were his problems. He looked weary--he had been out late the previous evening on a case. I could see that under his robe he wore an ancient pair of stripped brown pants and that he hadn't had time to take off his pajamas top before hurriedly slipping his robe on over it. He had a shadow of whiskers clouding his cheeks. But beneath his slightly wilted appearance I could see determination and doggedness and matter-of-factness ----spiritual qualities that would keep him plugging away and inching up a bit at a time on his problems. And as I shook hands with him before hurrying off I wondered whether he would be going back to an even more apparently miserable job in China come V-day for us. I wanted to tell him that he was doing a great job because he was doing a hard job that would probably never be known or appreciated. I wanted to console him with the thought that his reward would be measured by his efforts, not by his success. But somehow nothing came out--probably because I knew he wasn't in particular need of encouragement.

He waved goodbye as I opened the little gate in the white pickett fence of the churchyard and turned back towards the house his forehead already seamed by his thoughts of the little visits he had to make that day and the little problems he just had to master.