The Beatás of 17th-Century Manila

Séptimocento in the flesh was the first Philippine beatá, the remarkable woman from Pasig who came to be known in Manila as the Hermana Sebastiana de Santa María. She was poor, she was an india, she was unlettered; but her appearance heralded a mystical movement that was to run a hundred years and to leave an enduring legacy: the first natíve religious communities.

Born in Pasig, around 1652—or barely nine decades after the Conversion—Sebastiana Salcedo showed how fast and how deeply the Faith had rooted in Philippine earth, for this unschooled country girl already yearned beyond ritual and catechism towards the unsafe heights of spiritual experience. The yearning was spontaneous. She was only a child when she vowed her virginity to God and began a life-long fast that was to become more and more severe with age. As if by instinct, when a young girl, she learned for herself the proper training for the mystical athlete: solitude, the penitential discipline, contemplation.

"All these decisions," notes her friar chronicler in awe, "she put into practice when still a very young girl, even before she had a spiritual director or any notion about spiritual direction." He could only conclude that "the Holy Spirit was leading her, directing all her actions, and lifting her desires towards great things."

When she came to Manila she became a sort of tertiary of the Dominicans, who had not yet organized an order for laymen in the Philippines. It was pioneers in the spiritual life like the Hermana Sebastiana who were to prompt the friars to set up Third Orders here, so that lay folk, too, could aspire, without entering the cloister, to spiritual perfection. Anyway, there was no cloister that the young Sebastiana could have entered. The only cloister for women in mid-17th century Manila was the Monasterio de Sta. Clara, which did not admit native
girls. In this ban was more prudence than discrimination. The missionaries had carried over from the Americas the caution that peoples only a generation or two away from paganism might not be ready for the stern disciplines of the religious life. You must master arithmetic before you can advance to calculus—though this rule indeed cannot apply to the child mathematical genius. And the evidence is that our childhood in the Faith produced quite a number of spiritual prodigies, of whom the Hermana Sebastiana was the first known example.

There's almost nothing on record of her life as a person; the record is wholly of her growth in the spiritual life, as if she had, while still in the flesh, become pure spirit. Her years in Manila coincide with the most terrible phase of spiritual development, the phase which mystics describe as “aridity.” After the happy dedication of girlhood came this period of her maturity when, though she prayed as zealously, she felt there was no one to listen because God had abandoned her. The country girl from Pasis was experiencing what St. John of the Cross had called “the dark night of the soul.” St. John was a poet; the Hermana Sebastiana was unlettered; but that one and the other should have reported a similar experience attests to its authenticity.

Coupled with this spiritual bereavement was physical suffering, possibly brought on by her penitential disciplines: the hairshirt and the whip. She burned with constant fevers, often felt such a constriction in the breast that she could hardly breathe and seemed to die every time it happened.

“But if her physical dolours were great,” says her chronicler, “her spiritual afflictions were far crueler, her spiritual aridities full of anguish. Her lack of any consolation, the frightful spiritual darkness, the apparent desertion of her Beloved—in a word, the terrible trials with which the jealous Spouse of Virgins willed to purify the faith of the elect he would raise to the most sublime perfection.”

But the Hermana Sebastiana did not see it that way. She believed that such great spiritual and corporal pain was being inflicted on her because she was the gravest of sinners. And she shuddered away from the popular veneration she aroused. She had begged God to discharge on her the punishment for all the sins committed in her country; and whenever disaster visited the land she saw herself as responsible, because she had not proved worthy enough as vicarious victim.

Once, during a plague in the city, the plague-stricken among whom she moved called out to her:

“Hermana Sebastiana, pray for us that we may soon be freed from this scourge of the wrath of God.”

But she said to them:

“Pray for me rather, who am the cause of this scourge.”

In this plague, as in various other pestilences, she manifested what seemed to be a power of healing, until she came to be regarded as a thaumaturgist. She already had fame as a holy woman, a beata, which means blessed. The rich folk of Manila gave her money to distribute among the needy. She became a familiar figure in jails and hospitals, bringing food and clothing, solace and hope.

Towards the end of her life she emerged at last from the dark night of the soul and approached the stage of beatitude. Her long hours of contemplation in the dead of night often lifted her in transport to “the most intimate union” with her God and the rapture endowed her with a foreknowledge of events that happened exactly as they were revealed to her.” Because “her prophecies were fulfilled in all the minute details,” she was revered as a clairvoyant and both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities thought it no shame to seek the counsel of this humble india.

During the last 15 years of her life, she could hardly eat and subsisted almost wholly on the bread of holy communion. This was a time when daily communion was not customary. The very devout communicated on Sundays and great feasts but the mass of the faithful were supposed to receive communion only once a year, during Easter. It was therefore a very special privilege that was granted to the Hermana Sebastiana when she was allowed to receive holy communion every day. It was often her only food; whenever she failed to receive it her body weakened to the point of death. But communion visibly invigorated her body. The doctors who examined her were at a loss to explain how she could survive on so little food. The priests when they gave her communion were equally astonished: from her mouth issued a heat so great the heart in her breast might have been either furnace or volcano, ardent with flame.

She died on March 29, 1692, at the age of 40 and her death shook the city. Her body remained so soft and supple, so free from all look or smell of corruption, it seemed to be still alive. She lay in state at the Dominicans and to her funeral, celebrated with a pomp unusual for so humble a citizen, came noble and plebeian, Spaniard and indio, the rich and the poor, to pay homage to a woman regarded, even when alive, as a saint.

Cries from her 17th-century friar chronicler:

“Before God there is no difference in race nor discrimination of pedigree, because he it is who made both the great and the
small and who has equal care for both. Though this truth be clear in Scripture, there are those presumptuous enough to declare and assert that the indio, because of his lowliness and the simplicity of his thought and speech, is incapable of heroic virtue and the heights of contemplation; but this they say because they use the power of nature for measure and not the power of divine grace, which can raise up sons of Abraham from stones and lift the poor from the dung to the highest grandeur. To manifest this power of divine grace, God had wrought great things through his handmaiden Sebastiana, who, if her spiritual directors had only published her life and virtues, would have been "of great credit to the world and even a glory to the Church of God," for even the little recorded of her in these annals of the year 1692 "indicated such spiritual perfection that her virtue could compete with that of the saints of the first magnitude."

Inexplicably, no move was made for the beatification, at least, of the Hermana Sebastiana de Santa Maria, but she may have been canonized in another form, for one suspects that the Hermana, who seems to have lived as a recluse or anchorite in Pasig before coming to Manila, became associated in the folk mind with the Doña Jerónima legend, itself an incrustation on older myths about a cave goddess of the Pasig.

What the career of the Hermana most signals is how, in less than a century after its conversion, the Philippines had become so part of the body of Christendom that a cultural movement in Europe could have a counterpart here, allied but original to the land, and with almost no time lag. They didn't know it, but the native beati of this period were part of the mystical movement among lay folk that swept Europe during the 17th century and produced in England the metaphysical school of poetry headed by Donne, Vaughan and Crashaw. If, say, the Hermana Sebastiana had only had enough literary skill, like Teresa de Avila, to write of her troubled pilgrimage, it would be instantly apparent that the metaphysicians of 17th-century Europe had contemporaries in this extreme frontier of Christendom. But since most of our beati were simple unlettered folk, they left no records of their experiences, which, anyway, would have been ineffable; and what notions of them appear in friar chronicles tantalize by being so brief, albeit so suggestive. As a result, these native pioneers of the spirit have gone unnoticed, or where remembered (as in the beatitudes they founded) are seen in isolation, apart from one another, when actually they were interrelated, shared a common history, and together formed a movement, an authentic mystical movement, that was a major event in our culture. The late-19th century manangs and terciarias on whom Rizal lavished his scorn were a shadow of the great movement that in its prime produced intrepid God-seekers who battled viceroy and archbishop, insisted on the autonomy of conscience, daily confronted the prejudices of their times, and were the first to exercise the right of suffrage in the Philippines.

Though the movement became concentrated in Manila, its special climate was abroad in the land. In 1675, a Portuguese merchant in Cavite was seized by the spirit, gave away all his goods to the poor, embarked in a rowboat and sailed across the bay until he came to the Bataan town of Orion, where he built himself a hut in the wilderness and lived an eremite there, on fasting and rapture, until the day he was found dead, upright on his knees, arms crossed over his breast, the dead face still rapt in prayer. In the Pangasinan town of Binalatongan (now San Carlos) a baby girl left to die on a mountain was found by a man who took her home, raised her up and then married her. Widowed, she made a vow of continence, dedicated herself to the service of God, wore a hairshirt, slept on a cross, reached the heights of contemplation, at one time heard, for the space of an hour, "suave heavenly music that God had sent for her solace." She died in 1675, in the odor of sanctity, famed throughout Pangasinan as the Beata María Guinita. In Bataan, during the last half of the 17th century, two native girls, Cecilia Tangol and Melchora la Beata, likewise testified to the spirit of their age by aspiring with unschooled hearts to heroic virtue, punishing the body to release the spirit, and achieving such a perfection of charity that, although indias, they were granted the permit for frequent communion. They represent, in the history of Philippine mysticism, the age of the eremite, which was to culminate with the Hermana Sebastiana. But when the Hermana went to Manila she had gone beyond the stage of the solitary and was already in search of a mystical community. It was as if the Philippines were, within a century, going through all the developments of Christian piety, from the missionary movement of apostolic times, to the age of the hermits in the desert, to the time of the foundation of monastic life, when groups of the God-haunted sought to live together in the manner of the primitive Christian communities.

In Manila, the Hermana Sebastiana had come upon a number of people afflicted like herself with anguish of the marrow. The fact of mortality had come to most of them not as intimations but as a monstrous shock which, in the wink of an eye, in typical 17th-century manner, exposed as illusion
Lord wanted it so, to hold me bound to his will; and not to do mine in punishing my body, but his will in suffering what he sent me."

At about this time, another young widow, Francisca Fuentes, had also undergone a conversion, was also living as a recluse in the midst of the merry town. A Manileña, born in 1651, she had married young, was widowed young, whereupon she had turned her back on the vanities of the world, living in such retirement her house seemed not a secular dwelling but a hermitage. She thought of joining the Poor Clares in their cloister but hesitated for a long time.

Then she had a dream in which St. Francis and St. Dominic appeared to her. Both seemed to be caressing her, both seemed to be beckoning to her. On an impulse she prostrated herself before St. Dominic, offering herself as his daughter, and with that the vision vanished. In 1682 she asked for and was permitted the habit of a Dominican tertiary and she devoted herself to work among the poor and, the sick, especially those at the hospital of San Juan de Dios, in which enterprise she was joined by many prominent ladies of the city.

It may have been at this time that she met the Hermana Sebastiana de Santa María and that the two of them began to associate with their fellow recluse, Antonia Ezguerra. The meeting of these three marked the native beginning of the religious life in community, for the three beatas were presently turning the house of Antonia Ezguerra into a "little beateria."

It was a coming together of the Philippine races. Antonia Ezguerra was a creole, Francisca Fuentes probably a mestiza, the Hermana Sebastiana an India; and they were later joined by another older widow who had long been living as a recluse, Juana de la Trinidad. Another member of this primitive community was a native woman named Lorenza, who seems to have been Antonia’s maid servant but who was raised to the status of hermana. When Antonia lay dying she asked that the habit of tertiary be granted to Lorenza, "who has been serving me for 12 years."

Two other associates of the community, Doña Luisa de Losada and Doña Mariana de Salcedo, were Spanish and both belonged to "the first nobility of the land." The former, who, on becoming a tertiary, took the name of Luisa de la Asunción, was "of noble blood and nobler of virtue." Much younger was Mariana de Salcedo, who is described as the "companion of the Madre Sebastiana" and as being "very like her in perfection, in frequent approach to the sacraments, and in the exercise of prayer and mortification." What’s so bemusing here is that a
Spanish girl of noble blood is being compared to an india. Mariana was “a maiden young in years but very mature in mentality and behavior... an angel in life.” She was a faithful compañera indeed of the Hermana Sebastiana; the Hermana died in 1692 and the very next year the young Mariana followed her. Together they had learned to transcend race and rank in Antonia Egguerra’s “little beaterio,” which had served as antechamber to Sion.

In the Egguerra house, by dint of trial and error, the beatas also learned for themselves the proper procedures for a communal life. It was, one might say, an experiment in a new kind of convent, intermediate between nunnery and the lay Third Orders, for in one the members were cloistered and in the other the members lived in the world, whereas the beaterio our pioneers of the spirit were developing may be described as an informal association of lay tertiaries living in community but still in the world. The idea appears quite modern; it was certainly novel enough in 17th-century Manila to cause, like every innovation, a lot of trouble, though the early beatas may not have realized how adventurous they were. The small community in the Egguerra house indeed thought merely to emulate the strict observance of a formal nunnery. The members went to church as a group, rose in the night to sing in chorus the matins of the Virgin, fasted as one, experimented together in the forms of mental prayer.

Their great desire was to be recognized as a formal community and to found a house where women not content with ordinary devotion could test their competence for heroic sanctity. To this end they addressed petition after petition to the Dominican authorities and to each new governor and archbishop but were always impatiently rebuffed. An endowment for a nunnery had been willed to the Dominicans as early as 1633 but no nunnery was built because of the vigorous opposition of the Poor Clares, who opined that one cloister for women sufficed for the city of Manila. (The undercurrent here was the traditional rivalry between the Franciscans, to whose order the Poor Clares belonged, and the Dominicans.) Forbidden by royal decree to found a convent of cloistered nuns, the Dominicans could have used the endowment to found a convent for beatas instead, but may have doubted the ability of native tertiaries to administer such a foundation.

Once, angrily told by her spiritual director to stop pleading for such a foundation because it was “most impertinent,” Antonia Egguerra cried out: “Father, the beaterio will be founded and your reverence shall see it!” And keeping only the house she lived in, where she began to gather young girls to educate in the communal religious life, and some stores she owned in the Parian, she sold the rest of her property, to amass funds for the establishment of a beaterio in her house. But the Hermana Sebastiana said to her: “Sister Antonia, the beaterio will not be established here, but there near the convent of Santo Domingo. Neither you nor I will see it.” And the Hermana predicted when, where and how the beaterio would be founded, and even the street and the address on the street where it would stand — prophecies which, according to chronicle, “were fulfilled to the last detail.”

The two beatas indeed never saw their great dream realized. They died only two years apart from each other, Antonia Egguerra in 1694. Before she died, she summoned her spiritual director, who had now become the father provincial of the Dominicans, and asked him to give the first habits of the beaterio to the Hermana Lorenzo and the Hermana Juana de la Trinidad. The father provincial protested that, with Antonia gone, the beatas in her house would have no one to direct them nor any means of support. Replied the dying Antonia Egguerra, who had everything already arranged: “Father Provincial, after I die, Sister Francisca will take over my house; and with the little I have, which I shall leave to her, the beaterio can be founded.”

When the father provincial promised to fulfill the dying woman’s wish, the Dominicans had, after years of resistance, yielded to the power of feminine persistence, which they had underestimated.

So, it was left for Francisca Fuentes, henceforth to be known as Mother Francisca del Espiritu Santo, to act as the foundress of the Beaterio de Santa Catalina, the first Philippine religious community. When the beaterio was established on July 26, 1696, the native mystical movement had achieved Sion, had at last built a local habitation for the Communion of Saints.

Contrary to popular idea, the religious life is not hebetude; and the early history of the first Philippine beaterio was as turbulent as, say, the career of St. Teresa of Avila, who likewise had to battle both Church and State, not to mention public opinion, which she never feared to scandalize.

After the death of the Hermana Antonia, her two protégés, Lorenzo and Juana, were dressed with the habit. So, Mother Francisca del Espiritu Santo had two beatas under her direction when the license for the establishment in Manila of a beaterio for Dominican tertiaries was issued by the father general of the order. The community of three moved to a house nearer the
church of Santo Domingo but stayed there only a short time because the house was sold. The infant community subsisted on the rents from the stores that the Hermana Antonia owned in the Parian.

Among the beaterio's first applicants was a Japanese mestiza who took the name Jacinta de la Encarnación. A year after her admission she caught a chill and died—"and like a mystical flower of this new garden of the Church she was transplanted to the heavenly paradise for the joy and glory of the Divine Spouse." Another early applicant was a captain's daughter, Rosa Prieto, who had sought refuge in the beaterio because her father would force her into a marriage not of her liking. The enraged father disowned her, swearing she would never see him again, but in less than a month he was back at the beaterio begging to see her, and weeping with happiness to find the girl already clothed as a beata.

When the community had grown large enough it was formally inaugurated as a beaterio, on July 26, 1696, and placed under the advocacy of St. Catherine of Siena, becoming known thenceforth as the Beaterio de Sta. Catalina. The beatas formally received the habit and made simple vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. Mother Francisca was elected prioress and the number of choir sisters was fixed at 15, in honor of the mysteries of the Rosary. A convent for them was started by the order on a lot between Letrán and Sta. Domingo; the street would come to be known as Beaterio.

The building of the convent got the beatas into trouble. The governor-general, Don Fausto Cruzat, happened to pass the construction one day and was vexed that he had not been told about it. "With what license," cried he, "do you make this construction without my knowledge? In the Indies, no college, church or convent may be built without the license of our lord the king." Work on the convent was stopped while a license was applied for. The license took so long to arrive that, in defiance of the governor, construction was resumed, and the beaterio was completed without the governor's consent. The beatas moved in, and this convent of theirs in Intramuros was to be the mother house of their company until the Pacific war.

Hardly had their skirmish with the governor ended when the beatas found themselves at war with Archbishop Camacho of Manila. The root of the trouble was the claim of the friar orders to independence from episcopal jurisdiction. Since the beaterio was not a regular religious order, the archbishop felt that it was he, and not the Dominicans, who should have authority over it. The beatas, claiming autonomy, refused to let the archbishop meddle in their affairs, especially since they knew he was doing it just to spite the Dominicans; but their cause was not helped by a rebellion in their house. Several beatas began to complain about Mother Francisca's strictness and one of the malcontents abandoned the beaterio and placed herself under the protection of the archbishop. When the beatas persisted in refusing to recognize his authority the archbishop excommunicated the entire community and placed the beaterio under interdict. Off-limits signs were posted on its doors and walls, as on a plague-stricken house, and for several days the beatas could not go forth even to hear mass. It was a great scandal in the city that supposedly holy women should be defying the lord bishop of Manila.

Since it was difficult to appeal directly to Rome, the beatas appealed instead to the Pope's representative in the islands, who was then the bishop of Camarines. This was around 1699—and the brouhaha turned into a farce. The bishop of Camarines decided that the beaterio shared in the privileges and exemptions granted to regular religious orders and he excommunicated Archbishop Camacho for opposing the decision. In retaliation, the archbishop excommunicated the Pope's representative!

To prevent further scandal, the Dominicans decided to dissolve the beaterio. The beatas were offered asylum at the college of Sta. Potenciana by the new governor general, Don Domingo Zabalburú. On the day they left Sta. Catalina, the beatas gathered in their oratory, were divested of the habit and dispensed from their vows. Weeping, they knelt down one by one, took leave of their short-lived shelter, then walked out through the door. It was the year 1704 and they had been in Sta. Catalina about half a dozen stormy years.

Out on the street waited the coaches of the governor, the curtains closed. The beatas boarded the coaches and were taken to Sta. Potenciana, where waited the governor himself, hatless and deeply moved. With all courtesy, he escorted the beatas, now garbed in lay dress, across the courtyard and into the halls of Sta. Potenciana. Zabalburú may have felt guilty; the archbishop was so fierce against all things Dominican because one Dominican friar had sided with the governor in an argument with the archbishop. The poor beatas were victims of male politics; but, then, their patroness, St. Catherine of Siena, had thought it neither unwomanly nor unsaintly to engage in politics. The archbishop was shocked to hear that the beatas had abandoned their embattled house.

The two years they spent in Sta. Potenciana has gone down in the history of their beaterio as the "Babylonian Captivity."
During this "captivity," a number of the beatas grew lukewarm of faith and returned to the world, but Mother Francisca and a hard core of the community never wavered in the belief that they would someday return to Sta. Catalina. Said one beata whom her family was urging to come home: "If they take me out of here, it will be either to the grave or back to the beaterio."

By 1706 the archbishop had mellowed and he let it be known that the beatas could return to Sta. Catalina if they observed closure. He was satisfied when a few grilles were put up in the beaterio's oratory and visiting room. The beatas chose to humor this male cynicism, which held women to be so frail of nature that, if they will not stay at home under the authority of father or husband, then they must be strictly cloistered behind bars in a convent, to keep them from straying.

Says a modern-day daughter of Mother Francisca:

"Canon law and canonists tried all means to enclose women, putting them down in the last category of human beings. The Church now has a different view of women, more rational and humane. Woman, being flesh and blood like man, is of the same nature as he, and equal to him, though there be certain differences in their nature. The old notion had women inferior to men. That was what they believed in the time of the Foundress: so, the Sisters were enclosed in Sta Potenciana."

In other words, the beatas of Sta. Catalina had waged a feminist battle for equal rights, especially the right of women to be deemed as responsible as any man.

On the day they returned to their beaterio, the governor again sent his coaches, to take the beatas back to their Sion. When they got there, they assembled in the oratory, were reinvested with the habit, and renewed their vows. Those who returned with Mother Francisca were ten choir sisters, six lay sisters, and one novice. Adding to their joy was the arrival of the long-awaited charter of the king, authorizing the establishment of the beaterio.

Mother Francisca lived only five years more after the return from the "Babylonian Captivity," but long enough to build a chapel for the Sacrament in her beloved house. She died, after a long illness, on August 24, 1711, at the age of 64. So much had happened since the day when the young widow had dreamt that St. Francis and St. Dominic were beckoning to her and that she had chosen to fling herself at the feet of St. Dominic. She passed away when the bells of Sto. Domingo were ringing for early mass and was buried that same afternoon in the chapel of Letran, on the Gospel steps of the altar.

The passing of the triad — Sebastiana, Antonia, Francisca — that had launched the beata movement did not mean its decline. Even as the Mother Francisca lay dying, two young Bulakeñas, both true daughters of the 17th century, were carrying over into the 1700s the restless spirit of their age. Both were adventurers; both had to fight the world's mockery; and both, though visionaries, were to prove as hardheaded and headstrong as the three primal heroines of this mystical movement.

The pair to which belongs the next phase of the movement were sisters, born Talampás, but known in religion as Sor Dionisia de Santa Maria and Sor Cecilia Rosa de Jesus. They were daughters of a poor couple of Calumpit — Andres Talampás and Isabel Constancia — who brought them up so devoutly the two girls were from childhood famed for Christian virtue.

When they came of age, both sisters decided to consecrate themselves to God and to live a contemplative life within the town of Calumpit. When, however, they consulted the Augustinian missionary in town he dismissed their project as mere girlish whim and apparently thought it audacious of two native girls not only to aspire to the contemplative life but to request the habit of beata as tertiaries of the Augustinian Order. Not all their subsequent pleading could make him change his mind.

In 1719, having despaired of convincing the missionary that they were serious of intent, the sisters Talampás left Calumpit and went to seek their spiritual fortune in Manila. This, again, was audacity: two young unmarried women abandoning home and family and going off by themselves to lead their own lives in the wicked city.

On reaching Manila they went straight to the Recolletos' church of San Sebastian, prostrated themselves before the shrine of Our Lady of Carmel and dedicated themselves for ever to the service of the Virgin. They found a small house near the church, in what was then known as barrio Calumpang (now Bilibid Viejo) and were soon arousing wonder as mystical solitary, never emerging from seclusion save to repair to San Sebastian, for mass or vespers, or for voluntary service in cleaning the church. Apparently they supported themselves as seamstresses.

Six years later, their girlhood dream was fulfilled. They had asked the Recolletos to be granted the habit and, on July 25, 1725, the sisters Talampás — Dionisia and Cecilia Rosa — were clothed with the habit of mantelatas, or barefoot tertiaries of St. Augustine, possibly the first native girls to win that privilege.
It is clear that Dionisia and Cecilia Rosa had no intention of founding a community. As beatas, they continued to live as solitaries in their small house and might have stayed thus all their lives but for a benefaction of the Recollets, who offered the sisters a small garden within the churchyard of San Sebastian. In this garden a nipa house was built for them, where they moved, earning their keep by sewing Carmel scapulars and altar cloths.

Their example attracted other devout women, who also pleaded to be granted the habit and to share the sisters' retreat. Since the house was small, only four more beatas could be admitted. The impatience of the other applicants led to so much trouble that the Recollets, in disgust, decided to take back their garden. The beatas in the nipa house were ordered to go off the habit and go back to their homes. Then the Recollets had the nipa house torn down.

The sisters Talampás returned to their small house in barrio Calumpang and resumed their life as solitaries as though nothing had happened.

Said they to the prior of San Sebastian, who was so bitterly against the beaterio and would not hear of restoring the habit to them:

"Father, if now you disdain and dismiss us, be sure that later you will receive us with affection, and not only us but other maidens whom the Virgin will bring to keep us company."

And to their father confessor they said:

"It's certain that God and the Holy Virgin wish to test and purify us in the crucible of suffering, but so firm of intent are we that every day we feel more courage to suffer."

Their stubbornness eventually wore down even their worst foe, the prior, transforming him into their advocate, and in 1728, on July 16, the feast of Our Lady of Carmel, and before the shrine of the Virgin in San Sebastian, the sisters Telampás, after swearing to live according to the Rule of St. Augustine and the constitutions of the Recollet tertiaries, again received, this time for good, the habit of manantias, taking the names of Dionisia de Santa María and Cecilia Rosa de Jesús.

A larger house had been built for them in the garden of San Sebastian and in the new convent, henceforth to be known as the Beaterio de San Sebastian, they were, as they had predicted, joined by other maidens until, around 1732, the beatas formed a community of 13. For the beatas' sewing and embroidery work, the beaterio was given 25 pesos a month and 100 cavan of palay a year by the Recollets of San Sebastian, plus another 25 pesos a month and 200 cavan of palay from the Recollets of the San Nicolás Convent in Intramuros, the mother house of the Philippine Recollets. Both stipend and ration were increased as the beaterio grew.

Moreover, the two indias from Bulacan found benefactors among the rich. One of the first to join them in the retreat where they would live on the heights of contention and ecstasy, like the prophets on Mount Carmel, was a creole lady, Doña Margarita de Miranda, from the Pampanga town of Arayat. The widow of a nobleman, Don Cristóbal de Córdoba, the childless Doña Margarita, when she entered the beaterio, took over its financial management, assigned to it the income from a house she owned in Intramuros, would leave it half of her estate when she died. She became known as "La Beata," was venerated as co-foundress, with the sisters Talampás, of the Beaterio de San Sebastian, which she had to defend from calumni.

For no sooner had this native Carmel been founded than a group in the city publicly denounced it. The charges were: that some girls in the beaterio were there without their parents' consent; that the girls were forced to make a vow of chastity against their will; that the beatas lived in community against the law and to the prejudice of the State, which had to support them; and that "all this scandalized the city of Manila, which could not view, without indignation, the privations and miseries suffered in the beaterio by girls from prominent families."

The denunciations were eventually proved both base and baseless; but having escaped the fury of the people, the beatas then had to face the fury of the Church. The See of Manila questioned the right of the beatas to wear a religious habit and to live in community; and it asserted the authority of the archbishop over this lay group composed of folk who were not, canonically, professed members of the Recollet Order. The squabble reached the city's fiscal office as a charge that the beaterio was founded without royal license. Happily, the governor-general, Don Fernando Valdés Tamón, chose to settle the dispute by legalizing, on July 24, 1735, the existence of the beaterio, pending the arrival of the royal license.

The license, however, had still not arrived when the Marqués de Obando became governor-general and he, too, was baffled and vexed by these Philippine beatas who seemed to be neither fish nor fowl, neither nun nor secular. To regularize the beaterio de San Sebastian, to fit it into some category, Obando ordered that all its members be registered; that they stop calling themselves beatas, tertiarías, manantías, or any other religious appellation; that they stop wearing habits and living in seclusion; that only a limited number be allowed to remain in the beaterio,
to teach, and that they stop using Tagalog in the community; and that the beaterio be demolished should the beatas resist his orders.

The beatas resisted. They received the inspector sent by the governor but only to present their side of the case. They pointed out that they were all free women, unmarried, and that they were in the beaterio of their own accord, bound by no vows, though they took simple vows at the moment of death. They possessed nothing except a small house in Intramuros but they were no burden to the public treasury because they supported themselves on the produce of the labor of their own hands. Obando desisted from expelling them and demolishing their house but he did assume the right to appoint the superiors of their community instead of allowing the beatas to elect their own officials. Apparently, the beatas were also allowed to go on using Tagalog in their mystical Carmel. What was being fought here was the war between men and women. On the one hand was male resentment that women, without the excuse of having taken the veil and abandoned the world, should live in independence; on the other hand was a feminine intent to escape ubiquitous male authority and prove that women could organize and run their own government. In effect, Obando's decree abolished the right of suffrage that these women had granted themselves.

Harassment of the community by Church and State subsided when the king's license finally arrived on May 26, 1756, authorizing the foundation of the beaterio and placing it under royal protection, though this did not save it from the scorn of society in general, a scorn that can be understood as fear and suspicion of anything novel. The beatas did seem to be neither fish nor fowl. They themselves may have been unaware that they were starting something new: mystical communities of lay folk. They were upholding (as did the Reformation) the spontaneity of the amateur; but the world, as usual, preferred a familiar tag. If one was a religious, one was either cleric or nun.

The dilemma of our native beata was that, even if they had wanted to, they could not have been regular religious — members, say, of the Dominican or the Franciscan Order — because the policy then was not to admit natives to the regular religious orders. To repeat, this policy was dictated by prudence. In fact, the skeptical among us who, today, assert that the Conversion was superficial, that our ancestors couldn’t and didn’t understand the faith they were made to embrace, and that early native Christianity was therefore a mishmash of pagan and Catholic cults, are paraphrasing the arguments for not admitting newly converted peoples to such specialized laboratories of the spirit as the religious orders — arguments that the skeptics would be the first to feel affronted by.

In justice to the early missionaries, it should be said that they recognized the dilemma. They saw among the native beati sanctity of a heroic order, sanctity worthy of the religious life, but which could not be received there because of this policy of not admitting natives to the orders. The Recollets tried to get around the problem by allowing beatas on the point of death to profess in the order. In other words, the beatas entered the community as lay tertiaries but died as professed Recollet nuns.

In this manner died the sisters Talampás, who, mercifully, were spared the ruder tumults that shook their Carmel. Cecilia Rosa de Jesús, during a lingering illness, was allowed to profess and took the vows on March 11, 1731, though apparently she did not die until the following year. Dionisia de Santa María, "Mother of the Beaterio de San Sebastián," made her profession four years later, on October 26, 1735, just before she died. The two Bulaheñas from Calumpit had spent only some half-dozen years together in the Carmel they had built.

When they died, another native girl, Ignacia Incua, after living as a recluse for two decades, was attracting followers enough to organize another beaterio, in Intramuros, near the Jesuits. That these foundations should have followed so closely on one another is no surprise, for it was an age of exuberance in both the temporal and the spiritual sphere. Vital ages create their own contradictions, their own underground resistance movements, as may be seen in the hippie movement spawned by an age of unparalleled prosperity in the United States. In a sense, the 17th-century beati were the hippies of a Philippines aglow with martial victory and aglut with commercial profit. These mystics, too, expressed the vitality of their day in the very passion of their protest to it, as well as the paradox that ages of great physical vehemence seem to produce, automatically, the most ethereal mysticism. St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross were contemporaries of the conquistadors; Donne the God-obessed was also Donne the Elizabethan who fought in the battle against the Invincible Armada. Like him, our beati were clearly people of action, founders and leaders of movements, but, again like him, they knew

_The anguish of the marrow,_
_No contact possible to flesh_
_Alloyed the fever of the bone._

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to have grown up in Binondo and to have had special devotion
for the Jesuit church of San Ignacio in Intramuros. A friend
of the family, Father Paul Klein, a German, was a member of the
Company of Jesus and he became the young Ignacia’s spiritual
director.

At 21, bidden to marry by her mother, Ignacia announced
that she intended to enter the newly founded Beaterio de Sta.
Catalina—which indicates the influence of the movement started
by the Hermana Sebastian, a movement that Ignacia was to
crown. However, though she seems to have become a Dominican
tertiary, she did not press her plan to join the beatas of Sta.
Catalina.

On the advice of Father Klein, to whom she made a general
confession, she went on a retreat, to examine herself better,
and emerged with the decision to devote herself to the service
of God, though not—being under Jesuit direction—at the Domin-
can beaterio.

Instead, the young Ignacia left home and, in the style so
prevalent in those days, went to live as a recluse in Intramuros.
One reason would be to escape her mother’s importunings
to get married; another reason was to be closer to San Ignacio.
She took a house near the corner of Victoria and Sta. Lucia,
beside the Jesuit college. Like the sisters Talampas, Ignacia
supported herself with her sewing. Again like the sisters Talm-
pas, she could not have had, during this phase of solitary, any
definite plan to form a community.

As with the Dominican and Recollet beatas, a community
seems to have developed unintended, as Ignacia’s growing fame
as recluse drew other women into her company. First a niece
came to visit and decided to stay. Then came other followers,
until what was a hermitage had become a community of nine.
But Ignacia seems to have spent some two decades in solitude
before she began to attract followers.

The community formally became a beaterio around 1730,
when Ignacia, with Father Klein’s help, gave it a rule patterned
after that observed by the Company of Jesus. It therefore became
known as the Beaterio de la Compañía, under the spiritual
direction but in no way an adjunct of the Jesuits. Its formal
foundation was more or less simultaneous with that of the
Beaterio de San Sebastian.

The rule that Mother Ignacia gave her company limited
admission to “pure indias” or Chinese mestizas desirous of
learning “the ways of perfection.” The community was governed
by a directress (Mother Ignacia was the first one), a sub-directress
and six counsellors, whom the beatas elected to office by secret
ballot. They also voted on the admission or rejection of applicants, and the readmission of beatas who had returned to their homes. The voting system was borrowed from the older religious orders by the beaterios, which were therefore the first Philippine communities to elect their own officials through modern suffrage procedures.

The community arose at four in the morning, retired at nine in the evening, and was at work when not at prayer, for its rule ordained that “the main support of the beatas shall be from the fruit of their labors.” Unlike the Beaterio de Sta. Catalina, which enjoyed a grant from the Dominicans, and the Beaterio de San Sebastian, which received stipends from the Retollets, Mother Ignacia’s company was subsidized by no order, not even the Jesuits, and began in such poverty that the beatas, having no light, had to sup before dark, unless there was a moon, when they could sup out on their baláén in the moonlight, eating from banana leaves because they had no plates. They had nothing to eat but rice and salt, and even this they had to beg, sometimes tramping as far as Pampanga on their begging trips. Their habit was a black coarse-cotton gown, over which they wore a large veil of the same rough cloth.

They lived not only poorly but in penitence, spending the nights sleepless in contemplation, yielding the discipline without pity for their starved bodies. Mother Ignacia was often seen with a rope around her neck, or carrying a heavy cross, or prostrated on the ground so that others might trample on her. Because of the misery of their privations and the rigor of their penances, almost all the beatas became sick—but their chief illness was the “fear of the bone” that had driven them to embrace, in the midst of so luxurious a city, so harsh a life.

Though they did so in the hope that they could make up for the shortcomings of the world, the world found Mother Ignacia’s company as baffling and bizarre as the other native beaterios, of which there were now two in Intramuros, one in the outlying suburb of San Sebastian, and one in the town of Pasig. It seemed anomalous—and presumptuous—that lay associations of the devout should receive “novices,” make “vows,” and allow “perpetual professions” as though they were canonically established orders or convents; and in 1771 came a letter from the king to Governor-General Francisco Tavie de la Torre specifying what provisions in the rule of Mother Ignacia were anomalous because they were proper only to religious orders or congregations. The archbishop of Manila was ordered to correct the constitutions of the Beaterio de la Compañía by removing from them all references to vows of chastity, obedience and poverty. Nevertheless, the beaterio, like its sister communities, more or less ignored both king and archbishop and continued receiving girls who, after undergoing a two-year novitiate during which they were taught to read, write and sew, were allowed to make temporary vows, for a seven-year period, at the end of which they could make a perpetual profession as members of the beaterio, exactly as though it were a regular convent of nuns. However, the vows bound a beata only as long as she lived in the community and were automatically dissolved if she left the beaterio. The beatas lived a community but not a cloistered life.

Despite the austerity of the regimen, more and more women were attracted to Mother Ignacia’s company. She had begun with four followers; a community of 33 was soon overcrowding her house; by 1745 there were 50 beatas under her direction. Moreover, the beaterio had begun to receive girls to educate as well as women boarders who craved a life of seclusion. In 1748 the beatas were educating 45 girls—native, Spanish and mestiza—and the number swelled the following year to 30 native girls, 29 Spanish girls, and four Negro women.

A pioneer labor of the beaterio was the conducting of retreats for women, retreats that drew native women from all over the city and neighboring towns as well as Spanish ladies and mestizas, sometimes as many as “200 Spanish women and from 50 to 80 mestizas.” All these women of diverse races gathered as one, lived in community during the eight days of each retreat, and together performed the spiritual exercises within the beaterio, “to the great benefit not only of themselves but of the communities they came from.” Racial integration started in the beaterios.

So famed for good became Mother Ignacia’s beaterio that in 1748 the archbishop of Manila recommended it to the protection of the king, so it might enjoy royal subsidy. The reply of King Ferdinand IV was issued in 1755: the beaterio was to continue supporting itself and enjoying its present status as “a house of retreat exempt from cloister,” but without becoming a convent or foundation, and the women living there were “not to be molested in the practice of their pious exercises.”

This decree of Ferdinand IV, though it disappointed by not offering the beaterio a royal grant, was a landmark of the beata movement. The new form of religious life—more freewheeling and less cloistered—that Philippine women had been developing during a hundred years into what became known as the beaterio had at last been “recognized” by the State.

Mother Ignacia did not live to see the king’s decree. She
died on September 10, 1748, at the age of 85, and tradition has it that she passed away while on her knees at the communion rail of San Ignacio, just after receiving the sacrament. She had headed the Beaterio de la Compañía for 64 years. Popularly regarded as a saint, she was honored with the kind of funeral reserved for great personages and to it came the lords temporal and spiritual of the land, to accompany the bier to San Ignacio.

With her death, the mystical movement may be said to have ended, about a hundred years after the appearance of the Hermana Sebástiana in mid-17th century. It had, until the king’s decree in 1755, the character of an underground movement, as may be gathered by the attacks on it by its enemies in Church and State, enemies who, with reason, distrusted it, like everything novel, as bizarre, irregular, unconventional, freakish, nonconformist; anomalous, abnormal and illegal. Even its early friends—the spiritual directors of Mother Francisca, for example; or of the sisters’ Talampás—seem to have feared it, since they fought it, because they couldn’t quite place it; and the more light-minded of the public were ready to believe anything of these queer creatures who were neither fish nor fowl, not of the cloister and yet not of the world.

Though the movement included male ecstatics (this must have been the time when the various brotherhoods of the penitentes were formed) it was dominated by women from the 17th to the 18th century. Then the spirit passed to the menfolk, resulting in equally bizarre formations, equally mysterious underground movements, from the cofradía of Apolinario de la Cruz in 1740 to the Guardia de Honor sects of the 1890s. The spirit can even be traced to non-religious aggregations like the secret societies of Propaganda days, from the Masonic lodges to the Katipunan, where, as among the early beati, the initiate were hermanos or kapatid, envisioning a secular Communion of Saints in the form, not of a faith, but of a nation, and suffering, for their independent ideas, persecution from both Church and State.

But the beati have it over the revolutionaries. Mysticism has proved to be the harder, more durable foundation. The patriots’ secular societies, not excluding the Katipunan, had the ningas cogon character of native endeavor, but the beaterios founded by ecstatics which have lasted from the 17th century to our day, surviving kings, bishops, governments, wars and revolutions, have turned out to be the most enduring creations of native enterprise, still growing, still in progress in the 20th century. They may have proved to be so adaptable to every shift of history because they were based on audacity and experiment.