



Statesman-Journal photo by Jill Cannetax

The Rev. Henry Herman Herrera

## Priest goes from tropics to mission in mid-valley

BY PHIL MANZANO  
Of the Statesman-Journal

DALLAS — One visit to the Rev. Henry Herman Herrera's room, where he serves as new superior of Mision Claret here, will tell you he has been around.

Woven pith helmets adorn one wall. Sheathed swords, that once belonged to a Moslem sultan in the Philippines, are displayed proudly, a gift from a Moslem princess.

In his photo album, pictures of guns and dead bodies are mounted next to those of cheery, high school students playing basketball or marching in a band.

Another photo shows Herrera in priestly robes, holding a shining chalice high. Behind him, an imposing cannon. Surrounding him, grubby but penitent soldiers bow their heads in preparation for communion.

FOR A WHILE, Herrera's life in the Philippines was like that — a twisted mixture of normalcy corrupted by the madness of war.

It meant jumping into a home-made bomb shelter at a moment's notice or rebel attacks bursting the dark, still night. It meant living under the repression of martial law.

At Mision Claret, his surroundings have changed from the tropics to the sloping hills of the Mid-Willamette Valley, but his work remains the same: teaching and spreading the word of God.

Like a roving missionary, Herrera, 63, travels to Salem and Jefferson, where he says Mass each Sunday for the Spanish-speaking community. Other mission members minister to the Spanish-speaking in other towns in the Mid-Willamette Valley.

"INSTRUCTION TO the adult, instruction to the teen-ager, to those about to get married, instruction of little children — when you have covered all these areas, you've covered the whole human being," he said.

Between 1969 and 1975, Herrera ministered to the whole human being as he lived and worked on the small island of Basilan in Southern Philippines about 20 miles off the coast of Zamboanga City.

He was a "Yankee" in a foreign country, a Christian among Moslems.

"Our idea was to give them freedom," said Herrera about his Moslem students. "We were not going to Christianize them, just educate."

For many of the island's poor, education was a way to break out of the isolated poverty, he said. Herrera directed one school in Lamitan, where he also formed a high school marching band.

But that freedom was fleeting. It was on Basilan Island, among other Moslem strongholds, that the bloodshed between Moslems and the Philippine government began in 1972 and continues today.

MUCH OF the southern Philippines is strongly Moslem today and

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Herrera holds chalice aloft for Philippine soldiers.

# Father . . .

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is the center of a rebel effort to secede and form an independent government rooted in Moslem tradition, **Herrera** said.

In the early morning hours of New Year's Day 1972, bands of well-organized Moslem soldiers began occupying villages and cities on the island.

In Lamitan, people panicked as a force of 200 to 300 Moslem soldiers was believed to be headed for the town.

**Herrera** left the island to ask an armed forces commander in Zamboanga to send down troops. Through his island contacts, **Herrera** found out Moslem guerillas were using brand new weapons. The rifles were delivered by a submarine that had been traced to North Korea. The rebels also have been supported by Libya's ruler, Col. Moammar Khadafy.

Philippine army soldiers were stationed in the town to fend off periodic thrusts from Moslem guerillas. At one point, 1,000 refugees were housed in the school.

**FOR PROTECTION**, what began as a crude hole in the floor at the Lamitan convent grew more and more sophisticated with each attack until it became a concrete bombshelter complete with supplies.

**Herrera** remembers being able to track advancing forces by the flow of refugees coming into town.

Because of his work as a school teacher among the Moslems and Christians, mysterious messengers

would appear suddenly and warn him to stay out of a certain area. His name later became a password for Catholic priests and workers who followed after him among the Moslems.

One Catholic worker recently told **Herrera** that he was taken to a secret Moslem mountain stronghold. The worker stood before the Moslem band leader, who held a .45-caliber pistol. The leader questioned the worker about **Herrera**

until finally the leader said, "Yes, you know **Herrera**. He taught me when I was in grade school."

"I'm glad my name saved one guy's life," said **Herrera**.

Besides the armed rebellion, 1972 was also the year President Ferdinand E. Marcos declared martial law, giving police and military virtually unlimited powers.

Even in the previous year, agents from the National Bureau of Investigation had arrested stu-

dent body officers at **Herrera's** high school.

After leaving the Philippines in 1975, **Herrera** worked at a school in Prescott, Ariz., before coming to Dallas in July. He returned to the Philippines for a brief visit in 1979.

His work now will be among the Spanish-speaking who through language or culture are separated from the rest of society.