

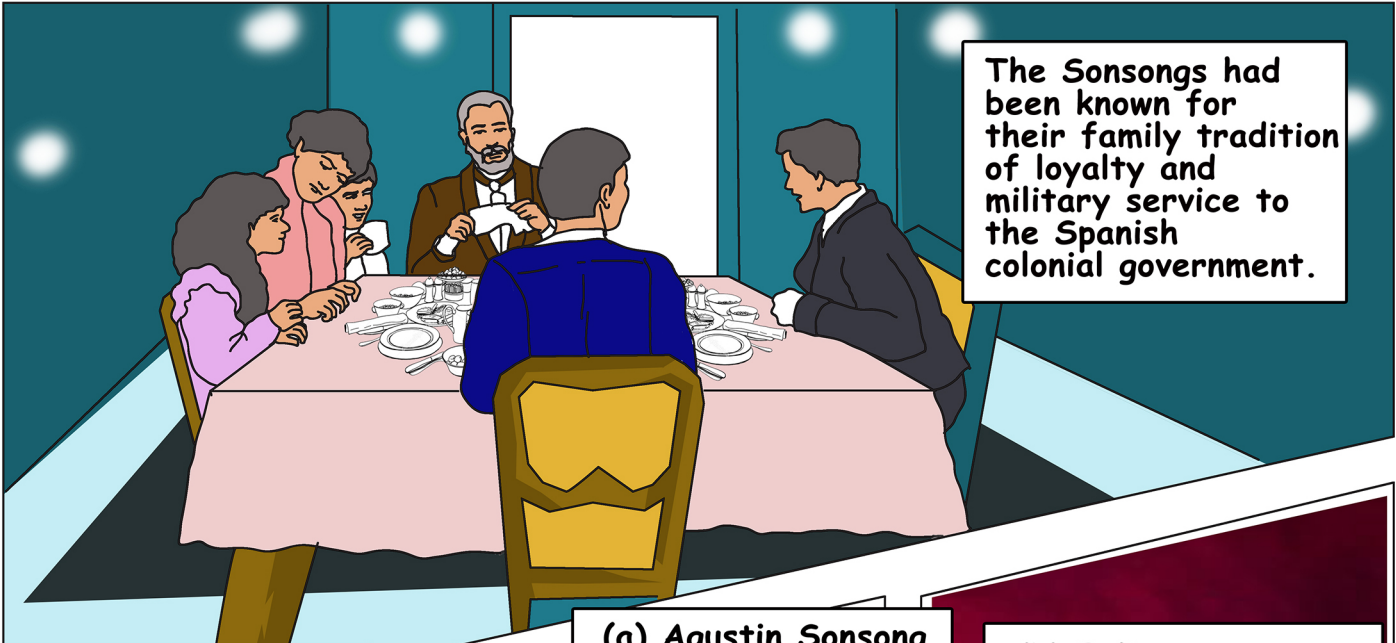


BIOGRAPHY of
FELIPE SONSONG
of Macabebe, Pampanga


Published by The HAU Center for Kapampangan Studies
Illustrated by Dodjie Arellano Aguinaldo

In 1660, Francisco Maniago of Mexico, Pampanga staged the Kapampangan Revolt after the Spaniards repeatedly failed to pay for the harvests they had bought from farmers. The Sonsong family of Macabebe supported the rebellion against the Spaniards.






The Sonsongs had been known for their family tradition of loyalty and military service to the Spanish colonial government.



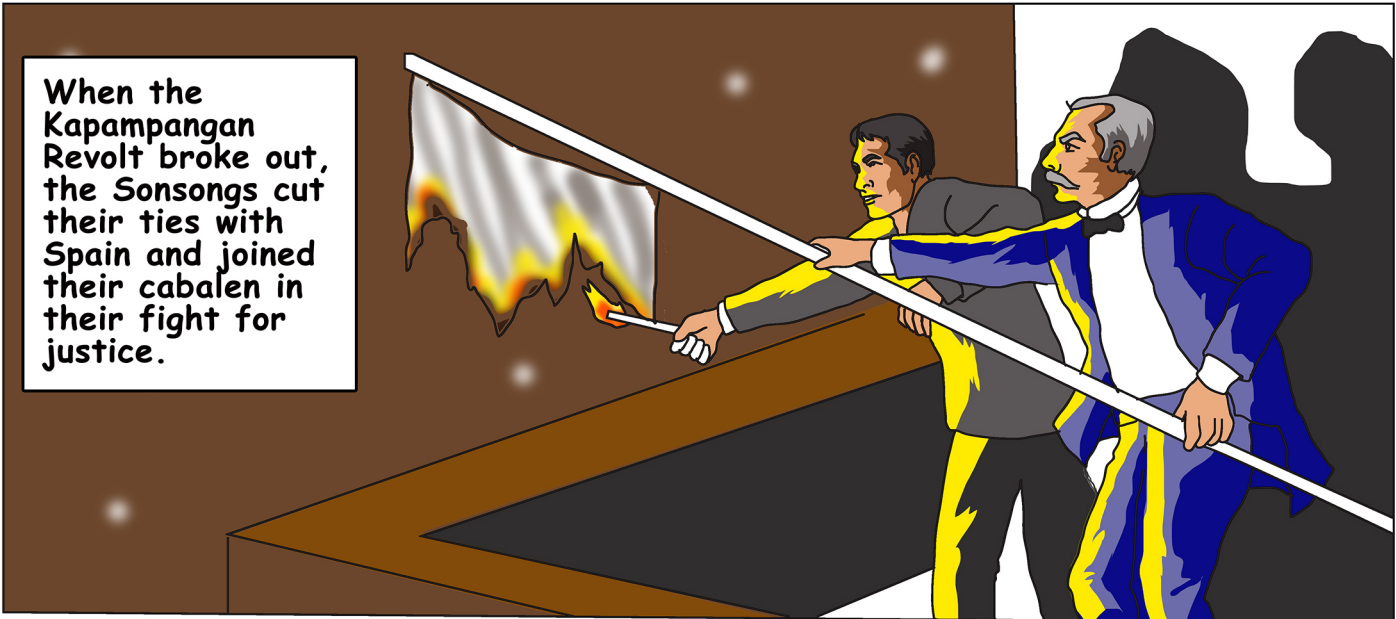
Don Ramon Sonsong, gobernadorcillio of Macabebe, had two brothers:



(a) Agustin Sonsong, a captain in the Spanish royal infantry, and



(b) Felipe Sonsong, full-time farmer and occasional soldier.



When the Kapampangan Revolt broke out, the Sonsongs cut their ties with Spain and joined their cabalen in their fight for justice.

The Sonsong brothers, Agustin and Felipe as well as Agustin Jr. left Macabebe to join Maniago. Agustin Jr. even became Maniago's emissary to the leaders of a similar revolt in Ilocos and Pangasinan.

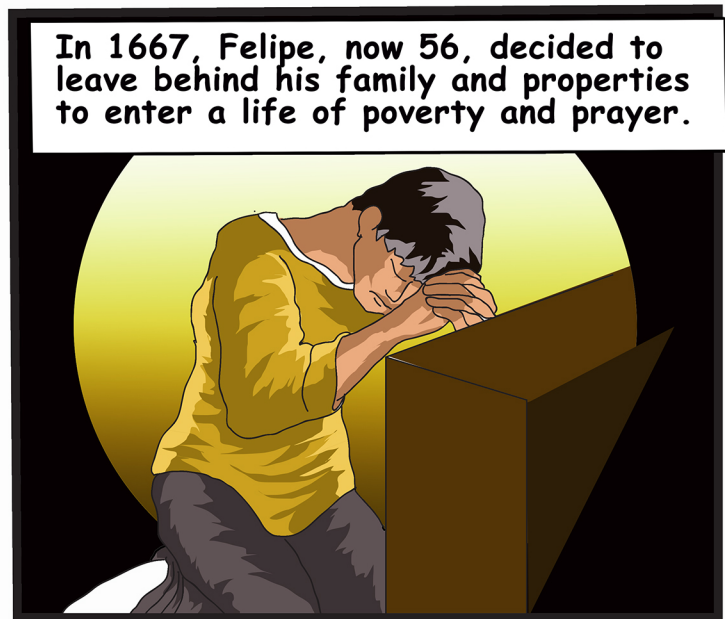


The Kapampangan revolt was defeated by the Spanish forces led by Sabiniano Manrique de Lara assisted by Juan Macapagal of Arayat. The Sonsongs then returned to a quiet life in Macabebe.

Shortly afterward, Felipe Sonsong's wife died, leaving behind a son, Jeronimo.



In 1667, Felipe, now 56, decided to leave behind his family and properties to enter a life of poverty and prayer.



He entrusted his son Jeronimo to his relatives in Macabebe.

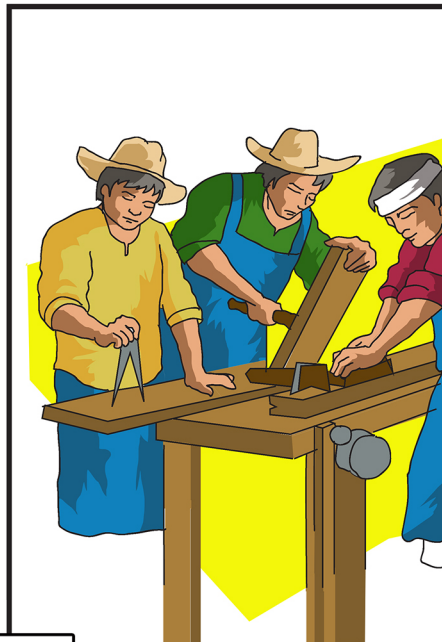
Afterward, Felipe offered himself to the parish priest of Macabebe, who then referred him to the Augustinian Fathers in Intramuros.



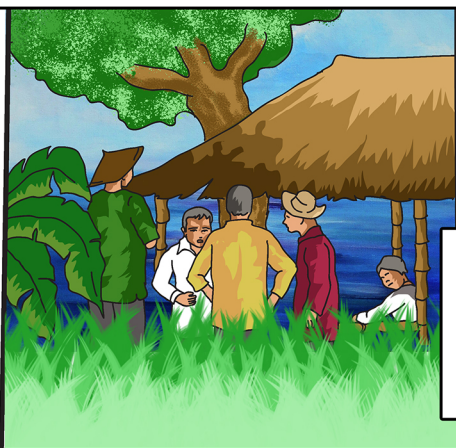
In the Convento de San Agustin in Intramuros, Felipe served the Augustinians as a carpenter.



The Augustinians were so impressed with Felipe's carpentry skills as well as his humility that they allowed him to wear the Cord of St. Augustine, in honor of Our Lady of Consolation. When the Dominican Fathers needed help in the construction of a church for Chinese converts in the Parian outside of Intramuros, they borrowed Felipe from the Augustinians.



Felipe welcomed the opportunity to do a charitable act for the Chinese whose uprising he had helped suppress when he was still a soldier under Spain.

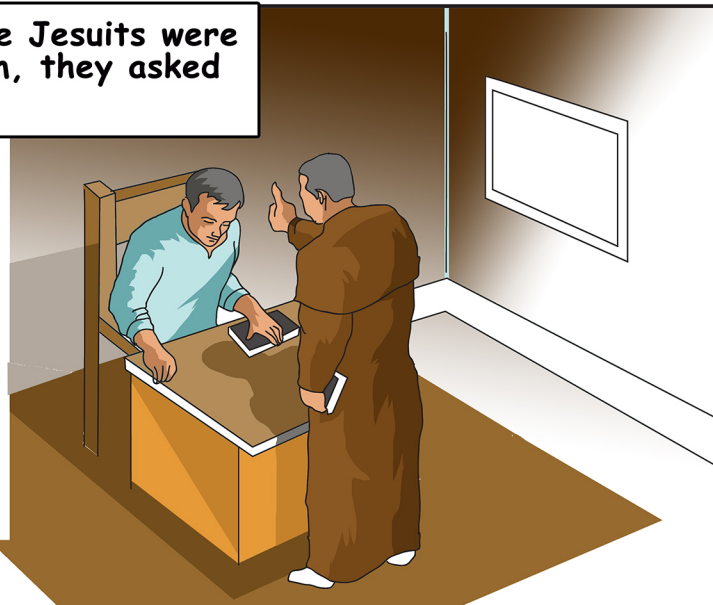


Meanwhile, Felipe's Dominican supervisor noticed his "profound humility and holy manner."



So, Felipe was allowed to wear the Dominican scapular and habit as a donado (lay member) of the Dominican Order.

Later, when the Dominicans heard that the Jesuits were recruiting volunteers for a mission to Guam, they asked Felipe to apply.



The mission was being organized by Jesuit priest Fr. Diego Luis De Sanvitores, who had just arrive from Spain.



Fr. Sanvitores had met the pagan islanders earlier in Guam and wanted to return there to evangelize them. He convinced the Archbishop of Manila to request the King to order the construction of a ship for the mission to Guam.



When Felipe Sonsong first met Fr. Sanvitores, he "threw himself at his feet and with many sighs and sobs he begged him" to accept him for the mission.



Fr. Sanvitores tested Felipe's humility by tasking him with sewing and mending clothes to be used in the mission.

But he impressed the Jesuits because "he succeeded in everything they made him do," wrote the Jesuit chronicler Lorenzo Bustillo.

Thus, the ex-Macabebe soldier and farmer/carpenter learned to sew with a needle using the same hands that once held rifles, plow shares and hammers.

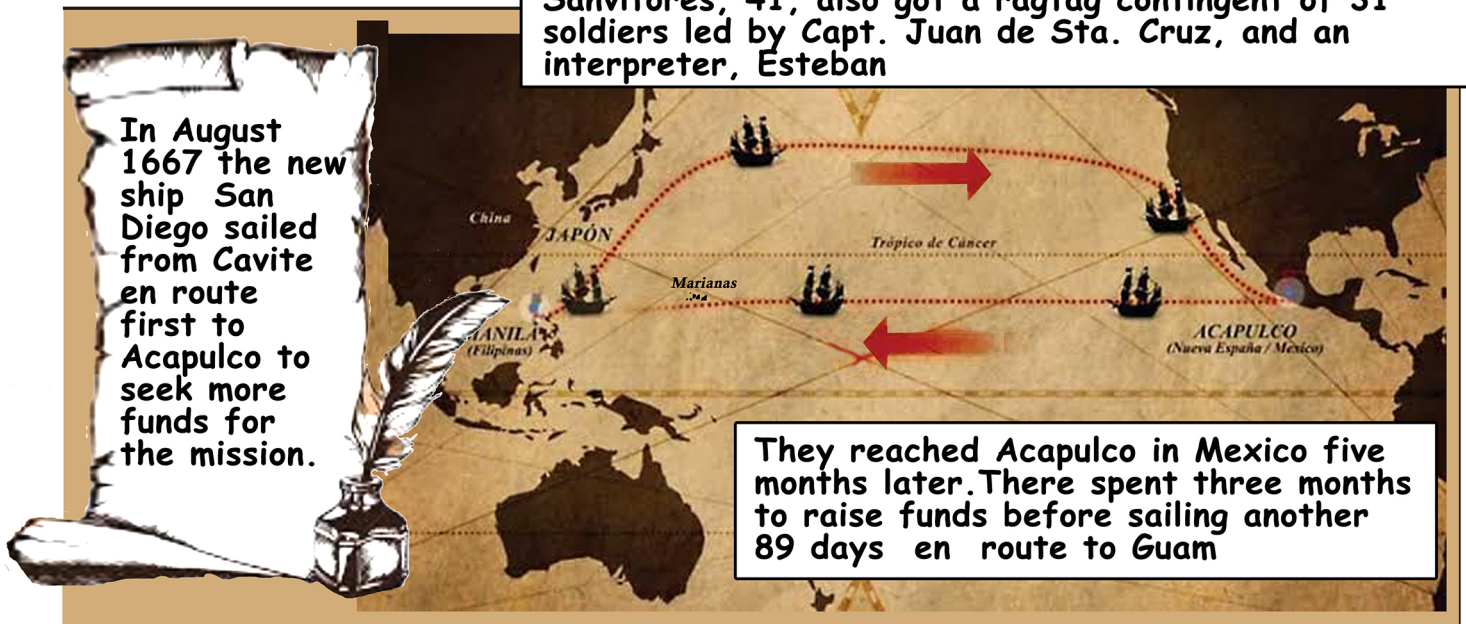
Felipe "burned with charity and goodwill in serving God."

Felipe also offered penances and mortifications for the salvation of the souls of his future converts in Guam, "long before he met them."

The mission included five Jesuit priests and 11 lay helpers, most of whom were adolescent boys who would serve as catechists, cooks, soldiers and choir members. Oldest among them was Felipe Sonsong, 57, and youngest were two 10 year-old Kapampangan boys and one Visayan, Pedro Calungsod, 13. The head of mission, Fr. Sanvitores, 41, also got a ragtag contingent of 31 soldiers led by Capt. Juan de Sta. Cruz, and an interpreter, Esteban

In August 1667 the new ship San Diego sailed from Cavite en route first to Acapulco to seek more funds for the mission.

They reached Acapulco in Mexico five months later. There spent three months to raise funds before sailing another 89 days en route to Guam





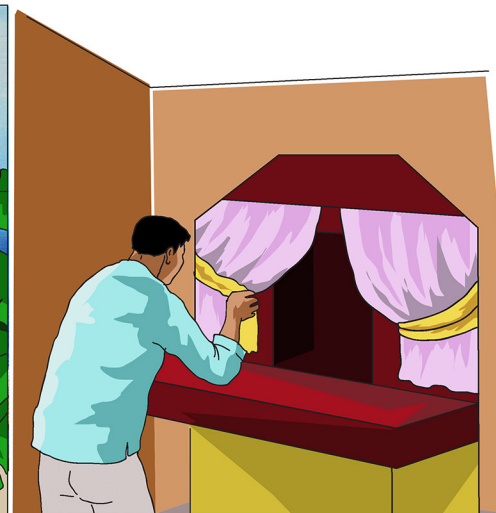
While on board the ship, Felipe "occupied himself in devotions and spiritual books and long hours of prayer." He advised his companions to do their work well and he taught catechism to the soldiers and officers, "shifting from one language to another."

On June 3, 1668 they reached the Marianas, a chain of islands populated by 30,000 Chamorros, half of whom were in Guam, the main island whose capital is Agana. The Chamorro chief Kipuha, leader of half of the 180 villages in Guam, welcomed the Jesuit mission.



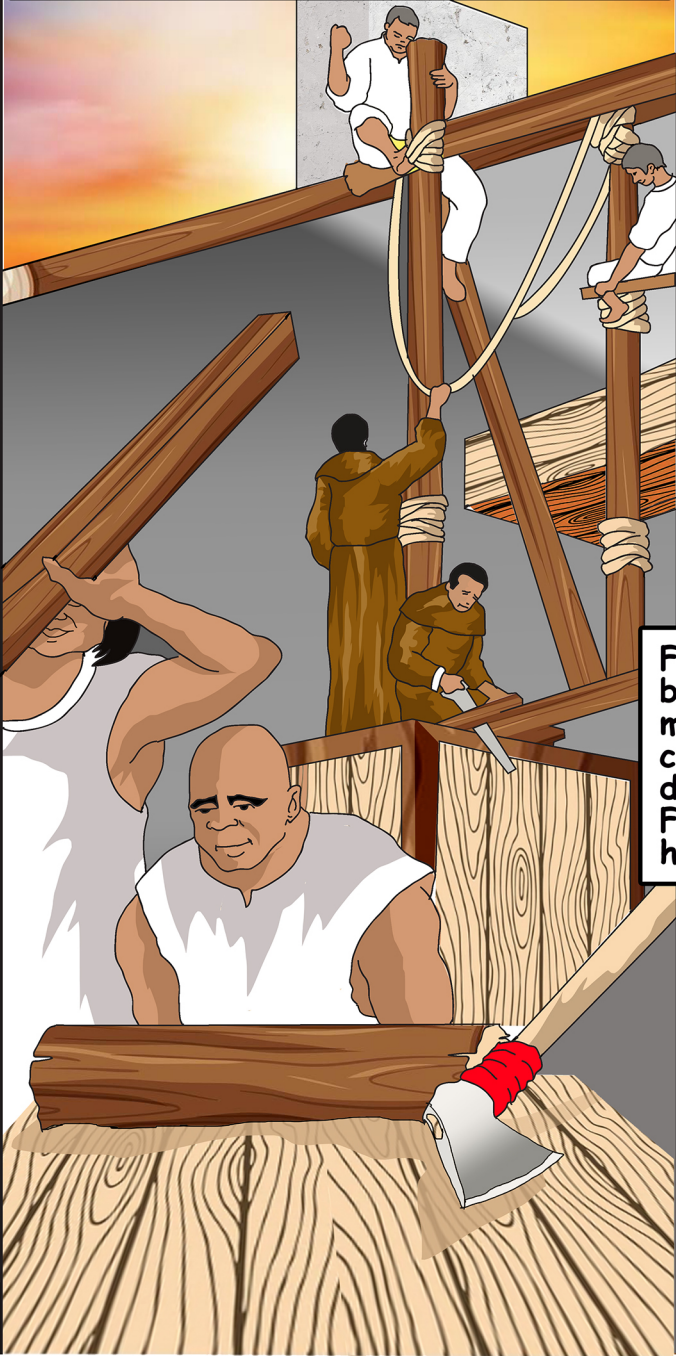
When he got on shore, Felipe threw himself at the feet of Fr. Sanvitores, pledging to do everything to help the mission, even if it required "giving the blood of his veins for the salvation of these islanders."

Kipuha ordered the natives to build a chapel which Felipe adorned with "ornaments and hangings" of colorful sinamay cloths that he himself had sewn.



Felipe's sinamay cloths "looked like they were made from silk." Impressed, Fr. Sanvitores ordered Felipe to "sew more clothing to cover the nakedness of the Chamorros."

The following year, they built a larger place of worship to accommodate the growing number of converts. Felipe again took great pains in decorating it. "He built a sanctuary made of boards hewed from coconut trees." He also created "an altar piece quite beautiful for this land, composed of frameless canvases on which he placed several holy pictures made of paper."



Felipe also "made another floor in the living quarters of the missionaries with promptness."



Felipe always kissed Fr. Sanvitores' feet and begged him to "direct him to a path of mortification and prayer." Fr. Sanvitores however, cautioned Felipe about his extreme penances and disciplines considering his age (57). He ordered Felipe to stop wearing a coarse hairshirt. Felipe humbly obeyed the priest.



Still, Felipe kept begging Fr. Sanvitores to consecrate him as a donado, or lay Jesuit, and Fr. Sanvitores kept telling him it wasn't necessary since Felipe was already a Jesuit "interiorly." Once more Felipe threw himself on the ground, sobbed, kissed Fr. Sanvitores' feet saying, "Father, even slaves like this little worm must wear the insignia of their masters."

On the eve of the feast of Pentecost, 1669, Fr. Sanvitores called for Felipe, who threw himself at the feet of the priest as usual. Fr. Sanvitores lifted him up and told him to just kneel.

He then gave Felipe a shorter version of the Jesuit black cossack, with a narrowed collar and a cincture (cord) and consecrated him as a Jesuit donado.

"Brother Felipe" then became "more and more humble, placing himself below everyone as the vilest creature in the world."

Felipe "could not bear to hear others praise him and speak well of him, and told them that he was not the kind of others thought." He treated everyone, even his own companions as superiors.

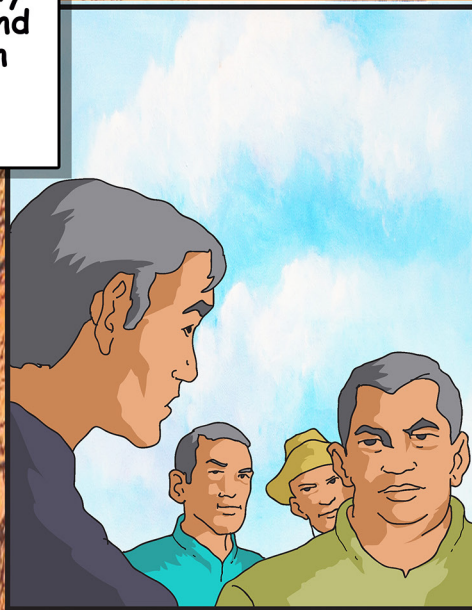
"He was tireless, imagining himself building castles and temples where God Himself would dwell," wrote Bustillo.



When the Chamorro natives raided and burned the Jesuit missionaries' dwellings, Felipe repaired them and "made and mended the clothes of all of us like solicitous and loving mother with many children to take care of." Felipe's work attitude was "to do his best in everything as if he was doing it for God himself," wrote Bustillo.



Felipe's goal was "to help his fellow mission workers to work neatly and properly even if they were poor" and to focus "without worry on whatever they were supposed to do."



Felipe Sonsong maintained a balance between work and prayer. Although he had his hands already full of all these tasks and responsibilities, he still "heard one or two or more Masses everyday," Bustillo wrote.

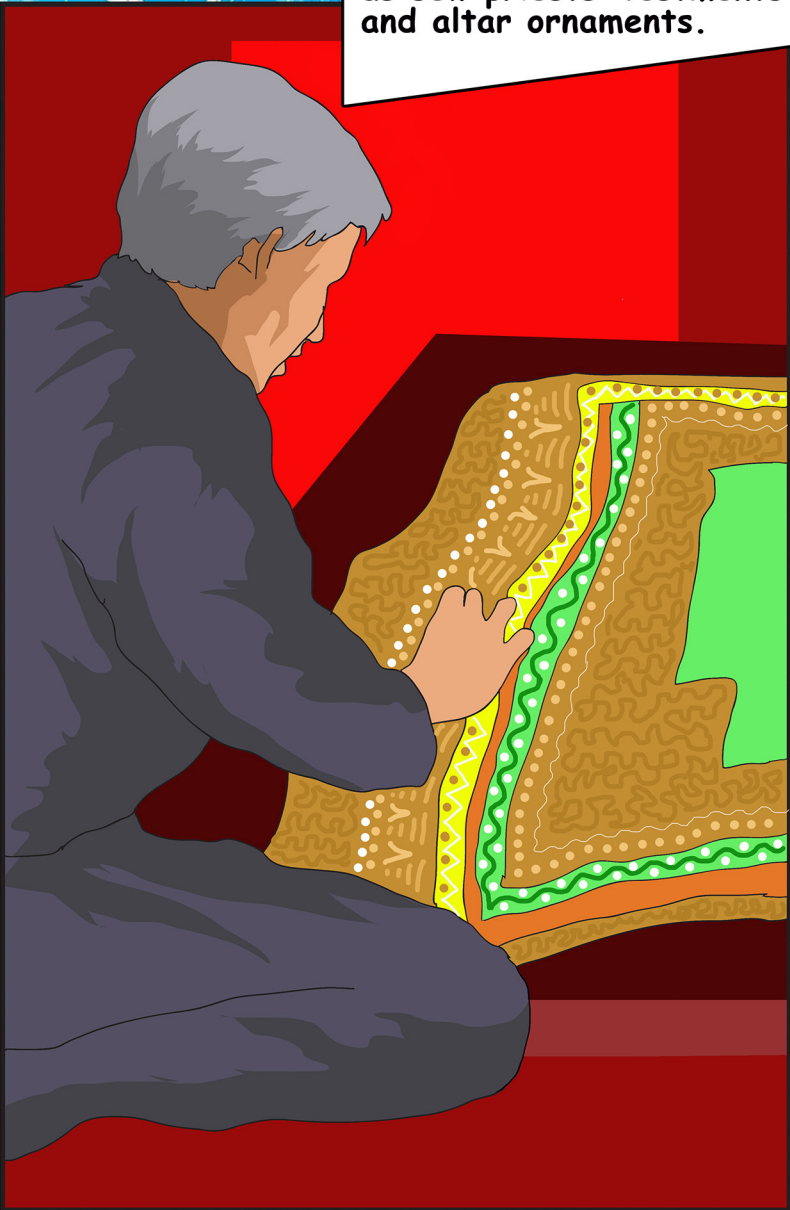




Felipe described himself as "a worm and the most vile creature in the world, a slave among servants, placing himself below everyone else in the mission."

"He continued repairing many ornaments for divine worship. Although these works didn't belong to his proper responsibility and expertise, the result was as faultless as if they had been made or designed by a perfect master of the trade."

Sonsong's skillful hands enabled him to build churches and houses as well as sew priests' vestments and altar ornaments.



"It was wonderful to see the earnestness and energy with which he undertook such excessive work, in the worst heat of the sun, especially for a man of his age," wrote Bustillo who stayed with him throughout the mission to Guam.

"He rolled logs over,
carried them and hewed
them, all bathed in
sweat..."



....which ran down to the
ground like streams all over
his thin and delicate body."



One day, while constructing a church in one of the islands, Felipe fell from a scaffolding ..



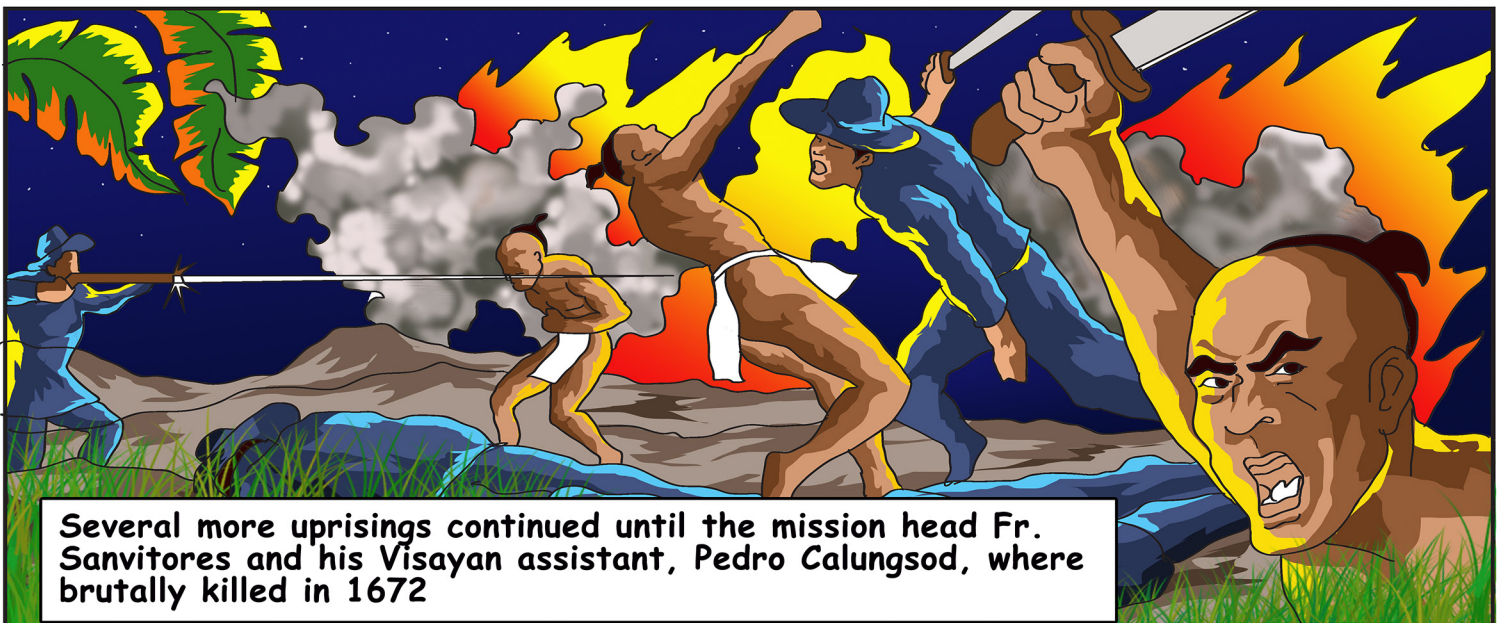
He recovered but from then on, he had to use a cane while walking.



The first Chamorro Uprising occurred on September 11, 1671 when 2000 natives attacked the Jesuit mission in Agana, which was guarded by 30 soldiers. The Chamorro chief Hurad was captured but was released by Fr. Sanvitores, as gesture of goodwill.



Several more uprisings continued until the mission head Fr. Sanvitores and his Visayan assistant, Pedro Calungsod, were brutally killed in 1672



On July 23, 1684 when Felipe was 73 years old, the Chamorros staged a major attack on the mission. He had just finished constructing a house for a newly arrived batch of Jesuits when the attackers came, slitting his throat.



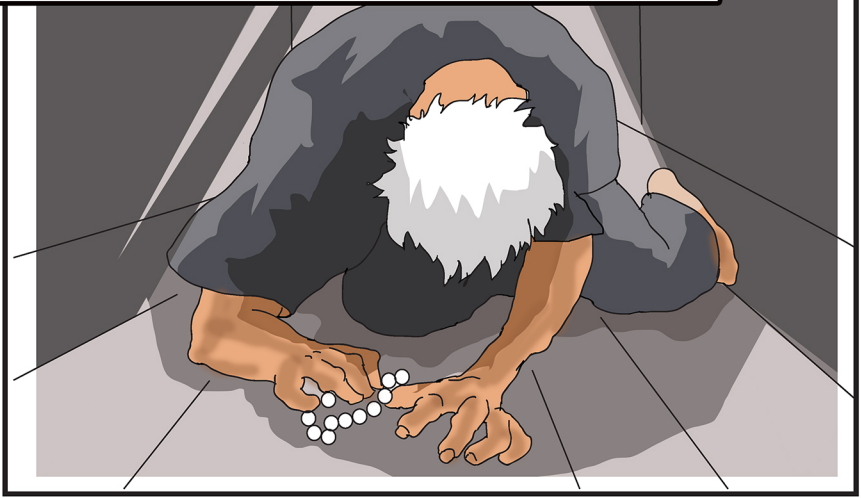
The attackers intended to behead Felipe, but the weapon's blade was not sharp enough. Still, the neck wound bled profusely, nearly killing him



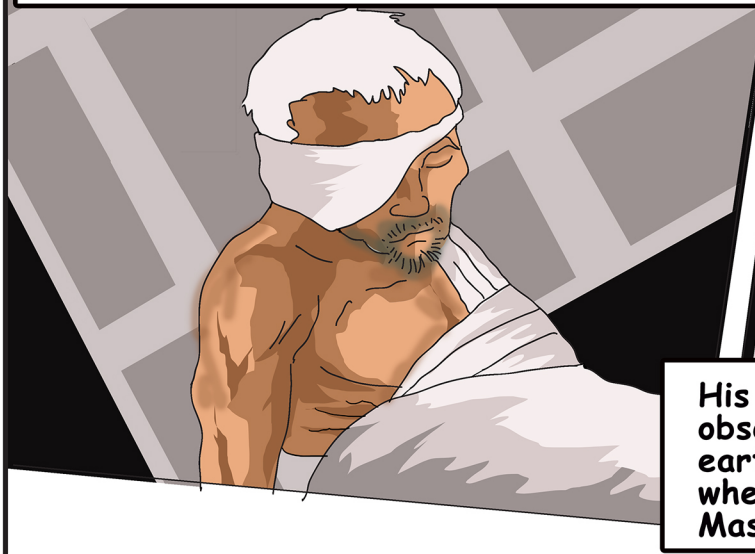
Then they stabbed Felipe's head twice, followed by another stab into his left eye using the same weapon, cutting through the bone. They left him for dead, "all covered with his own blood." Several other Jesuit missionaries were killed including Fr. Manuel de Solorzano, Balthasar DuBois, Fr. Teofilo de Angelis, Fr. Augustin Strobach, Fr. Karl von Boranga, and Fr. Pierre Coemans.



Felipe was administered the last rites but somehow he regained consciousness. "The first words he said," Bustillo wrote, "were the names of Jesus and Mary." He never ceased saying these names day and night as he slowly recovered in the next one-and-a-half years."



He prayed on his knees all the time even when he continued sewing the clothes of the missionaries. But his condition continued deteriorating because phlegm had filled up his chest.



His fellow Jesuits made three observations during Felipe's last days on earth; (1) He stayed "in a hidden spot where he could view the priest saying Masses."



(2) He considered himself "already dead, and only living for Christ and so he let himself be used for whatever purpose anyone in the mission wanted for him."

And (3) the only thing that really mattered to him was "to be on his knees in prayer."



When his companions tried to give him medicine and food, he told them, "what for, if I must die?"



But when he was told that as Jesuit donado he had vowed obedience to his superiors, "he closed his eyes and made an effort to swallow the food until he had no strength for anything more."



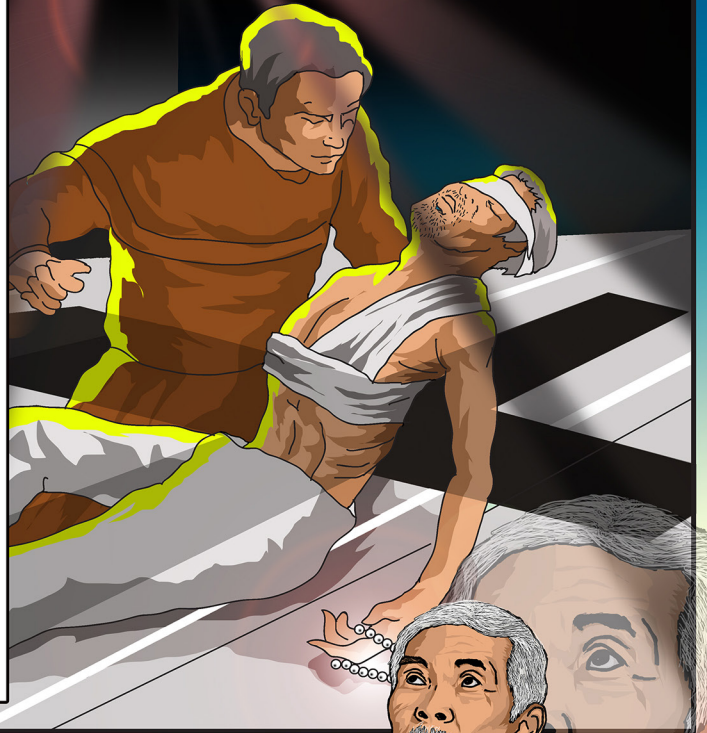
Felipe "did not lose the use of his reason and senses until he died."



When he received Extreme Unction, he "responded to the prayers with great joy."



At 11 a.m. on Friday, January 11, 1686, or one year and six months after the attack, Felipe suffered a seizure. The Jesuit fathers gathered around his bed to recite prayers for the dying. Felipe responded to the prayers and asked for a crucifix, a rosary, and the holy medals, which he kissed unceasingly. At 1 p.m., the Jesuits, thinking Felipe would survive, went to siesta. At 2 p.m., Bustillo returned to find Felipe kneeling on the floor with his arms resting on the bed and his head on top of his arms. "Thinking that he was still alive, I spoke to him to get him back to bed. But he was already dead," wrote Bustillo. Felipe's age was 74.



Felipe's body was carried the next day from the fort to the newly erected church near the sea for burial. He wore all the holy insignias: Our Lady of Mt. Carmel scapular, the Dominican scapular, the Augustinian cord and the Jesuit habit. Guam's top military officials led by Gen. Jose Quirroga and top civilian officials led by Gov. Damian de Esplana carried Felipe's body, with all the soldiers in attendance. "All revered him as a saint," wrote Bustillo who witnessed everything.





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