

Manila Observatory appoints new Executive Director

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Abstract

Dr. Antonio G. M. La Viña succeeded Ms. Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga as Executive Director of Manila Observatory last 1 October 2016. This article contains the following: (1) News about the appointment of the new MO Executive Director, (2) message of the Executive Director, (3) the new frontiers faced by the Manila Observatory with the launching of Philippine microsatellite *Diwata-1* and the drafting of new laws on the establishment of the Philippine Space Agency, and (4) the story of Manila Observatory's beginnings in an abandoned pigeon house.

Keywords

News

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1. New Executive Director for MO

In a memo dated 15 September 2016, Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarin, SJ, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of Manila Observatory, announced the appointment of Dr. Antonio G. M. La Viña as Executive Director of the Manila Observatory (MO) starting 1 October 2016. Dr. La Viña is a lawyer, a member the Board of Trustees of the Manila Observatory since 2004, and was the dean of the Ateneo School of Government for the past 10 years, as well as undersecretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in 1996. He has worked nationally and internationally on the policy concerns of various environmental concerns, including climate change. Dr. La Viña was a spokesman, advisor, and negotiator for the Philippines at the COP21 climate summit in Paris in 2015. He finished his Master of Laws and Doctor of Juridical Science degrees at Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut.

Dr. La Viña succeeded Ms. Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga who served as Manila Observatory's Executive Director since 2007. During her term, Ms. Loyzaga positioned the observatory as a center for disaster science and risk management, focusing not only on observation and monitoring of natural disasters like typhoons, floods, and earthquakes, but also on how to quantify the disaster risks to help the government and private sectors mitigate the effects of disasters and organize the relief efforts. In his homily at the mass celebrating the culmination of MO's 150th year anniversary last September 26, 2016, Fr. Jose Ramon Villarin, SJ thanked Ms. Antonia Yulo Loyzaga for her nine years of service as Executive Director from 2007 to 2016, for her outstanding leadership that has brought the Manila Observatory international recognition as an institution in the frontiers of disaster science and risk reduction, and for the successful series of scientific symposiums, meetings and exhibits during MO's sesquicentennial.

Contents

1	New Executive Director for MO	1
2	Message of the Executive Director	2
3	Facing the New Frontiers	2

2. Message of the Executive Director

I am now Executive Director of Manila Observatory, a Jesuit scientific institution that, among others, works on climate change, disaster risk reduction, poverty mapping, etc. I replace my friend Toni Yulo Loyzaga whom I helped recruit to join MO a decade Ago. She has done a wonderful job and her shoes will be difficult to fill.

I have been in the MO board for twelve years and is totally committed to its work. And so when the request to head the oldest observatory in Asia came from Fr. Jett Villarin, the Chair of the board, I could not refuse. I am actually excited and enthusiastic to do this, especially at this time when there is a good chance that the international community working together can defeat climate change with the Paris Agreement and reduce significantly, via the Sendai Framework, the most serious risks of disasters. I am also very happy to join a community of the best physical scientists in the country, including our wisest colleague Fr. Sergio Su who welcomed me warmly and many young scientists at the start of their careers. My job is to make sure they have the enabling environment and the resources to do excellent science. My responsibility is to help them identify priorities and to shepherd the results of their work for better impact, among others to influence policy and governance decisions.



Dr. Antonio La Viña
Executive Director of Manila
Observatory

On a personal note, I welcome this opportunity to do solid technical work. It's a chance to detach a bit from our vicious politics. I will still be teaching law in a number of schools, doing governance work with the Ateneo School of Government, and will continue to do legal, policy and capacity building work for government and international organizations but leading MO now rises to the top in terms of my priorities.

3. Facing the New Frontiers

Last 27 April 2016, the Philippines launched its own satellite Diwata-I, named after the fairies in Filipino folklore, from the Kibo Module of the International Space Station (ISS). The microsatellite was made possible through the efforts of DOST (Department of Science and Technology), Hokkaido University, and Tohoku University. A bill was recently filed by Dr. Rogel Mari Sese, Program Leader of the National Space Program, in the Philippine Senate (SB 1211) and House of Representatives (HB 3637) for the creation of PhilSA or the Philippine Space Agency. The launching of satellites may be beneficial to the country in terms of weather imaging and telecommunications, but doing so also puts the satellite infrastructure at risk to natural disasters that haven't yet caught



Diwata-1, the Philippine microsatellite launched in 27 April 2016 from the Kibo Module of the International Space Station (ISS). Image credit: Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, PAGASA (public domain).

“This institution is also a religious community; that its members, far from concealing or minimizing their religious commitment, make it the very center and focus of their lives; and that they have taken for their motto *Lumen de Lumine*—light from Light—because it is their faith, serene and imperishable, that all the paths of knowledge, wherever they may wind, whether through the earth’s crust or the sun’s flames or the vast reaches of interstellar space, lead in the end to that Love that draws all men, all creation, to itself: that Love which Dante says that *it moves the sun, and moon, and all the stars.*”

—Fr. Horacio de la Costa, SJ, *Lumen de Lumine*, Closing remarks at Manila Observatory’s 100th Anniversary (20 September 1965)

popular imagination—disasters such as geomagnetic storms, solar radiation storms, and radio blackouts.

The Manila Observatory started in an abandoned pigeon hole which expanded into a network of stations for monitoring the storms that rage in the heavens. Now, as the Philippines is venturing into space, the Manila Observatory has partnered with different institutions to access data from different instrument arrays to monitor the storms not only in the troposphere, but also in the lithosphere, ionosphere, magnetosphere, and the heliosphere. We are all in the sun’s atmosphere and the agitations in the solar interior send shock waves to disturb our life here on earth.

“1865 is when the Manila Observatory opened for business,” wrote Director Tony La Vina, as he shared the story of Manila Observatory’s beginnings written by the Jesuit historian Fr. Horacio de la Costa, SJ. “I feel so young to lead such a great institution in the 21st century.”



Dr. Antonio La Viña with Fr. Sergio Su, SJ who witnessed the 100th Anniversary of Manila Observatory in 1965. Fr. Su heads MO's Solid Earth Dynamics program. He is now 94 years old.

The Abandoned Pigeon House

One grey morning in September, 1865, two young Scholastics stood at a window of the Mission House, looking out on Manila Bay. They noticed several ships stranded on the shore, and knots of seafaring men staring at the wreckage disconsolately.

One of the Scholastics, Jaime Nonell, asked his companion rather naively what had happened.

“Baguio”, the other answered briefly. “Typhoon.”

Nonell recalled, somewhat tardily, the terrific storm of the night before. He looked at his companion curiously. He had noticed something odd about Francisco Colina of late. The man had been quite preoccupied. Other members of the Jesuit community, too, had noticed Colina's habit of mysteriously vanishing to the roof of the Mission House as soon as his classes at the Ateneo Municipal were over.

Once, Nonell had taken his courage in his hands and followed Colina up. He had surprised the young man tinkering about an abandoned pigeon house. Shyly at first, then enthusiastically, Colina had taken Nonell into his confidence and made a full confession of his dark doings. This, he had said, waving airily towards the pigeon house, was his meteorological observatory. Taking Nonell's arm, he had led him to a tiny contraption consisting principally of hair.

“My hygrometer,” he had explained with pride.

The next instrument was a household thermometer doing its best to look scientific. The next, a glass siphon filled with an oily liquid of sickly hue and labelled *barometer*. And the third, a rag fluttering from a length of twine.

“What in heaven's name is that?” the bewildered Nonell had demanded.

“Oh, that. Why, that's my anemometer.”

Nonell, therefore, more than half suspected the reason for Colina's present preoccupation, and ventured to ask him if he had made any observations during the course of the typhoon.

“Yes,” said Colina. “Hourly.”

Nonell asked if he could have them. He had himself manipulated the modest meteorological instruments which his Physics professor had set up in Balaguer, and was interested. He plotted out the curves of Colina's homemade instruments. A day or two later, Colina received a note from the Editor of the *Diario de Manila* requesting a scientific commentary on the recent typhoon. Somehow or other, news of his 'observatory' had leaked out.

With the aid of Nonell's graphs, Colina wrote the article. A long-headed Dutch businessman, at that time head of his country's consulate in Manila, came across the article and was struck by a happy thought. As he remarked to his cronies (probably at Joaquin el Chino's):

“Why cannot the Jesuits do this sort of thing regularly? They might find out the laws that govern these destructive typhoons—even discover a way of foretelling their arrival. Ja. Good for business!”

His cronies—traders and sailors—had nodded sagely in approval. Without a doubt it would be good for business. They consulted the Jesuit Superior about the matter without delay.

Father Vidal sent for Colina.

“Ask Nonell,” Colina said. “He knows more about it than I do.”

Father Vidal sent for Nonell.

“Impossible with our present instruments,” said Nonell.

“We'll buy you good ones,” said the long-headed Dutchman.

“We'll need a Secchi universal meteorograph,” said Nonell.

“What's that?”

“It's an instrument invented by Father Angelo Secchi, the Jesuit director of the Vatican Observatory. It registers barometric, thermometric and hydrographic variations automatically. It will serve our purpose, I think. Only—”

“Only—?”

“Well, there are at present only two in existence. One in Rome and one in Madrid.”

“How much will it cost to build another?”

“About five thousand duros.”

The business men went into consultation. Then:

“Father Vidal, be so good to write to Father Secchi and ask him to make a universal meteorograph for the Meteorological Observatory of the Ateneo Municipal de Manila.”

—Fr. Horacio de la Costa, SJ, *Light Cavalry* (Good Shepherd, 1942). Originally Published in University of Michigan.