A Glorious Death

Graeme Lay

Father Francis Vernon Douglas, good at sports, coaching and singing, was a popular figure in New Plymouth. He became a member of the Columban missionary order and served his time in the Philippines until he was tortured to death by Japanese soldiers in 1943. He gave his life rather than betray the Filipino people whom he loved.

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THE YEAR is 1943, the place the Philippines. World War II is raging throughout South-East Asia and the Pacific: the Philippines has been occupied by the Japanese military forces since their invasion of the country at the end of 1941. But midway through 1943 the Japanese are losing the war against the Filipino and American guerrilla forces hiding in the hills north of the Philippine capital, Manila. The Kempati, the dreaded Japanese occupation police, are desperate to learn just who among the civilian population is providing the guerrillas with information about the movements of the Japanese forces. In August 1942 the guerrillas blow up a Japanese convoy at Pililla, 54 kilometres from Manila. Anyone suspected of providing intelligence to the guerrillas will be arrested, brutally tortured and beaten to death.

The Catholic priest at Pililla is Father Francis Vernon Douglas, a 33-year-old New Zealander who is a member of the Columban missionary order. He has been in the Philippines since 1938. Like other priests, he comes under suspicion of helping the insurgent forces, as occasionally they come down from the hills to have their confessions heard. However, rather than be put in an internment camp as some other Europeans have been, Father Francis prefers to stay in his parish and administer to his flock.

As 1943 progresses and Allied victories against the Japanese increase, their wrath against the guerrillas mounts. Men from villages are rounded up, kept in the sun without food or water and beaten until they supply information about the guerrillas' hiding places. In July Father Francis receives a call claiming to be from a seriously ill guerrilla who wishes to take the holy sacraments. Answering the call, he finds that it is a false summons, made by three lonely American GIs who just want the company of another white man. He returns to his church, angry that this false call has put his life in jeopardy. If the Japanese authorities discovered his visit they would now have what they consider to be evidence that he has been dealing with the insurgents.

On 24 July 1943, Father Francis, the Kiwi who has devoted his life to helping the less fortunate, is reading his breviary when he finds himself surrounded by hostile Japanese soldiers. He is arrested, slung onto the back of a truck and taken to the nearby lakeside town of Paete. He is about to have his faith tested in a way he could never have imagined when, just a few years ago in New Zealand, he chose to devote his life to God. How did this courageous young New Zealander come to be in the Philippines, and what was to be his ultimate fate?

FRANCIS VERNON DOUGLAS was born on 22 May 1910, at the family home in Johnsonville, a suburb of Wellington. His mother, born Catherine Gaffney, was an Irishwoman and a devout Catholic who had migrated to New Zealand from Shannon at the age of 20. In 1904 she worked as a waitress in Rotorua before marrying George Douglas, a good-natured Australian who was not then a member of the Catholic church. Vernon, as he was known to his family, was their fourth child and third son. In all, the Douglases had eight children, and although as a working-class man George struggled to support his large family, they were a happy brood. The children worked hard around the home, the girls helping their mother with the domestic chores, the boys helping to raise vegetables and chooks, chopping wood and delivering newspapers and groceries. Going to Sunday Mass

was a vital aspect of the lives of the Douglas family, their mother leading the way. George became a Catholic in 1926.

Francis, like his siblings, began his education at Johnsonville Primary, a short distance from the family home. He was growing to be a strong, tough, good-looking boy, although he had a narrow escape when as a ten year old he was struck by lightning and knocked out. From 1921 to 1922 he and his brother Ray attended the Marist Brothers' school in Thorndon, until a railway strike disrupted travel and they returned to Johnsonville Primary. From an early age Francis showed exceptional leadership qualities. He also had a strong physique and excelled at sport. He captained the First XV and First XI, and also represented his school at tennis, once winning a championship playing in bare feet with a borrowed racquet. He also did well academically, topping his class as a fourteen year old.

However, in the late 1920s New Zealand was in the grip of economic depression. George became unemployed and the Douglases could not afford to send any of the children to secondary school. At that time there was no such thing as the unemployment benefit. Francis left school at 14 and joined the Post Office as a telegram delivery boy, but he continued to take after-work tuition from a neighbour, Colonel Stevenson, who was a Presbyterian minister. After the Johnsonville postmaster died Francis became a postman, a job he held until 1927, when his life took a significant turn. On 17 January that year he left Johnsonville to enter Holy Cross College, at Mosgiel, in order to train for the priesthood. He was 16 years old.

Francis' spiritual inspiration was undoubtedly his mother. Catherine Douglas believed fervently that all the world's problems could be solved by applying Christian principles and ideals. She even wrote a 10,000-word booklet, entitled it *The Chastener* and in 1925 entered it into a competition for the prevention of crime in America. She hated poverty and war, and always sided with the underdog. Her faith unshakable, Catherine believed that 'the highest education we can have on earth is the teaching of Jesus Christ'.

Accordingly, all the Douglas children attended catechism classes and grew up with a strong sense of social duty and Christian commitment, and no one was surprised when Francis decided to enter the seminary and become a priest. His older brother, George, was already a teaching brother, having entered the Junior-ate seminary before he turned 14, and his sister Doreen had joined a convent in Sydney to train to become a nun.

Holy Cross College, Mosgiel, is on the Taieri Plains, 12 kilometres south of Dunedin. Founded by Bishop Verdon in 1899, the seminary was headed by Monsignor Cecil John Morkane DD, MA, when Vernon Douglas studied there. At that time the Minor Seminary at Holy Cross provided the opportunity for boys like him to complete their secondary schooling and sit their matriculation exam, while the Major Seminary provided university level courses, including scripture, theology, philosophy, Greek, Latin and French. Believing that priests should be men of all-round learning and culture, Dr Morkane also conducted classes in elocution, public speaking and debating. In general, however, life was spartan for both students and priests. Constant study, cold and even hunger formed their daily routine, leavened only by some sport and gardening. Bells punctuated the day, from when the students rose just after six in the morning until the final ring at 10 pm, when the seminary lights went out. Outside Holy Cross, New Zealand

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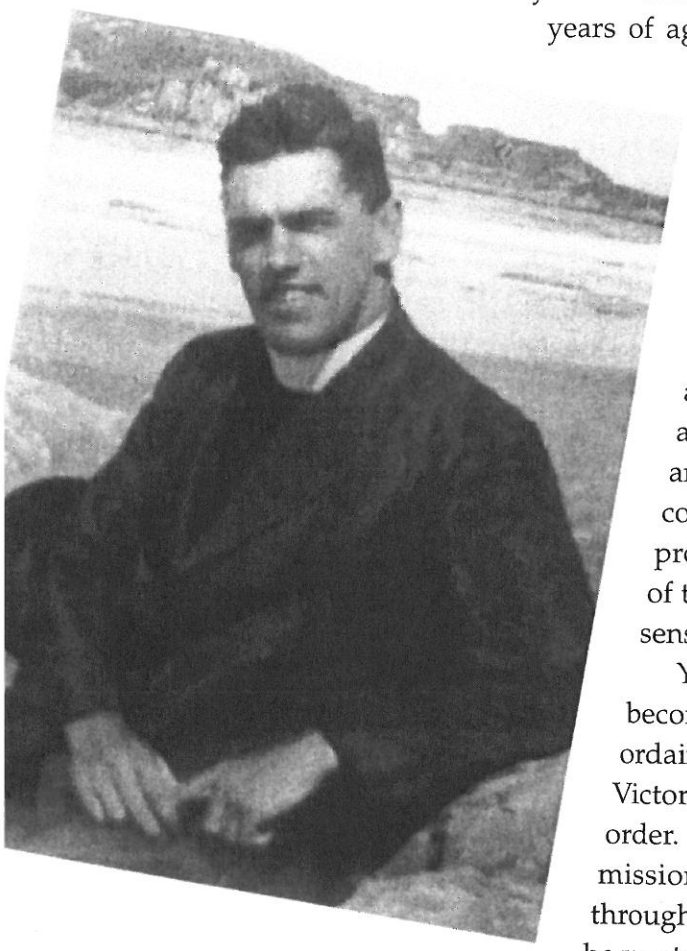
was in the grip of the Great Depression, and austerity and poverty were the lot of the general population as well.

However, Vernon was a devoted student throughout his years at Holy Cross. While he was there the seminary was once visited by Father Michael Cuddigan, an Irish Columban missionary priest who had spent some years serving in the Philippines and China. It is possible that it was after hearing Father Cuddigan speak that Vernon began to harbour the desire to serve in a similar way in the same part of the world. Another event of significance occurred during his training when one day he persistently questioned Dr Morkane about the secrecy of the confessional. He was informed that by canon law, under no circumstances whatsoever could the seal of the confessional be broken. No exceptions could be made, even if one's own life was threatened.

On 29 October 1934, Francis Vernon Douglas was ordained into the priesthood by Archbishop O'Shea, at Saint Josephs in Buckle Street, Wellington. He was 24 years of age. The next morning he held his first Mass, at his old church in Johnsonville, Saints Peter and Paul. It was a day of great pride, especially for the Douglas family. It must have been particularly significant for Francis' mother Catherine, who was now 60, and still deeply saddened by the death of her son Joseph, from diptheria, six years earlier.



Vernon at Mount Maunganui Beach. He cut a dashing and popular figure. As well as carrying out his priestly duties in New Plymouth, he coached cricket and rugby teams and was in charge of the Boy Scouts and the Altar Boys.

In 1935 Father Francis was appointed curate at Opunake, a small town on the west coast of Taranaki, the centre of a large Irish Catholic community. The following year he was made parish priest at Saint Josephs, in New Plymouth. There his sporting prowess and attractive personality combined to make him an extremely dashing and popular figure. As well as carrying out his priestly duties, he coached cricket and rugby teams and twice climbed to the peak of the province's dominant landmark, Mount Egmont. He was also in charge of the Boy Scouts and the altar boys. His fine singing voice and a great sense of humour added to his popularity.

Yet well before his ordination, Father Francis had felt the call to become a missionary and serve in Asia. Just four months after being ordained, he wrote to Father Mullany at Saint Columbans, Essendon, in Victoria, Australia, seeking permission to join the Columban missionary order. The order was named after Saint Columban (543–615 AD), an Irish missionary and scholar who established Christian communities throughout Europe. The calling Father Francis felt was to serve in China; as he wrote to Father Mullany: 'I think my one great motive is to save some of the millions of souls in China, to save them for Christ.'

He received glowing references from his former teachers and current colleagues, and was invited by Father Mullany to join the Columbans. The young priest then wrote to Archbishop O'Shea, asking permission to join the missionary order. He was farewelled by his New Plymouth community in March 1937. There was pride as well as regret at his leaving. One priest, Father Phillips, commented in his speech of farewell, 'Most priests try to imitate the saints, but Father Douglas tries to imitate Lofty Blomfield [a well-known wrestler].' In a characteristically modest reply to the valedictory speeches, Father Francis commented: 'During my stay I would like to have done more here. I have accomplished little. The priest's

'ork here [in Fitzroy, New Plymouth] is the same as that in China, the mission of ɔuls, which will not prosper without the grace of God. We are not separated ecause we are so far apart. I would like to recall the mystical Body of Christ. We ıust remember that the church is universal and we are united in that sense.'

The next day Father Francis drove to Wellington to spend a few days with his ımily. It must have been a sad time for his parents, Catherine and George. Their aughter Doreen, now Sister Kathleen, was in a convent in Sydney, and their son eorge, now Father Pascal, was teaching in Fiji. Now, another of their children as leaving New Zealand.

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ɹ MARCH 1937 Father Francis left Wellington by ship, bound for Sydney where e would visit Doreen, before going on to Essendon for a year's missionary aining. When the year was up he returned briefly to Wellington to officiate at ıe wedding of his sister Sheila, then he prepared to farewell his family. His ıother, Catherine, sobbed as she said good-bye to him after the wedding. When ould any of them see him again?

At the end of his year's training Father Francis fully expected to be posted to hina, where those millions of souls awaited salvation. But in April 1938, to his reat surprise, he was appointed to serve in the Philippines. In reply to queries bout his posting, he wrote: 'I know little about the Philippines, except that I am restling with a strange and unusual language.' The language was the ıdigenous Filipino tongue, Tagalog, which Francis was never to master fully.

The need for priests' services in the Philippines was obvious. Following 500 ears of Spanish colonisation and cultural influence, the country was strongly atholic, the only nation in South-East Asia where Catholicism was the dominant elief. However, following the Spanish–American war of 1898, which had been artly fought in the Philippines, over 100,000 missionaries had been expelled om the country, leaving ten million Catholics to be cared for by only 700 Filipino riests. In 1929 the Columbans had returned to the Philippines and soon became ıe largest foreign mission group operating there.

Vernon sailed to Manila Bay from Sydney on the MV *Neptuna*. After his arrival e spent some time in the capital, studying the language and customs of the ilipino people. It was all very different from anything he had experienced before: ıe tropical heat and humidity, the poverty and overcrowding, the language and eliefs of the people, their superstitions and lack of reverence towards the church. lthough the Catholic church was in reasonable heart in Manila, in the provinces was very different. Here apostasy, heresy and superstition were known to be idespread. In November 1938, Vernon was appointed parish priest at Pililla, orth of Manila.

A settlement of about 5500 people, Pililla was spread about the edge of aguna de Bay. The nearby lake flooded regularly, the parish was very poor, the hurch there was in disarray, and the village had been without a priest for many ears. The Church of Saint Mary Magdalene, which had been built in 1670, was ow deserted except for bats and snakes. Vernon was accommodated in the large tone 'convento' attached to the church, but living conditions were primitive. ooking was done on an open fire under an outside lean-to, while water had to e drawn from a well half a kilometre away. Some of the village people were ctually anti-Catholic, while others preferred to attend the local Aglipayan church

'aint James the Apostle at Paete, ıilippines, where Vernon was rtured by the Japanese. His own urch was 45 kilometres away. He ıs dragged in and suffered water rture and repeated beatings from le butts and sword handles.

across the road from Vernon's. This was an alternative Catholic church which had been begun by a rebellious Filipino priest called Gregorio Aglipay, and which did not recognise the authority of the Pope. Mass was spoken in the local language, Tagalog. While the Aglipay church bell called its followers to worship, Vernon's own church bell lay silent among the ruins of its belfry, which had collapsed.

Although he was contemptuous of this maverick 'priest', Father Francis, or 'Padre Francisco' as he became known, was undaunted by the problems of his parish. What did distress him was not the neglected buildings, but the loss of faith. In a letter home he commented, 'Most of our priests would prefer to work in the pagan atmosphere of China than in the false Christian atmosphere of the Philippines.' However, he saw this 'appalling loss of faith' as a challenge to be met, not evaded.

Father Francis was to be in the country for four and a half years. His first entry in the parish registry was for the funeral of a nine-year-old boy who died of pneumonia on 7 November 1938, his last entry for a baptism on 22 July 1943. His language difficulties were partly overcome with the help of a local town councillor, Jose Flora, who translated his sermons into Tagalog and the local language into English. Jose was also the scoutmaster, and Father Francis soon became actively involved in scouting with the village boys. He set up a boy scout altar boy group, and proved himself as popular with the Filipino youngsters as he had been back with the youngsters of New Plymouth. However, his scouting activity was to have fateful consequences.

Father Francis maintained a lively though intermittent correspondence with his family and friends at home. In some of his letters he dwelt on the meaning of the priesthood and his own role within it. To his friend Father James Casey, for example, he wrote in a letter dated 5 August 1940: 'I believe, then, Jim, that a priest who has an ardent desire for missionary labour and at the same time cherished a strong attachment to the ideal of community life has to make a choice of which of these ideals he has to follow.' He also followed the course of the war in Europe closely and made the following judgement of its cause: 'I think the hand of God is punishing the many nations, who for long years have refused God his rightful place in the lives of their people.' Before very much longer, the war was to come much closer to home.

On 7 December 1941 the Japanese attacked the American military base and Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The Americans immediately declared war on the Japanese, who the very next day invaded the Philippines. The war was now a truly global one.

People fled from Manila to the provinces, where food supplies could be obtained and the Japanese bombs were less likely to fall. In his role as field marshal of the Philippine Army the American military leader, General Douglas MacArthur, was unable to defend Manila and declared it an open city. He left the

ilippines in March 1942 for Australia, vowing 'I shall return.' The Japanese perial Army occupied Manila with no resistance. The American and Filipino ces retreated from Manila to the Bataan peninsula, on the western side of anila Bay, in January 1942. There they held out against the Japanese for three nths until surrendering in April. Seventy-six thousand prisoners were arched north by the Japanese to a prisoner-of-war camp. Over 16,000 men died the seven-day, 120-kilometre march, receiving no food on this ghastly journey.

Those Filipinos and Americans who had escaped from Manila before the arch took to the hills and became guerrilla soldiers to protect the civilian pulation and cooperate with the United States Armed Forces Far East. lthough they worked in loosely knit groups they formed an efficient intelligence twork, harassing the Japanese and ambushing convoys at every opportunity.

There were strong cultural differences between the Japanese occupiers and the lipino people. The latter had been more Western than Asian in their outlook for nturies. A gentle and sensitive people, to them personal rights and respect r human dignity were paramount. The Christian concept of duty to one's eighbour was a basic tenet. By contrast, the overriding philosophy of the panese was duty to their Emperor. Unquestioning obedience, discipline and ard work were their other vital ethics. As a method of training, Japanese soldiers ere slapped regularly, a custom which also came to be applied to the Filipino eople who displeased them. This practice was strongly resented, as the Filipinos garded the face as holy.

Although many of the Columban missionaries were Irish and therefore eutral, the occupation of the Philippines by the Japanese brought difficulties for nem. There were also Americans, Australians and New Zealanders like Father rancis in the order, and their homelands were at war with Japan. Some of the merican Columbans joined the guerrillas in the hills, others were interned in amps. The Irish priests were permitted to stay with their parishes, but were llowed to minister to their flocks only under strict supervision. Having an Irish nother, Father Francis could have elected to be interned in a camp, but he chose ot to, preferring to continue his work in the Pililla parish community. He and the ther Columbans were required to wear red armbands bearing Japanese writing, o show they had special permission to remain at large, although as an act of defiance Father Francis often refused to wear his.

The occupation of the Philippines by the Japanese became more and more brutal, especially after the tide of the war began to turn against the Imperial forces. Many Filipinos were made to endure mass propaganda sessions, fearing execution if they didn't attend, while anyone suspected of anti-Japanese activities was tortured to the point of death. Others became informers in an effort to protect themselves, and it was impossible for the people to know who could be trusted. Summary executions became common.

One especially feared practice was 'zoning'. This involved drawing up a cordon around a particular village, then rounding up all the men and teenage boys and incarcerating them in a local church or other large building. Here they were systematically tortured, often to death, to force them to reveal information about the guerrillas. The informers, called Makapilli, would have their heads covered in hoods and be led into the church to point out to the Japanese anyone who had aided the insurgent forces.

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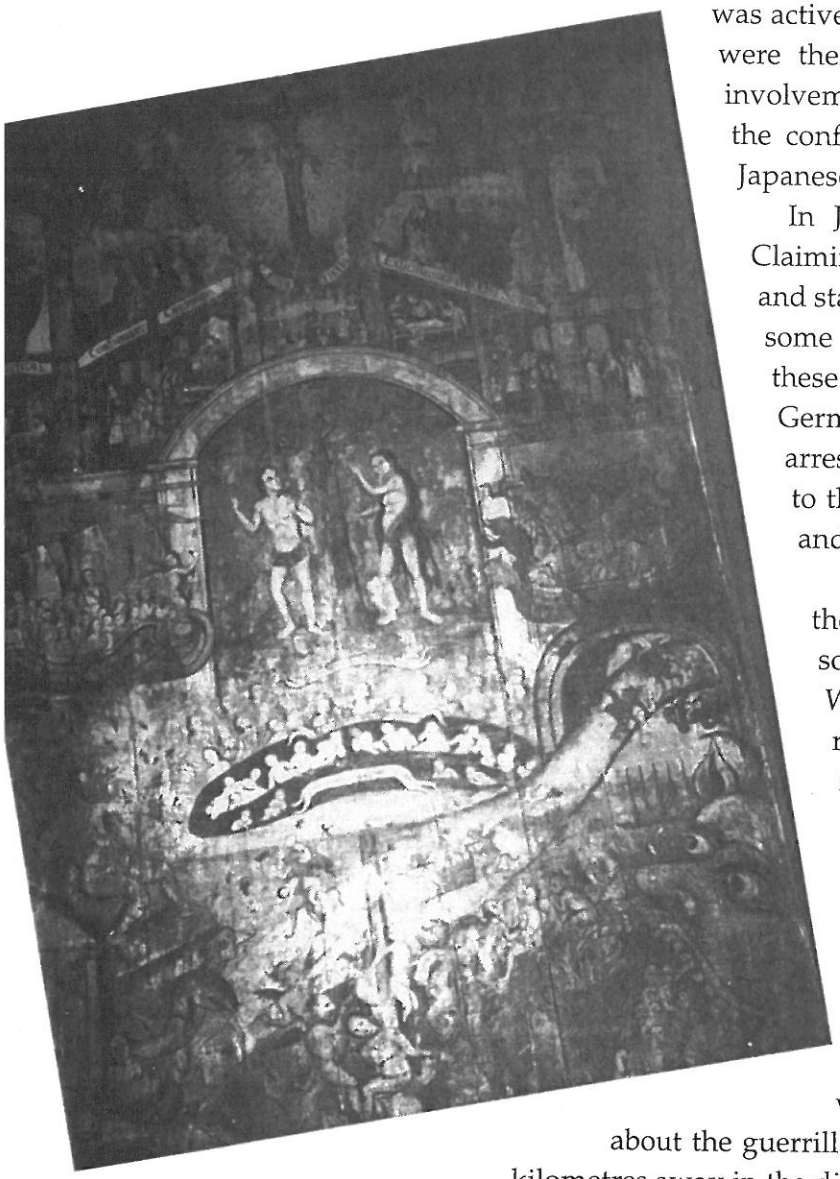
In August 1942, after the guerrilla forces successfully blew up a convoy near Pililla, the Japanese became particularly vicious in their attempts to discover who in the community had helped them. When a local boy turned up at a dance and showed off a cigarette with MacArthur's words 'I shall return' printed on it, he was taken outside and summarily shot.

At this time Father Francis had a *National Geographic* map of the world on his wall, which he used to follow the progress of the war. Along with the map were some boy scout flags, and also in his room was an old radio which no longer worked. Already the Japanese occupiers suspected him, because it was thought that the guerrillas, anticipating their death in battle, would come down from the hills and make their confessions to a priest. Whether or not Francis was actively assisting the guerrillas remains unknown: some who were there say he was, others deny that he had any direct involvement with them. However, it is known that he did hear the confessions of some guerrillas, and this was seen by the Japanese as taking sides.



he mural depicting Heaven and ell that Vernon would have been cing while tied to a pillar inside int James Church. He said nothing it prayers for the three days he was ere until his death.

In June 1943 a German sausage seller came to Pililla. Claiming to be a good Catholic, he sought out Father Francis and stayed with him for a few days. He also made friends with some of the locals. After he left the village, however, some of these people were arrested, and it was thought that the German was in fact a spy. Although Father Francis was not arrested then, it is possible that the German had passed on to the Japanese the information that the priest had a radio, and a map and flags on his wall.

It was the next month, July, that Father Francis received the call from the Sierra Madra mountains, saying that someone there was dying and needed to see a priest. When he found only the three lonely Americans, Francis returned to the village, furious that they had put his life in danger. He went to Manila and reported the incident to the Malete priests, then went back to Pililla. He told a friend, Father Gordon Jackson, that he feared for his life.

A few days later, the Japanese military police came and took him away, along with the flags, the map and the broken radio, which were cited as evidence that the priest had been spying. Now the Kempati wanted to make Father Francis tell them what he knew about the guerrillas. He was first taken to the town of Tanay, about five kilometres away in the direction of Manila, then back through Pililla to the town of Paete, about 60 kilometres away.

The day Father Francis was brought to Paete it was the feast day of Saint James. This commemorated a time early in the eighteenth century when Saint James was supposed to have arrived in the village on a white horse, flashing a silver sword and thus saving the villagers from an invading enemy attack. The Fiesta of Saint James the Apostle was normally a day of great rejoicing for the people who lived in the lakeside village, with the large stone baroque church dedicated to Saint

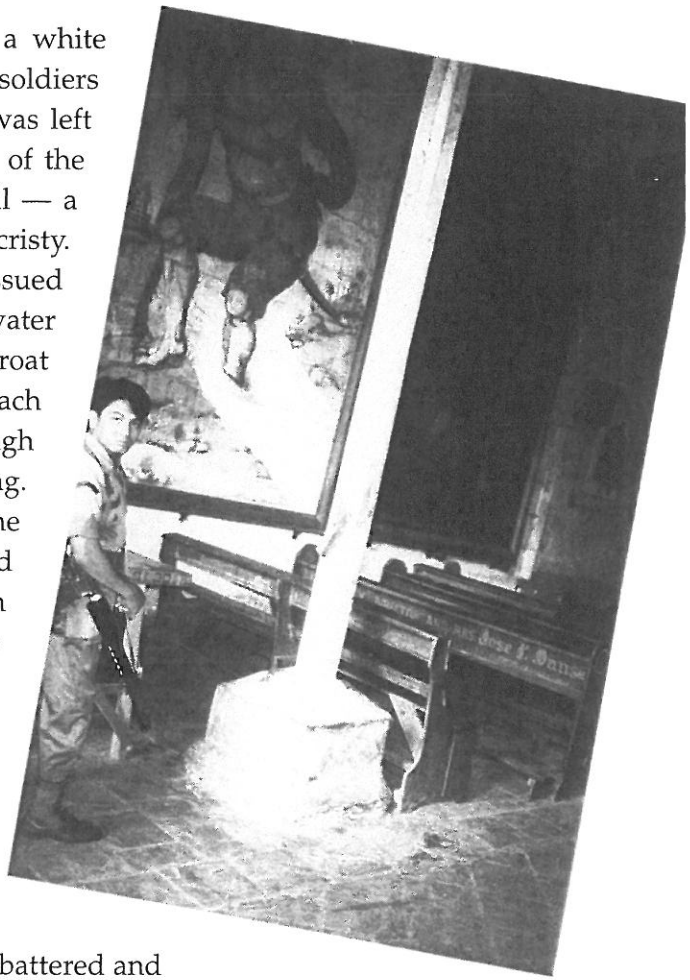
James the focus for their religious celebrations. However, in July 1943 there was nothing to celebrate. The village people, like most other Filipinos, had to concentrate on surviving. The village priest was driven out and their church commandeered by the Japanese military police. A cordon was thrown around Paete and the men and teenage boys who had come to the fiesta were detained. For the next seven days the women and children of the village had to listen to the cries of agony of their men as suspected guerrillas were tortured. Inside the church the Japanese had set up two separate torture chambers: one in the sacristy (the place where priests vested themselves for Mass) and one in the baptistry (an enclosed cubicle under the bell tower where babies were baptised).

On Saturday 24 July, an unknown European priest wearing a white soutane was brought into Paete on the back of a truck. Japanese soldiers dragged him across the village plaza and tied him to a post. He was left there all day in the heat, a machine gun aimed at his head. None of the villagers dared to give the priest — who looked exhausted and ill — a drink. That evening Japanese soldiers dragged the priest into the sacristy. For some hours the sounds of coughing, choking and spluttering issued from it, but no European voice. Father Francis was being given water torture, a process in which water was poured down the victim's throat until his stomach was full, a board was then placed across the stomach and a soldier jumped on it, forcing the water back up and out through the person's nose and mouth, creating a sensation similar to drowning.

When the water torture failed to extract any information from the priest, the now-furious soldiers hauled him down the nave and tied him to the baptistry font, where they struck him about the head with their rifles. Although his face began to bleed heavily, smearing the white marble font, the priest continued to say nothing.

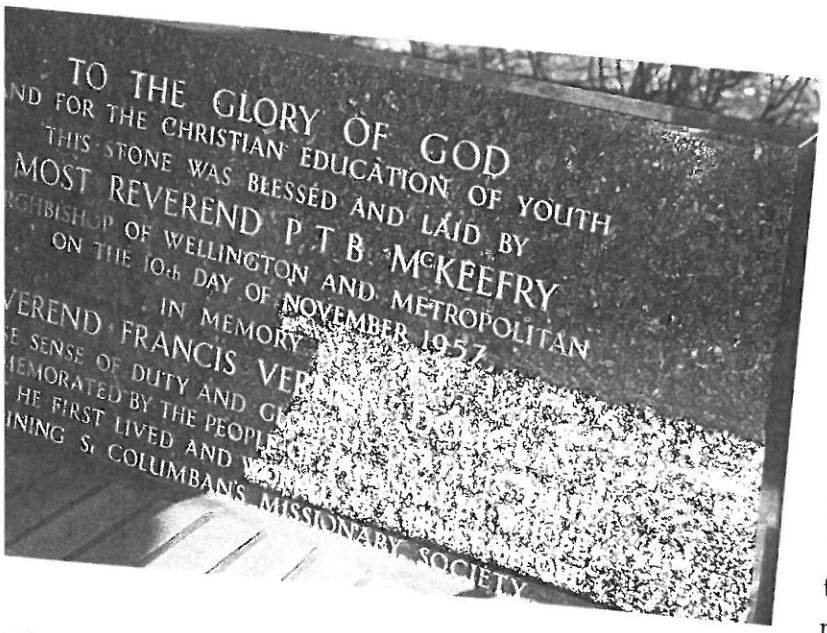
He was then taken from the baptistry and tied to the pillar that supported the church's loft, facing a huge painting depicting images of heaven and hell. There he was left for three days. The pillar was only a short distance from the church's main entrance, and as the door was opened and the soldiers came and went, village women and children peered inside, hoping to see their husbands and fathers. Instead they saw the priest, his body by now battered and bleeding, and were awed by his fortitude. A Japanese officer interrogated him, and when he received no answers to his questions struck the priest on the forehead with his sword handle, causing his victim's face to bleed profusely. During the three days of torture, the priest stood facing the altar, his lips moving but giving no information to his tormentors. From the time the priest was brought into the church, the villagers of Paete escaped physical abuse from the Japanese.

On the third day the Japanese soldiers asked the parish priest of Paete, Father Rosal, to come and hear Father Francis' confession. Father Rosal told the Japanese that he would have to die rather than divulge anything told him by Father Francis during his confession, and asked that they stay while he heard it. Father Rosal found his brother priest covered in blood and with wounds from head to foot. One of his eyes was missing. A Japanese soldier told him: 'I admire the man. He knows how to suffer. He has been here three days and nights and yet shows the least sign of impatience.'



The pillar Vernon was tied to when he was tortured in the church. The villagers could see him from the door but could do nothing to help.

On the evening of 27 July, with darkness falling, Father Francis was taken from the church, his hands tied behind his back, and put on a truck. Although still conscious, he was extremely weak and obviously dying. Many of the deeply religious villagers saw him as a saviour. Like Jesus Christ, he had been stripped and beaten, but accepted his torment with great bravery. As they watched, a Japanese soldier pulled a canvas sheet over the priest's face and the truck sped away. Apart from his Japanese tormentors, no one ever saw Father Francis again. Undoubtedly he had been killed.



The foundation stone at Francis Douglas Memorial College in New Plymouth.

It was not until Easter 1945 that Father Francis' family was told of his disappearance and presumed death. For months their letters to him had been returned, marked 'whereabouts unknown', giving them a sense of unease, then foreboding. His mother, Catherine, had long had a premonition that her missionary son would never return. But Catherine and George, though they grieved, were proud of their son, who had remained faithful to his calling, had been tested terribly until death and not found wanting. He had died the death of a martyr. The day after they received the official news of Vernon's death, their daughter Sheila was delivered of her fifth child, a girl. The birth of this child did something to alleviate the grief they felt at the news of their son's death. The family named the baby Vernon Rose.

The Philippines was liberated from the Japanese in October 1944, by General MacArthur, who kept his vow to return. After the war, the life and death of Francis Vernon Douglas was commemorated by the establishment of a Catholic school for boys in New Plymouth, where he served before he left New Zealand. The school was named Francis Douglas Memorial College and the inscription on its foundation stone includes the words:

> In memory of Francis Vernon Douglas, whose sense of duty and glorious death is thus commemorated by the people of Taranaki in whose midst he first lived and worked as a priest before joining Saint Columban's Missionary Society.

In the school hangs a portrait of Francis Vernon Douglas, and an annual Mass is held by the boys of the college to celebrate the achievements of the priest who gave his life rather than betray the Filipino people whom he loved.