

INTERVIEW OF TOMAS A. CAMACHO

by Howard P. Willens and Deanne C. Siemer

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- Willens: Bishop Tomas A. Camacho has kindly agreed to participate in our project. We have had the good fortune to meet with him on many occasions over the years, and he is one of the most experienced and insightful observers of the scene here in the Northern Marianas. Bishop, thank you very much for being available to assist us on this project. Could we begin by your giving us some background about where you were born and your family background.
- Camacho: Yes. I was born in Garapan in Saipan on September 18, 1933. My mother is from Palau. The family is originally from Guam and her parents moved to Palau way back. She was born in Palau herself; she grew up in Palau. My father decided to take a trip from Saipan, and then he met my mother in Palau, and they got married. At the time, his father was the what we call "atkatdi," which is equivalent to mayor, but not elected. He was appointed by the Japanese government. He was the "atkatdi" at that time.
- Siemer: In Saipan?
- Camacho: In Saipan. My father has three sisters and five brothers. My father died in 1961, just a couple of months after my ordination.
- Siemer: What is your father's full name?
- Camacho: Vidal Palacios Camacho.
- Siemer: And your mother's?
- Camacho: My mother's maiden name is Maria Borja Aguon. After they got married, they immediately moved to Saipan. Then my older sister was born, and a second sister was born, a brother, then I was born. Then they moved back to Palau.
- Willens: Why did they move to Saipan?
- Camacho: My mother wanted to move because, according to her, life there was just miserable.
- Willens: In Palau?
- Camacho: In Palau, at that time. So she and my father decided to move to Saipan to raise us. But in 1936 or maybe 1935, they went back to Palau. We all went. One of my brothers was born there, my brother Antonio. I was born there in Saipan. Then we moved back to Saipan again and have remained here since.
- Siemer: When did you move back?
- Camacho: 1936, 1937.
- Siemer: So the family was here during the war?
- Camacho: Oh, yes. I grew up in Garapan. My father built a house right next to his father's house. In those days I believe they used lime, not concrete, to put up a house. They gathered stones and they put stones on top of one another and they put lime around it. He was able to put up a two-story building in those days. I grew up there. I went to a Japanese first grade. Then half-way through second grade, the Japanese government told us to move out of our house. Luckily my father had a ranch up in the Chalan Galaide toward Topatchau, around

that area. My father inherited 21 acres of land from his father. That's quite a large-sized property. At that time, there was a house built there and a water tank. So we moved to Chalan Galaide at Topatchau.

Willens: Why did the Japanese tell the family to leave the home in Garapan?

Camacho: They wanted to use the space for the soldiers.

Willens: Was this before the war actually began with the United States?

Camacho: Before the bombings, yes. So while up in Chalan Galaide, we used to walk all the way down to the Japanese school, where the building for the senior citizens is now, right there. In fact, the house that was occupied by the school principal still stands, where Dr. Chong used to live. That was the house of the principal of the school, and right in front of his house was the gate to go into the school. So we used to walk all the way from up there at Topatchau down to go to school. We'd wake up early in the morning. I guess they began school at 7:00 in those days. Then after school, around lunch time, I think, we would walk back up to the ranch.

Willens: Did you complete the four or five years that the Japanese provided?

Camacho: No. They closed down the schools. The Japanese military took over the school. So then we had to walk over toward the gas station on the way up to Capitol Hill. See, we used to walk down there and attend classes under the mansanita trees. For a few months we did that, then war broke out. But interesting, I'll never forget first grade. Wrestling was a big thing with the Japanese. So I was there wrestling with former Governor Tenorio, and I fell down and broke my arm. I thought I was going to die. We had to walk from the school all the way to the hospital. The hospital still stands there. I was holding my arm and just walking with my teacher to go to the hospital. There were no casts in those days. They put on a splint, they called it, then they wrapped it around, and it was like that for a couple of months. When they took off the cast, I couldn't stretch out my arm. So then I had to go to a chiropractor. It hurt. While we were on the ranch, my brother used to take care of seven cows. He would tie the cow to a tree to feed around the tree, then next day you take him to another tree. I used to take care of about 50 goats. Imagine, in second grade. There was a big fence. After school, I had to go gather some green grass for the goats. That was my job. My brother would take care of the seven cows. One day I went with him; we were riding on the back of the cow. He was ahead of me, my older brother. He died during the war. Then he turned around and was facing me, and the cow's going that way, and he's facing me. I said I can do that too, so I turned around and I didn't realize that I hit the behind of the cow, and he started running. The cow went into the bushes, and I fell down and broke my arm again.

Willens: You broke the same arm again?

Camacho: Actually, it was dislocated. This came out and went up here. Oh, that hurt. The second time it hurt bad. Anyway, then I went to the local chiropractor. He used to live in Navy Hill. There was no hospital in those days. So he set it.

Willens: This was during the war then? You were about seven or eight years old?

Camacho: No, I was nine.

Willens: The former Governor, who was Pete P. Tenorio?

Camacho: Yes.

Willens: Was he one of your classmates?

- Camacho: I think so; I think we were classmates.
- Willens: Who were some of the other classmates that you remember?
- Camacho: Ben Santos and Manny Terlahe and Joe Santos Acres.
- Willens: Santos Acres?
- Camacho: Yes. He was my classmate. Juan Sablan died. Who else? I forget the rest. But anyway, that was the Japanese school.
- Siemer: How far did the Japanese education system on Saipan go in those days?
- Camacho: I believe up to fifth or sixth grade. But by the time you graduate, you can read, you can write, you can do arithmetic.
- Willens: I've read that the curriculum in the Japanese schools was oriented toward Japanese traditions and Japanese language.
- Camacho: Oh, we had to speak Japanese.
- Willens: Did the local population have any role to play in the community?
- Camacho: No. The Japanese controlled everything. As I said, my grandfather was a mayor but not elected. There was no election in those days. The mayor was just appointed by the Japanese government. All the teachers in the school were Japanese. By the second grade, we were doing multiplication. Up until now, whenever I multiply, I have to use Japanese because I never learned the English, 2 x 2 and so forth. I do the Japanese; I memorized it so I never forgot the multiplication table.
- Willens: Did your family benefit from the economy that the Japanese brought to the island in terms of sugarcane industry and the other agricultural industries? Did you family participate in that?
- Camacho: No, except that some Okinawans leased my father's property. Also, anything that my father produced, the leftover, we sold. My father used to go from Garapan to the ranch every day, and on the way back he would bring firewood, and he'd sell it. There was no electricity in those days, so everybody had to cook using wood. But we were never hungry. My father planted enough taro, tapioca, corn. When we were staying up at the ranch, some Koreans or Okinawans would come up as far as Topatchau walking, selling fish. My mother never had enough milk to feed us, so my father would make sure that there was a milking cow for the seven of us. Every time one of us was born, there was a cow there ready for the milk.
- Siemer: Seven children altogether?
- Camacho: Yes.
- Siemer: What are their names?
- Camacho: The oldest is Gregoria, married to Cabrera. Vicenta remains single. She's now paralyzed half way down. She stays with my other sister, because my mother just died last August. She used to live with my mother. Then my brother who died in the war. He was two years older than me. Then myself. My brother Tony, who was born in Palau. He also died of a heart attack about 10 years ago. Then my brother Frank, the former postmaster up there in Capitol Hill. Then my brother John, and Roman. Eight. Roman is my youngest brother. He lives in South Carolina. He joined the Army, and married a Guamanian girl. Both of them retired from the Army, and they live in South Carolina.
- Siemer: How long had your father's family, the Camachos, been on Saipan?

- Camacho: Since when my great-great-grandfather came to Saipan in I suppose the 1860s.
- Willens: The former Governor Carlos Camacho is related to you?
- Camacho: Yes. He's my second cousin. His father and my father are first cousins.
- Willens: Did you and your brothers and sisters have friends in the Japanese community, or did you stay pretty much to yourself and with other local people?
- Camacho: I remember I used to play with Japanese kids, because we were surrounded by Japanese families. But yes, we hung around with other Chamorros. Even up at the ranch, whenever we had visitors, they were Chamorros or Carolinians. We never had any Japanese close friends.
- Willens: Were the Carolinian and the Chamorro families and close?
- Camacho: Not really, because the Carolinians lived in the southern part of Garapan, and the Chamorros lived in the northern part of Garapan. Garapan in those days was big—a town of about 25,000 people—mostly Japanese. For example, west of my house was a Japanese store, north was Japanese, south was the Flores family, and east was another Japanese store. So we were sort of surrounded by Japanese.
- Siemer: What happened to your family's ranch during the war?
- Camacho: We stayed there during the war. A lot of Chamorros, but especially relatives, came up to my father's ranch because it had a lot of caves. And they all prepared a cave for their hiding.
- Siemer: Were you on this side, on the west side of Topatchau?
- Camacho: West side.
- Siemer: There's some excellent farmland there.
- Camacho: My father's brothers and sisters have property up there. So his brothers, five of them, and three sisters, they all have property out there. Quite a large property out there belongs to the Camacho clan.
- Willens: Some of the people you grew up with remember being told by the Japanese before the invasion of the United States to leave their village homes and go to their farm or ranch. But as I understand your recollection, your family was told much earlier to leave Garapan and go live on the ranch.
- Camacho: Before the invasion. Before the bombing, we were already up there.
- Willens: What is your recollection of the invasion, the bombing and the battle that followed?
- Camacho: One time my father and I went to Garapan. For what, I don't know; I just went with him. On the way back, we were near that Joe Tomakane's house, John Babauta's house. We call it Gualo Rai area. My father and I were there, and then I actually saw this American plane came over and started dropping bombs out near the ocean. I think there were ships out there. They were bombing the ships. That was not the actual bombardment. That was just a visit. Then they went away.
- Willens: Were you all scared?
- Camacho: At that time? Not really; I was with my father. I was only nine years old. I let him do the worrying. I was just following instructions in those days. The actual bombing happened way after that. We stayed in the cave. We were in the cave all the time. My father is the only one who would go out occasionally to get water, get some food. But then by the

middle of June my relatives from Gualo Rai came up. There were a lot of people there. I remember Juan Cepeda who's got German blood was just shot there by the Japanese, because anybody looking Caucasian was supposed to be a spy. So they just shot him dead, right there at the ranch. They thought he was a spy.

Willens: They came up to look at you, to inspect the ranch and see who was there?

Camacho: Yes. My brother died of the shrapnel. The day we were liberated, he died that morning, together with my uncle. Right near the cave was the little shed there where I kept my goats. It must have been from the ship, the shell came in and just exploded in that shed and killed all the goats.

Siemer: Was your brother outside the cave? Is that how he was injured?

Camacho: My brother was with my aunt when he died. He wasn't with us. He was with one of my cousins his age; they were always together. So he was with my cousin when he died.

Siemer: Did everyone else in the caves up there on Topatchau survive?

Camacho: I think quite a few died.

Siemer: There was a lot of shelling up there, wasn't there?

Camacho: Yes. Maybe 10 or 15 people died on our property, on our ranch, before we were liberated.

Willens: What was the liberation? Did some American soldiers come up the ranch and look into the caves? How did it happen?

Camacho: No. I believe the morning we were liberated some Chamorro people at the ranch heard Americans speaking. They were very close. He started yelling "Paz." He was recognized, and they invited the rest of us to come out. I remember my cousin came out holding a huge crucifix. That was the beginning of our liberation. We all followed one another out.

Siemer: Were there many people in the family who spoke English at that time?

Camacho: Nobody spoke English. When we were taken in the GI trucks, we went to Camp Susupe, where they had two, three sections there—one for the Chamorros, one for the Japanese civilians. I believe there was another one for soldiers.

Willens: Did they put the Carolinians in with the Chamorros?

Camacho: Yes.

Willens: So how long were you in that internment camp?

Camacho: Not too long. Then we were sent here to Chalan Kanoa.

Willens: I see.

Camacho: We were living in tents over there. Then they sent us over here to Chalan Kanoa. We were given houses. My father was given a house that still stands there. He extended it, and we lived there for a while. Then he was given a 100 x 100 lot over there by District 1. Then he put up our permanent house over there.

Willens: Did your family welcome the Americans?

Camacho: Oh, definitely, yes.

Willens: You had a grandfather who was an appointed official by the Japanese Administration, though. Were some members of the family sympathetic to the Japanese?

Camacho: At that time, no, because they [the Japanese] turned against us, actually. They were very cruel to us. They were demanding farm produce and the soldiers were stealing our chickens. So we didn't like them by that time. I don't believe so. At the same time, we were very hungry. We were very thirsty. We didn't even have water to drink. So anything is better than being in that situation. But I believe we were very happy to be liberated. We didn't know what the Americans were going to do. They [the Japanese] spread word around that the Americans were killing the men and keeping the women. I remember that, as a nine year old boy. In July 1945 they set up school here. Chalan Kanoa was a sugar town and the Japanese had a school there where the Chalan Kanoa school is now. The family of the sugar employees, they sent their children to the school the Japanese had there. I started to go to school. They put us all together. I remember Mrs. Mariquita Torres. A bunch of our people would go to night school learning English and then the next day would come to school to teach us what they learned the night before.

Siemer: So the teachers were Chamorros?

Camacho: Yes, to begin with. Then after a while, some Americans came in to help out. I remember it was equivalent to third grade now, learning ABC and how to spell mother and all those things. I went to school in 1945, 1946, 1947, then I joined the altar boys. I was an altar boy under a Spanish Jesuit priest who was here with us. There was a priest and a lay brother, and there were five Spanish sisters, Mercedarian sisters, who were here during the war. One died during the war, but the priest and four other sisters survived. So I joined the altar boys and served Mass. The church was where the old municipal offices were located, the two-story building by the Post Office. I believe it was a store during the Japanese time and was converted to a church. In 1947, they changed. The Spanish Jesuit went back to Spain, and an American Capuchin from Guam came over, Father Ferdinand Stippich. In 1948, he said to the altar boys: "Anybody want to be a priest?" I put up my hand and said: "Why not?" So in the summer of 1948, he sent me to Guam. In the meantime, we graduated from eighth grade. There was a little ceremony there, a graduation ceremony. When I went to Guam, they put me in Dededo village on Guam. They put me there with another Capuchin priest. So I attended the Dededo school. See, the standard of the school here wasn't anything in 1948. So I attended another eighth grade. Then from there I took the entrance exam to go to Father Duenas High School for boys. The Stigmatin Fathers opened it in 1948. I went in 1949. And it was tough. I was just learning English, and on top of that I had to learn Latin and Spanish and learn all the other subjects. It was a good thing there was a student ahead of me who was a former teacher. He wanted to be a priest, so he decided to repeat high school courses. After school he would take me aside to teach me what was taught that day in English. He would be telling me in Chamorro what it was all this about, you know. If it wasn't for him, my goodness, they would have kicked me out.

Willens: Were you learning Latin?

Camacho: Latin at the same time, yes, and all that stuff. I don't know how I passed those subjects. The teachers were five priests from Boston who came over in 1948 to begin Father Duenas School. It was tough. I was there for four years in high school. Then they conducted two years of junior college at the same place. Then in 1953 I graduated from high school. I was the only one there. In 1953, transportation was still very bad, and the economy here was real, real bad. None of my brothers or mother or father came to my graduation. I was all by myself there. But every summer beginning in 1948, I used to take Miss Guam, a little boat, to go to Guam. In order to go to Guam, you had to provide yourself with three days' provision, food and all that. And you slept on the deck. I don't know why I did it, looking

back. I remember the first time I was leaving, my mother was just standing there, tears coming down. I was 15 years old the first time I was separated from my family. I don't know why I did it.

Willens: What did your family think about your decision?

Camacho: Oh, they supported me.

Willens: Had anyone in the family ever made a selection of the church before?

Camacho: No. I'm the only one. But at the beginning of every school year, I'd go to Guam, then in the summer I came back on the same boat. I did that for four years, then started to fly in 1954, 1955. But in order to go to Guam in those days, you had to go to the airport, which is Kobler [Field], you paid \$10, but you could only go space available, because the airplane belonged to the Coast Guard. If there were men going to Guam, then tough luck, you wait for another day. But at least that was better than the boat. After I graduated from high school, I came back here. I remember after that graduation, a few of us who had been going to Guam to go to school, Dr. Joe Villagomez, Joe Cruz and Ricardo Borja, the Lt. Governor's father, and a few of us—I was about 17 at that time—we went around and campaigned to have the mayor changed.

Siemer: Was that Joe R. Cruz from Tinian?

Camacho: Yes. He was also my classmate. But our candidate didn't come with us. Mr. Benavente, he just stayed home, and we were out there campaigning. And he got elected! That was my first experience in politics.

Willens: Did you have a political affiliation in those days?

Camacho: No. A bunch of us just went out campaigning. I don't know why we did it.

Willens: Elias Sablan, as I understand it, was one of the founders of the Territorial Party that later became the Republican Party. He was also a leader in the Carolinian community?

Camacho: Yes. He was a very intelligent man. But we just got together, and we campaigned, and our candidate won without giving a speech, without showing up. Then I went back to Guam for two more years.

Willens: That was the junior college?

Camacho: Yes. I was coming back here every summer. And in 1955, I graduated from junior college. Nobody showed up. Transportation was still bad in those days, and money was very tight. In 1955, I had to go to the States. That year also the first Saipanese was ordained a priest, Monsignor Jose Guerrero. Monsignor Guerrero was born here and then went to Guam and lived with his uncle from the time he was very little. He was raised by his uncle in Guam but then decided to be a priest. In 1955, he came back to be ordained. He was the first one to be ordained in this cathedral [in Chalan Kanoa]. Good thing he got ordained. We're about the same height and weight. He gave me his black cassock. And he gave me his black suit. So I didn't have to buy any of my winter clothing or sweaters or things like that; I got them all from him. This was 1955. I went to the States in 1955 and stayed until 1960—five years.

Siemer: Where were you?

Camacho: Menlo Park, California. There's a seminary there. In 1960, I came back. I got ordained deacon in Guam. Nobody showed up. Then I came here and spent the summer here. That was the first graduation at Mt. Carmel. I had a brother who graduated from eighth grade and a brother graduating from 12th grade, and the school asked me to be the guest

speaker for that graduation, which was quite memorable. I helped out here in Saipan during the summer. Then I went back to the States for my final year.

Siemer: Back to Menlo Park?

Camacho: Back to Menlo Park for another year. Then I came back and got ordained on Guam. At that time, everybody showed up except for my brother and my father who was dying. He was dying in the naval hospital up where the Maturana House of Prayer is now. That was the naval hospital. My father was there dying of lung cancer, so he couldn't go to Guam. And my brother Frank stayed back to be with my father. My mother reluctantly went to Guam, and my brothers and sister. They saw me ordained there. And that week we moved up here to Saipan for my first solemn Mass. At that time it was very strict to celebrate Mass anywhere else but inside the church. But the Bishop at that time, in 1961, gave me permission to celebrate Mass right next to my father's bed in the hospital. So that was quite a treat. I celebrated my first Mass right next to him.

Willens: When was this cathedral [in Chalan Kanoa] built?

Camacho: This was dedicated in 1949. My first Mass here was in 1961, June of 1961. They brought my father down in an ambulance, and they brought this oxygen tank with him into the church. There was a doctor right next to him. He was in really bad shape; he was in constant pain. Then in August I got a telegram from Guam. The Bishop instructed me to come to Guam because I was assigned to teach at Father Duenas, my alma mater, and the Academy of Our Lady of Guam. So I went back to Guam. My father was still in the hospital. In October, my father was in real bad shape. I came up here; he died; I buried him. Then I went back to Guam.

Siemer: In those days, Saipan was under the Bishop in Guam?

Camacho: Yes.

Siemer: Was the rest of Micronesia under Guam as well?

Camacho: No. Before the Spanish-American War, we were all together. Then after the Spanish-American War, we were taken out ecclesiastically and put under Carolines and the Marshalls. In 1947, we were taken out again from the Carolines and the Marshalls and put back together with Guam. In 1985, we were separated. So I went back to Guam and taught at the Academy and at Father Duenas. Then I was the assistant at the Cathedral under Archbishop Flores, he was a Monsignor then, taking care of a small parish. For six years I did that.

Siemer: Were you in Guam in 1969?

Camacho: 1969? No, I was in Rota.

Siemer: What were the years that you spent in Guam?

Camacho: 1961-1968.

Siemer: During those years, did you have occasion to travel around Micronesia?

Camacho: No.

Siemer: Where did you go in 1968?

Camacho: In 1968 the Bishop needed somebody to go to Rota. So I volunteered to go to Rota. I spent two years in Rota: 1968, 1969, 1970. In 1970, I went back to Guam.

Siemer: Were you the parish priest in Rota?

Camacho: Yes.

Siemer: Did you also teach?

Camacho: In Rota? No, I didn't. It was Father Antonelli who did that. He taught Algebra. In fact, Father Antonelli was my professor in Guam at Father Duenas. In 1970, I moved back to Guam. I was assigned to Tumon when Tumon started to develop in those days. Then I went to Inarajan for two years, then I was assigned back to Agana Cathedral as the rector of the cathedral.

Siemer: That was a substantial promotion, I take it.

Camacho: Oh, golly. For a foreigner in Guam, a Trust Territory guy here, he's in charge now of the Agana Cathedral.

Willens: When was that?

Camacho: Let's see, I was in Agana in 1972 or 1973. I stayed there until 1976. In the meantime, they promoted me to a monsignor. In 1976, I was assigned up here for the first time as an episcopal vicar, acting on behalf of the Bishop of Guam. I was sort of in charge of the Northern Marianas. I was teaching here at Mt. Carmel School in those days. In 1984, my appointment came out and also the division of the diocese.

Siemer: So that's when you became Bishop?

Camacho: Yes. The appointment came out, and it was supposed to be top secret. It's supposed to be announced at just such and such an exact time to coincide with the timing in Rome, because the Holy Father must announce it first in Rome, and then it's supposed to carry the news throughout. So one afternoon I received a call from Bishop Flores in Guam. I kind of had a hunch about what was going on. He said: "Tommy, I want you here in my office tomorrow at 10:00 o'clock even if you have to swim." So I went to Guam. He said: "I have put you under pontifical secrecy. Under pain of excommunication, you may not divulge or tell anybody." I said: "Okay." He said: "The Holy Father has appointed you to be Bishop of the new diocese of the Northern Marianas. Now you go to my chapel and you pray over it before you tell me your decision." So I went. I came back, and he said: "What's your decision?" I said: "You know better. What do you think? Do you think I could do it?" He said: "I want your decision." I said: "Okay, I'll take it." Then he said: "But you still cannot say anything about it until (this was a Monday) I go to Saipan to notify your family." I couldn't tell my mother, my brothers and sisters. So I came back here and kept quiet about it. In the meantime, I was so nervous that I was having a stomach problem. So the following Sunday, Flores came up here. He gave as an excuse to come up here to thank the people for their prayers because he had undergone major surgery in San Francisco. So he said: "I'll come to Saipan and I'll thank the people; it's an excuse to come out. Then I would like to talk to your mother and your brothers and sisters after that Mass." I said: "Okay." So we went up to my mother's house. My brothers and sisters were there and their wives and their husbands. And he took out a bible, and he had all my brothers and my sisters and their wives and husbands and my mother swear that they are not going to say anything about it. Anyway, it was supposed to be made public the following Wednesday, I think, because he had to notify Rome that I accepted it, then the Holy Father would have to make it public. I believe it was Wednesday. So he said: "I want you to come down to Guam on Wednesday, because I'm going to invite the media." So I went to Guam, and the media came up to the Chancery Office, and then Bishop Flores made it public. Oh, then he said: "I want you to be ordained Bishop and to have all the ceremonies on January 13." I knew immediately why January 13. That was his birthday.

- Siemer: What was the reason that the church decided to separate the diocese here and give it a separate Bishop?
- Camacho: Because of the political jurisdiction. The church sort of follows the political status of the community.
- Siemer: So when the Marianas gained separate political status, then the church followed that?
- Camacho: Yes.
- Siemer: Who has supervision over this jurisdiction?
- Camacho: It's an apostolic delegate.
- Siemer: Who is that person?
- Camacho: He's in New Zealand. It was Antonio Magnone, now it is Patrick Coveny. He's an Irishman. He's the representative of the Pope for New Zealand, all the South Pacific Islands, Guam, and the Northern Marianas.
- Siemer: How is Micronesia divided by the church?
- Camacho: There is one Bishop for Micronesia, Bishop Amando Samo in Chuuk. He's the Bishop for Palau and the Federated States. The Marshalls is headed by a Monsignor Jim Gould, a Jesuit who was made a monsignor.
- Siemer: So there's a Bishop in Chuuk, there's a Bishop in Guam, and there's a Bishop here?
- Camacho: Yes.
- Willens: During the 1950s, Saipan was being administered by the Navy Department, whereas the rest of the Trust Territory was being administered by the Interior Department. Do you have any recollections of how you and your family evaluated the Naval Administration? Some people look back on that favorably, but other people say that the Naval Administration just wanted to keep the people here in sort of a subsistence economy. They didn't want to spend very much money. And there was no real interest in helping to develop the people educationally or economically.
- Camacho: Looking back now, we see it that way. But in those days, we didn't see it that way. We started poor, and we were still poor under the Trust Territory. With the Navy, it got a little bit better. They spent their money here more, I think. Of course, when President Kennedy doubled the budget from \$7 million to \$14 million in those days, they erected in front of this cathedral this statue of Kennedy. He doubled the budget for the Trust Territory. But yes, sure, there was more money for the people, more employment, during the Naval Administration.
- Willens: It was also during the 1950s that the CIA established the Naval Technical Training Unit as it was called. Were you and your family aware what was going on on Capitol Hill?
- Camacho: Oh, yes. In fact, let's see, in 1953 or 1954 I worked for the NTTU, Naval Technical Training Unit on Tanapag. They hired me as a student. They put me in the drafting office; they'd tell me to draw lines, finish this, you know. I worked for 27 cents an hour. In order for me to watch a movie, the movie was 50 cents an hour. That's a lot of money to spend on watching a movie. My sister was working in the laundry department on Tanapag, and she just couldn't figure out why all these uniforms coming out of Marpi were all dirty. People back there [in Marpi] were being trained for something. And then throughout the night we'd hear bombing. And occasionally they would fly in this unusual plane and it would land back there someplace. Then they'd bring people in a truck that was covered

and you couldn't see anything. There was a gate where the Nikko Hotel is now where you could not go. No trespassing or you would get shot. We could go as far as Tanapag, San Roque. San Roque was the end of the road. You could not go any farther.

Willens: Did the people on the base try to keep it confidential that they were training insurgents?

Camacho: Well, we didn't see them. We didn't see the Chinese. We knew there were Chinese being trained. We couldn't prove it. Every time the United Nations representatives came out here—once a year they had to visit the island—they'd take down all these signs.

Willens: The no trespassing signs were taken down before the visiting mission would come?

Camacho: Yes.

Willens: It was not a well-kept secret, to say the least.

Camacho: I believe in those days you had to have a special permit to come to this island.

Willens: It was in the late 1950s and the early 1960s when the political leaders here began to develop a program to try to become part of the United States. Some of them wanted to unify with Guam. That was the Popular Party approach. Then the Territorial Party wanted to have a direct relation with the United States, perhaps staying together with the rest of Micronesia. Those were the two basic positions. What in your judgment were the factors that led people here to want to have a relationship with the United States?

Camacho: Oh, the people here knew that the United States was the nation to affiliate with, with their wealth. And they liked democracy. We had never experienced democracy. We never had any self-determination. This was the big thing. And money, of course. The people here knew that the United States had the money; other nations maybe could help us, but not as much as the United States could help these islands.

Willens: Did the proximity to Guam have an influence because of the family relationships and the fact that many people here were educated in Guam and they thought that Guam was sort of the big city that they might aspire to?

Camacho: Yes. But remember the plebiscite?

Willens: Well, I was going to ask you about the plebiscite here and in Guam.

Camacho: Yes. I was in Rota when they were discussing it. The delegation from Saipan came to Rota. I was the pastor there then. I put a big horn-type speaker on top of the church, in the tower, and I could talk to the people from there. Actually, I'd use it for bells, to ring chimes, but I could also talk to the village. That was the only way of communicating to the village at that time. So they asked me to announce that there was going to be a meeting concerning reunification. I announced it, fine, everybody was invited to come up to the school. This was 1969. So I went. Olympio Borja and Dr. Palacios and Ben Santos, I think, and some of the political leaders came down. They were discussing it with the people, explaining to the people about reunification with Guam. People liked it. So they held a plebiscite, and people voted for it. And the following week, Guam was supposed to vote. So I went to Guam the following week, and my God, they rejected us.

Willens: Why was that?

Camacho: I heard some Guamanian explain it this way: that they didn't even have enough money to develop Guam, and now we would be a burden to Guam. They were right perhaps. They couldn't even develop the southern part of Guam, and now they were going to take over one, two, three, four, all the 16 Mariana Islands? Maybe they were right. But it was a slap in the face. I felt bad.

- Siemer: Many people on Guam had relatives here, did they not?
- Camacho: Oh, yes. We all came from Guam. All the Chamorros here came from Guam. In fact, this was years later when Senator Marilyn Manibusan was up here for the dedication of Aqua Resort Hotel. She asked me: "Hey, Bishop, what do you think of this reunification?" I said: "Marilyn, up until now, it hurts." We have the expression in Chamorro, it feels better to ask and to be refused than to offer and to be refused. Anyway, I said maybe it will take another three or four generations before this can heal. Because I feel bad about the rejection. I don't think we'll ever be reintegrated.
- Willens: 1969 was an important year, not only for that set of plebiscites, but also because the United States began official negotiations with the entire Trust Territory looking toward some kind of a future political status. Secretary of the Interior Hickel came out here in May of 1969. Do you have any recollection of Secretary Hickel coming out and making a speech about how the United States wanted to get things moving out here? .
- Camacho: I didn't hear him, but I heard about it.
- Willens: Was there generally a favorably response to Secretary Hickel, as you recall?
- Camacho: I cannot say.
- Willens: The Micronesians did send a delegation to the United States in the fall of 1969, and for nearly three years there was an effort to try to reach some agreement. But the other districts did not want to be part of the United States, as you know.
- Camacho: Yes.
- Willens: They wanted to be either independent or have this different relationship called the free association.
- Camacho: Right.
- Willens: And eventually the Marianas in 1972 requested separate negotiations, and that's when the United States agreed.
- Camacho: The United States I think pushed, and immediately the Northern Marianas said: "Go right ahead."
- Willens: Why do you think the other districts in Micronesia had different aspirations for their future political status as contrasted with the Northern Marianas?
- Camacho: Perhaps we were more exposed here to the American system and all the conveniences. I mean in those days we had good roads, electricity was good, water was good, and transportation was good, so why not? Whereas the other districts down there just remained backwards.
- Willens: The other districts had this idea of wanting to build their own independent nation, for the most part, and their local leaders seemed to emphasize that a good deal.
- Camacho: I remember talking to a priest friend of mine from Palau about this. Maybe this was 15 years or more, 20 years ago. He was dead against all this Toyota coming in, you know, Nissan, and all this development.
- Willens: He was against it for Palau?
- Camacho: Yes. He was a priest who had been educated away from Palau, see.
- Willens: Did you have any personal encounters with Ambassador Williams when he was in the course of negotiating the Covenant?

- Camacho: No. Just lately when he came back here to visit.
- Willens: You did preside over the signing ceremony on February 15, 1975.
- Camacho: Yes.
- Willens: What is your recollection today of that particular even which, as I recall, was right here at Mt. Carmel?
- Camacho: Oh, everybody was happy. I felt good for the people.
- Siemer: Who had asked you to get involved?
- Camacho: It was natural for me to be asked because I was the Monsignor for the island, and a native boy, to say the prayers.
- Willens: Have you followed the political developments here in the Northern Marianas ever since?
- Camacho: A little bit. I'm not too much involved, not supposed to be.
- Siemer: Once the Covenant was signed, there was a period of public education. Did anyone ask the Church's assistance in helping get people to understand what the choice was with respect to the plebiscite that followed the Covenant?
- Camacho: We were just asked to announce meetings here, meetings there. We were not involved directly to educate the people.
- Siemer: Did you have a sense back at that time about whether the public education was effective?
- Camacho: I thought it was all right.
- Siemer: Some of the concepts that were involved in the Covenant were somewhat difficult to explain in Chamorro. One of the criticisms we've heard is that much of the explanation was in English and therefore some of the older people did not understand how the Covenant would work or what they might be giving up, for example.
- Camacho: Yes, if they were to depend entirely on the translation, that could be a problem. If a word in English is planted in the Chamorro translation and then not sufficiently explained, then there could be a problem.
- Siemer: The Chamorro community seemed to be generally very favorably disposed toward the Covenant, but the Carolinian community seemed not to be. Do you recall why that developed?
- Camacho: I didn't know that they weren't too favorable. Oscar Rasa didn't sign the Covenant, right?
- Willens: That's correct.
- Willens: We now have about 20 years of experience under the Covenant. Do you think that the people here are generally satisfied with the relationship that has been established with the United States?
- Camacho: Oh, yes. Very much. They wouldn't change.
- Willens: Well from time to time you hear complaints of one kind or another.
- Camacho: Oh, naturally. That's natural.
- Willens: But you think on the whole the aspirations have been largely achieved?
- Camacho: Yes.

- Willens: What kind of changes in the community have occurred both on the good side and perhaps not on the good side over the last 20 years? Take economic development, for example.
- Camacho: That's the good side.
- Willens: Is it a good side? Even with the number of immigrant laborers and the social problems?
- Camacho: That's different. I'm very much concerned about the number of aliens coming into the Northern Marianas. It cannot be open-ended; you have to control it. We like to help people, okay, fine, but you have to help yourself first. Right now we are only one-third indigenous and two-thirds outsiders. As a consequence, look at how the culture is suffering. I wonder if the young people are scared. What will I be in this community when I grow up? All the outsiders are taking over the land and the business and all this. Maybe they're scared. But it's dangerous. We have to have some kind of control. How many people can these islands realistically take care of? Look at the United States. There is a limit. You don't accept any number of people who apply to come to the United States, right? There's a limit. This year, just this number of whatever from Europe, this number from Asia, this number from whatever. But here, the sky's the limit.
- Siemer: Actually, if the United States immigration system applied here, you would not have any more immigrants coming in here.
- Camacho: Actually, I wish we follow U.S. immigration.
- Willens: Well, as you suggested the economic development on the island over the last 20 years has been very extensive and very impressive, but it has depended to a very large measure on alien laborers to staff the hotels, to build the buildings, to people the garment industry, and so forth and so on. Do you think that the political leaders are willing to cut back on economic development somewhat in order to reduce the number of aliens?
- Camacho: No. They don't want to. Look at it. They're still going out and luring investors to come in.
- Siemer: Do you think that economic affluence has had an effect on the Chamorro family culture?
- Camacho: Yes. It created independence. I don't need my grandmother anymore to take care of my children, my mother to take care of her grandchildren, when I am going to work, because I have my maid. Also, that grandmother does not need her grandchildren or children to be taking care of her because she gets her \$400 every month [in Social Security]. So they're independent of one another. Before, usually the oldest daughter was obligated to take care of the mother and father when they grow old. It's in our culture. But that's dying out, I think. The grandmother now would rather be in her little house receiving this SSI and then go to the Senior Citizen Center, and everything's taken care of for her. There's less need for her children to come around to take care of her. The grandparents in the past disciplined their grandchildren, too, and teach values to their grandchildren. Now there's the language barrier. Kids don't speak Chamorro any more.
- Willens: Is there a lot of incentive still to educate the children and to persuade the children to not only complete high school but to go on to college?
- Camacho: At least high school. Finish high school, yes.
- Willens: But many of the better-educated young people seem not to come back to find jobs here in the Northern Marianas. Do you see that as a problem?
- Camacho: Not lately. Previously yes, when the pay scale was very low. Who would come back after

you graduated from a U.S. college when you can get a good job there? But even now ometimes it happens that a guy will graduate from college and apply for a job here. But they say that because they belong to a different political group, that they're not accepted.

Willens: Some people have told us that the number of students graduating from high school in Tinian, for example, may be less than it was 10 or 15 years ago because the students can leave school at the age of 15, 16 or 17 and take well-paying jobs in the local governmental office.

Camacho: They have to finish high school.

Willens: Do you have any personal views about the planned development of Tinian with respect to a gambling industry?

Camacho: I fought against it. I lost. You know, even politically, it's very dangerous. And not just morally, but politically it could be very dangerous over there in Tinian. How many voters do you have in Tinian? 300? 400? Okay. Suppose one of those casino operations hires 300 U.S. citizens from the States to work? That casino is going to have its own mayor, three senators, and one representative, and what are they going to do, the Tinian people? Very easy to manipulate the government over there. In order to operate 2,000 rooms [in the planned hotel development], you need at least 3,000-4,000 people, right?

Willens: That's true.

Camacho: All you need is 300 American citizens in there to control the political aspect over there. All they have to do is stay here for 45 days, then they can vote.

Willens: Any last thoughts you have, sir, about the community or its future?

Camacho: Well, we are undergoing rapid changes on this island, really. I hope to prepare the people to meet the changes. We cannot escape progress. That's one thing we cannot do. But I'd like to help the people cope with the changes as they come along.

Willens: Thank you very much, Bishop.