

THE PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PETITIONER, VS. ALBERTO MAÑALAC Y TABANE, FELIZARDO SANTOS Y INOCENCIO, EDUARDO CANTO Y BALDONADO, VICENTE SONER ALIAS “INTING” AND HENRY CANLAS, ...

G.R. No. 54116. March 23, 1987

Ponente: CRUZ, J.

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CRUZ, J.:

This case is before us on automatic review, the death sentence having been imposed on all the accused except one who was condemned to life imprisonment.[1] All the defendants pleaded guilty upon arraignment, for which reason their counsel saw fit not to file appellants' brief[2] and the Solicitor General saw no need either to argue the case.[3]

The only question we have to consider is whether or not the plea of guilty was knowingly made by the accused and validly accepted by the trial court.

The crime imputed to the accused was murder, allegedly committed by them in the municipal jail of San Jose, Occidental Mindoro, on January 29, 1979, when they ganged up on a fellow inmate, Romeo Roda, who was then asleep. While Canto, Soner and Canlas held the arms, legs and waist of the victim, Santos stabbed him several times in the body and Manalac strangled the helpless man with a nylon cord. The information alleged conspiracy among the accused and the aggravating circumstances of treachery, evident premeditation, nighttime and abuse of superior strength plus, in the case of Canto and Manalac, recidivism.[4]

At their arraignment on March 24, 1980, all the accused, with the assistance and advice of counsel de oficio who had conferred with them earlier, pleaded guilty to the charge.[5]

The hearing, held on the same date, began as follows:

"INTERPRETER:

All the accused pleaded guilty, Your Honor.

"COURT:

Atty. Sta. Romana, you ask them if they understood the legal consequence of their plea. Tell them that despite their plea of guilty, they may still be sentenced to the supreme penalty, that is death. (Atty. Sta. Romana conferred with the accused per instruction.)

"ATTY. STA. ROMANA:

According to them, Your Honor, they fully understand the consequences of their plea and are willing to face it.

"COURT:

Tell them, that they can still withdraw their plea. They may still change it to that of not guilty.

"ATTY. STA. ROMANA:

They are persistent, Your Honor.

"COURT:

Re-arraign the accused, they may change their pleas. (Interpreter re-arraigning the accused by again reading to them the information and after which, the interpreter individually asked them for their respective pleas.)

"INTERPRETER:

All of the accused pleaded GUILTY, Your Honor.

"COURT:

In that case, let us suspend the proceedings in the meantime and we will resume at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon, to give the accused sufficient time to deliberate on the seriousness of the charge and on the grave consequences of their pleas. x x x. (Session resumed at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon.)

"COURT:

Counsel, have you conferred with your clients?

"ATTY. STA. ROMANA:

Yes, Your Honor, but the same, they still insist on their former pleas.

"COURT:

In that case, the Court has to place each of them on the witness stand, if only to assure itself that each of them really understands the meaning of their pleas. x x x.[6]

Accordingly, each of the accused was questioned by the trial judge and testified in substantially the same manner as in the following interrogation of Alberto Manalac, the first to be called:

"COURT:

Q -

Do you understand Tagalog?

A -

I know, Your Honor.

Q -

When the information was read to you this morning, did you understand the contents of the information?

A -

Yes, Your Honor.

Q -

Nobody frightened you when you entered a plea of guilty in the information?

A -

None, Your Honor.

Q -

Do you affirm your plea of guilty?

A -

Yes, Your Honor.

Q -

You were not threatened by the fiscal, either by any member of the PC or by any prison guard or employee in the colony, before entering your plea of guilty to the offense charged?

A -

No, Your Honor.

Q -

When the information was read to you by the court interpreter, did you understand the same?

A -

Yes, Your Honor.

Q -

When the information was read to you this morning, did you understand the contents of the information?

A -

Yes, Your Honor.

Q -

By the way, what dialect do you speak?

A -

Tagalog, Your Honor.

Q -

So that when the information was read to you in Tagalog, you understood everything of what was stated in the information?

A -

That is true, Your Honor.

Q -

Do you still insist on your plea of guilty to the information that was read to you this morning?

A -

Yes, Your Honor.

Q -

You are sure that you were not forced by any person to enter a plea of guilty?

A -

None, Your Honor.

Q -

And you know for a fact that after you plead guilty to the information, the Court may impose the death penalty against you?

A -

Yes, Your Honor.

Q -

Aside from the statement of prisoner Danilo Ocampo y Orpesa, who is an eyewitness, the only evidence against you is your extrajudicial confession which for purposes of this proceeding is ordered marked as Exhibit "A" for the Court, now, were you threatened, harmed or promised leniency by the investigator before giving such statement?

A -

No, Your Honor.

Q -

Were you advised by the investigator of your constitutional rights prior to the taking of your statement?

A -

Yes, Your Honor.

Q -

Do you affirm under oath the contents of Exhibit "A"?

A -

Yes, Your Honor.

"COURT:

Alright, the Court is satisfied with the voluntariness and spontaneity of the plea of guilty of the accused.

"ATTY. STA. ROMANA:

In addition, Your Honor please, I will also manifest that for the third time, in this afternoon, I have been interviewing the accused and explained to them fully all the consequences of their plea and the nature of the case charged against them.

"COURT:

Call the other accused.

xxx

xxx

xxx[7]

We cannot expect more concern for the defendants' rights than was manifested by the trial court in its cautious appraisal of their plea of guilty. We commend the meticulous questioning of all of the accused to ascertain that they really understood the information filed against them, that they had not been forced to confess their guilt and that they were aware of the possibility of their being sentenced to death. For his exemplary solicitude, Judge Teodoro K. Beltran has added luster to the Judiciary as the citadel of justice even for the basest criminals.

The Court is satisfied that the constitutional rights of the accused were fully protected and find no reason for annulling their conviction. The penalties were correctly computed after consideration of the evidence of conspiracy and the circumstances attending the commission of the crime as revealed in the extrajudicial confessions, and of the plea of guilty. However, the death sentence will have to be reduced to life imprisonment conformably to the new Constitution and the civil indemnity increased to P30,000.00 in accordance with the present doctrine.

The judgment of the court below as above modified is AFFIRMED, without any pronouncement as to costs.

It is so ordered.

Teehankee, C.J., Yap, Fernan, Narvasa, Gutierrez, Jr., Paras, Gancayco, Padilla, Bidin, Sarmiento, and Cortes, JJ., concur.

Melencio-Herrera and Feliciano, JJ., on leave.

[1] Rollo, pp. 15-17.

[2] Ibid., p. 36.

[3] Id., p. 44.

[4] Id., p. 3.

[5] TSN, p. 3, March 24, 1980.

[6] TSN, pp. 4-5, March 24, 1980.

[7] TSN, pp. 6-8, March 24, 1980.

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