

Understanding catholicity from the perspective of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente

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8. Understanding Catholicity from the Perspective of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente

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The Iglesia Filipina Independiente considers the question of catholicity as basically a question of ecclesiology. She puts the reality of the church in the foreground and deals with the question of catholicity as consequential and yet as so essential an issue that without it an understanding of the church cannot be complete. Any discussion on the topic of catholicity should consistently point to the reality of the church. It must also be pointed out that her ecclesiological self-understanding as the church of the Filipino people constitutes a major theme in her understanding of the catholicity of the church. Her history is the foundation of her historical mission. I have approached the catholicity of the church as it is understood by the IFI through a historical-theological reflection, built on the framework of three theological affirmations.

Affirmations

1. Catholicity as an Affirmation of the Baptismal Identity of God's People

Historically, catholicism came to the Philippines in the sixteenth century with Spanish colonialism. The Roman Catholic Church, represented by the friars of the various religious orders, was the primary institution to bring about the successful subjugation of the Filipinos. A theocratic state prevailed, and the power of the religious orders remained one of the great constants over the three centuries of Spanish colonial rule.

This history explains why many revolts against the Spanish colonial regime were also directed against the Roman Church. These revolts, mainly agrarian in character, were pregnant with religious undercurrents that advocated either a return to indigenous religion or the founding of a new religion. The 1896 Philippine Revolution also took as its agenda the expulsion of the friars and the establishment of a Philippine Church under Filipino bishops and priests. The long history of colonial domination of the country under Spain (beginning in 1565) and the United States of America (from 1898) provided the context for the birth of the IFI. In the context of the Filipino people's struggle for national

independence and sovereignty against foreign oppression, her establishment was an important part of the birth of a people and the building of a nation.

Whether seen from the perspective of theology or through the eyes of faith, the birth of the church of the Filipino people was a providential act that follows the path of redemption history. It was a historical appropriation of the salvific work of Christ through which the Filipino people were delivered from being slaves to become children of God.

Such interpretation embodies a theological assertion that God has liberated the Filipino people from bondage to live in the freedom of Christ as people of God. That liberation has given theological significance to the political concepts of liberty, independence, and freedom, and these terms have become theological keywords in the self-understanding of the IFI, understood to be consistent with New Testament theology proclaiming “freedom in Christ,” “new men,” and “new creation.”

Obispo Maximo Gregorio Aglipay gave a theological articulation of this dimension of the ecclesiality of the IFI when, on behalf of the clergy and faithful, he stated that the founding of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente was “moved by faith in the eternal beliefs that God is present in all places together with his son our Lord Jesus Christ, founder of all Christian societies which have dignified humanity by elevating it above the miseries of sins, slavery and barbarity” (1902 Constitution). This statement was also the essence of the 1903 Doctrines and Constitutional Rules’ declaration: “our Church is Catholic, or Universal, because it considers all men without distinction children of God, and it bears the designation ‘Filipina Independiente’ to identify this association of free men who, within the said universality, admit servility to no one.”

This theological theme is also a consistent and prominent component in the canonical definition of the IFI as “a congregation of new men educated in and liberated by the teachings of Christ, dedicated to the worship of God in Spirit and in truth, nourished and sustained in the Eucharist and commissioned to preach God’s love to the world” (1977 Constitution and Canons).

These understandings have become an important part of the consciousness of the clergy and laity of the IFI, who see the mission of their church as making present the saving work of God by acts of charity, service, and solidarity to the world, especially to the poor, deprived, and oppressed. Bishop Vic Esclamado has explained Aglipayanism in his lecture “Pro Deo et Patria: A View from Afar”:

a concept with . . . universal relevance . . . among those who understood colonialism. It . . . has become . . . a movement of proclaiming God's love to all people in the world, especially to those who are marginalized, oppressed, colonized, and among people denied the full expression of their baptismal rights – full humanity.

The ecclesiological self-understanding of the IFI is defined in these statements. It reveals an ecclesiology that rests on the affirmation of the baptismal identity of the Filipinos as people of God and as rightful heirs of the freedom that Christ has accomplished for all people. Thus, for the IFI, the affirmation of our baptismal identity as the people of God constitutes the first element of catholicity. Christian identity is the basis of the church's catholicity. Catholicity is the presence of the children of God in the world. It is the acknowledgement that the children of God are spread all over the whole world, conscious of the existence of one another despite being separated by cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries, each one sharing equal dignity as the people of God. Through this acknowledgment the IFI directs herself in the building of the unity of the people of God in the universal church.

2. Catholicity as a Manifestation of the Unity of the People of God

The unity of the people of God constitutes the second important theological theme in the IFI's understanding of the catholicity of the church and her insistence on the central importance of unity: "we confess, affirm and seek to establish and renew the unity of the Church: unity in faith under the Fatherhood of God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ and who continues to call us into the unity by the power of the Holy Spirit" (IFI Statement on Church Mission).

In affirmation of this aspect of catholicity, the IFI has undertaken numerous efforts to build partnerships with other churches from the time of her establishment up to the present. She has consistently exerted efforts to connect herself to the rest of the people of God spread around the world. In the process, she has equally affirmed her share in building the worldwide church.

In the desire of pursuing unity, Obispo Maximo Gregorio Aglipay sought to forge collaboration with the Episcopal Church of the United States in 1903 and 1904. However, his endeavors were for the time futile, as the complicated political and religious situations of his time did not work in favor of his efforts toward solidarity and cooperation. Isolation was the price that the newborn IFI had to pay in exchange for asserting

her freedom from the colonial churches. OM Aglipay also sought at this time to connect the IFI with the Old Catholic churches, again with a lack of success.

During the time of Obispo Maximo Isabelo de los Reyes, Jr., the Episcopal Church finally on two important occasions accorded recognition to the IFI. In 1948 the Episcopal Church bestowed the gift of apostolic succession upon the IFI, and in 1961 the two churches signed the Concordat of Full Communion. The IFI had already since 1958 been a member of the World Council of Churches. Obispo Maximo de los Reyes was also instrumental in the formation of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines and was elected its Council Chairman when the local ecumenical body was formally organized in 1963.

Having signed the Concordat with the Episcopal Church, the IFI declared itself “no longer an isolated Church working within its own but [having] an interrelation with the worldwide Christianity, particularly with the third biggest Christian body in Christendom, the Anglican Communion, and soon probably towards the fulfillment of God’s will: the unity of His divided children” (*The Christian Register*, October 1961).

The Concordat with the Episcopal Church in the USA also led the IFI between 1961 and 1963 to sign similar agreements with eighteen other Anglican provinces and five Old Catholic churches. The Concordat with the Church of Sweden was signed in 1995, and the Concordat with the Episcopal Church in the Philippines was signed in 1997. The foundation of these concordat relations is the mutual recognition of the churches’ catholicity and autonomy, their possession of the essentials of the Christian faith, and their participation in the sacraments. Such appreciation of concordat relations attests to the IFI’s theological perspective and broader ecclesiology, which led her into participation in the building of the universal church.

The IFI’s understanding of catholicity as a manifestation of the people of God also leads us to an appreciation of the concordat relations as an expression of the catholicity of the church, as churches in full communion share and mutually pursue the common agenda of Christian unity. The Concordat is a way to proclaim the unity of all people before God and their equal rights as a part of the one church of Christ. It is not a matter of building a relationship on particular material needs and desires, certainly not in today’s world in an unequal global system. The differences in material resources and capabilities are basically insignificant, although they do

give a basis for certain programs of sharing as they are related to experiences of changes and developments in society.

As Concordat relations are founded on a sincere desire for unity among Christians rather than merely benefactor-beneficiary relations among churches, it is necessary to be clear about the theological reasons for unity and equality, to build visible proofs of the invisible theological reality. The Concordat embodies such a strong declaration of unity that everyday life in the churches and the common programs developed within them must spring up from this common theological framework. In this way the catholicity of the church will be strengthened as Concordat relations bring the churches together in communion, transcending their differences and divergences and learning from their diversity, in recognition that each is a part of the one Body of Christ.

The centrality of the Eucharist in nurturing the unity of the church comes to a greater realization in relationships established by the Concordat. The Eucharist is the highest form of worship of the church; as the church continues to celebrate the Eucharist, it expresses and manifests church unity. Catholicity, then, is the unity of the people of God that is derived from the Eucharist. A eucharistic understanding of catholicity has now become both a theological and historical reality as the churches welcome each other in the celebration of the Eucharist in affirming their equality and unity as God's people.

The IFI thus understands catholicity as an expression and affirmation of the unity of God's people worldwide, an affirmation that points to the universal presence of the church. It is being cognizant of one another, being connected with one another, cooperating with one another, and celebrating with one another the Eucharist as a sign of the catholicity of the church.

3. Catholicity as Participation in God's Mission

The IFI has developed an ecclesiological self-understanding based on a historical process that bears witness to the long struggle of the Filipino people against colonial domination, oppression, and racial discrimination. She showed a radically unorthodox character in expressing her liturgy, spirituality, and theology as she divorced herself from the rigid dogmatism and superstition of the Roman Catholic Church. She has essentially distinguished herself as the church of the Filipino people by asserting the nationalist and democratic ideals of the Filipino people. In

such a historical process, the IFI finds herself pursuing God's mission in the world.

The IFI understands her mission as "God's action in the world . . . in which the church participates by the power of the Holy Spirit . . . so that God's Kingdom shall be proclaimed and established for all times and in all places" (IFI, Statement of Church Mission). Seeing the church's mission as the continuation of God's saving and sanctifying work in the world, and seeing the church as God's instrument in bringing humanity into reconciliation with him, the IFI opens herself, embraces the whole world, and places herself within concrete human contexts and historical situations. The mission of the church becomes more manifest in the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ, as she has received the mandate to "preach the good news to the ends of the world." It is through obedience to this command that the IFI "manifests, represents and realizes in almost every place and every time the One and Universal Church of Christ and witnesses to Jesus, her Lord and Liberator, through . . . mission" (Rediscovering the Local Church). On the basis of such participation in God's mission, the IFI is able to affirm the catholicity of the church.

This understanding of catholicity as enhanced through mission invites the churches to renew and sharpen their missionary engagement by working together in confronting global issues that affect the people of God worldwide. It is important that churches prevail over the tendency to keep their missionary engagements within the confines of their local circumstances. As the catholicity of the church transcends all cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries, so it must be with the missionary engagement of the churches.

Catholicity, regrettably, is often discussed on a conceptual plane and seldom seen as part of historical reality. The question of catholicity has been part of many biblical, theological, and ecclesiological theses but never really as a part of the concrete issues of human dignity, social justice, and global peace. The IFI believes in a catholicity that unites the people of God in the work of renewing communities and rebirthing of the whole creation. It must be a catholicity that "affirms our hope for the establishment of the Kingdom of God here on earth" (IFI Statement on Aglipayan Spirituality).

During the 2002 centennial celebration of the IFI, an International Church Leaders Summit was held in Manila, attended by bishops, priests, and prominent lay leaders from The Episcopal Church in the USA, the

Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands and of Switzerland, the Church of Melanesia, the Anglican Church of Australia, the Church of North India, the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, and the Church of Sweden, as well as from other church organizations and agencies. This historic gathering signed the Manila Covenant, which embodies the accord of the churches to work together in upholding the particular and historical mission of the IFI and on the three issues of “the disruptive consequences of economic globalization,” foreign intervention, and the war on terrorism, and on “the right to restitution from damages caused by colonialism.”

In the final Communique of this historical meeting among church leaders, the participants expressed their appreciation for the life and historical mission of the IFI and their commitment to giving the IFI their continuing support:

We have come from different parts of the world to celebrate the centenary of Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI). Together we give thanks to God for the birth of a living branch of the Church in the midst of the hopes and struggles of the Filipino people. Being in full communion with the IFI we are all united in the spirituality of grace and justice, nurtured by our roots in the community of the Living God. We who are united here from the different parts of the world . . . [are] sharing in the historic experience of being fully united with the Iglesia Filipina Independiente. . . .

The Summit had the opportunity to discover and to deepen the understanding of being church and followers of Jesus Christ in the challenges and sufferings of the present world community. We take courage from the history of the IFI and its hundred years of dedication to Apostolic Faith and the dignity of the Filipino People. IFI brings a special gift to the world church. It has retrieved the integrity of Christian faith and witness in its passionate commitment to the service of the people and in keeping the church attentive to the burning political issues of today. We are all dedicated to uphold and to continue this specific dimension of Christian witness in our different countries and regions. (Communique)

The Manila Covenant is a contemporary affirmation of the unity in mission of the church of Christ in a fragmented world. It not only speaks about the churches’ commitment of support to the IFI but also points to an understanding of a catholicity that gives expression to the shared life, work, and witness of the churches in pursuit of God’s mission in the world, that is, a catholicity in mission. It asserts that it is imperative for churches to address, as a part of the affirmation of the catholicity of the church, mission concerns over the prevailing harsh realities of local and global structures of injustice that subject the people of God worldwide to dehumanizing conditions.

Conclusion

The theological themes of baptismal identity, eucharistic unity, and accord in mission constitute the essential components of the IFI's understanding of the catholicity of the church. She looks at the question of catholicity as grounded in the basis that the church is God's people on a journey towards historical unity in completion of God's mission in the world. Catholicity comes to embody an ecclesiological affirmation, theological principles, a moral imperative, a historical mandate, and a missiological response that proceeds from the church's awareness of God's constant and enduring love for his people.

As for globalization, the IFI looks at it as a serious challenge to her self-understanding and to her way of doing mission. As an actuality in the Philippines, globalization is a modern-day form of colonial domination and control, a tyranny over the national and democratic aspirations of the Filipino people, aspirations that gave birth to the IFI. It is once again instituting colonial domination and control over the social, political, and economic aspects of the country and reinforcing modern-day slavery. Globalization is a pretentious term for what the IFI has fought against since her beginning – imperialist aggression.

Imperialist globalization is the reason behind the intervention of foreign troops in the country, the deregulation of the oil industry, the liberalization of the mining industry, agriculture, and the fisheries industry, the liberalization of the retail-trade industry and the banking and financial sectors, and the monopoly and abuse of our land resources. The worsening cases of human rights violations, the unabating spate of political killings in the country, and the "war on terror" waged by the government against the "terrorists" are all parts of the frantic desire by the government to ram pro-globalization policies down the throats of the Filipino people through military violence.

The St. Martin's Statement talks about the positive and negative effects of imperialist globalization and the approach of not condemning but rather transforming globalization from within with the use of its own tools. It is my personal opinion that such a method of confronting globalization goes against the principles, mandates, and affirmations of catholicity. Imperialist globalization is basically a global capitalist system that propagates itself through economic domination and military rule. Our churches' reflection on globalization and catholicity should make us critically look at the contradiction of these two realities.

Indeed, our viewpoints and standpoints are founded on empirical situations. We each have social and economic contexts for these empirical situations. The Episcopal Church, the Old Catholic Church, and the Church of Sweden share a more or less similar context as churches in first-world countries in comparison to the IFI's experience in a third-world country. Members of the IFI have a totally different experience of globalization, as they, citizens of a poor and underdeveloped country, find themselves situated within the axis of powerful and affluent nations. Globalization is a global phenomenon, yet our dissimilar contexts naturally reflect our dissimilar degrees of experience and attitude toward globalization.

Globalization, I believe, is an irreversible process with ideological motives, methods, and processes of implementation and actual social consequences that run in diametric opposition to the moral and spiritual standards of catholicity. The attempt to transform it from within might constitute a noble attempt on our part as churches, an attempt that would necessitate that we enter into dialogue with globalization, an approach that would probably lead the church into a situation of compromise, if not cooptation and collaboration, with the perpetrators of globalization.

We should draw a lesson from the facts of church history. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church, with all her intentions to remain faithful to the mandate of proclaiming the gospel "to the ends of the earth," was compelled to provide theological justification to the expansionist project of the Empire, an enterprise that would mother the Holy Roman Empire. We too have witnessed churches becoming tools for the colonial enterprises of various world superpowers. Catholicism came with Spanish colonialism to the Philippines in the sixteenth century, resulting in a collaboration that would sprout a theocracy, and Protestantism came with US imperialist expansionism in the beginning of the twentieth century, guided by the creed of "manifest destiny," which embodied the US's supposedly benevolent endeavor to "civilize and Christianize" the Philippines.

It is an imperative for us, conscious of this painful fact, to find paradigms of engagement from which we may competently confront the realities of globalization in a more catholic way of being and becoming church. I think the model of a church of the Eucharist provides the appropriate model – a church that celebrates the unity of God's people in what is, ironically, an extremely fragmented and highly polarized globalized world, a church that makes a prophetic affirmation of the identity, equality, and

dignity of all humanity against the injustice of a globalized economic system propelled by consumerist ideology, a church that is a source of inspiration for humanity in confronting and deconstructing the globalized structures of power of the empire and a source of hope for humanity as she leads the journey towards the building of the Kingdom of God. This, I believe, would answer the need to articulate a sharp theological stance that will enhance our response as churches in full communion as we seek to address the challenges of imperialist globalization.