

Iglesia ni Cristo

(“Church of Christ” in Tagalog)

By Anne C. Harper

Founder: Felix Y. Manalo

Location: World Headquarters: Quezon City, Philippines

Official Publications: *Pasugo* (“God’s Message” in Tagalog, monthly magazine in English and Tagalog), *God’s Message* (magazine in English), assorted tracts and evangelistic pamphlets

Organizational Structure: The group is hierarchical in nature with ultimate authority resting in the Chief Executive Minister (CEM), Eraño Manalo, the son of Felix Manalo. A Church Council of 17 executive officers oversees church matters and issues *tagubilin* or circulars that cover everything from personal behavior to approved political candidates.

Unique Terms: *Sugo*, Last Messenger, Angel from the East, one new man, unity

HISTORY

The passage from the nineteenth century into the twentieth brought dramatic change to the Philippines. After 400 years of Spanish rule and Roman Catholic (RC) domination, the land came under the administration of the U.S. and, as a result, saw Protestant missionaries of many denominations arrive on its shores. With those missionaries came copies of the Bible, which had been banned by the RC Spanish colonial government.

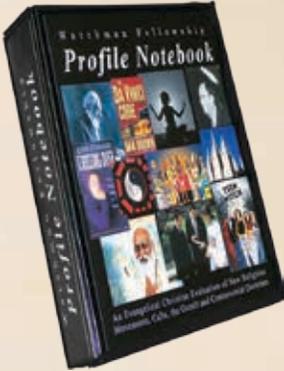
In 1902, four short years after that change of power, Felix Y. Manalo (born 1886) came upon a Bible left in an RC church pew. He subsequently witnessed a debate between a RC priest and a Methodist minister and was amazed to see the minister win. As a result Manalo left the church of his birth, began to study the Bible and served in a variety of ministerial capacities under the tutelage of four denominations over a span of 10 years. His time with the Methodists, Presbyterians, Christian Disciples, and Seventh Day Adventists, as well as his RC upbringing, left a strong imprint on the Filipino church he founded, the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC).¹

Leaving the Seventh Day Adventists in 1913 after a doctrinal disagreement,² Manalo grew discouraged and disillusioned with not only the SDA, but American Protestantism as well. One day that November he advised his wife not to disturb him as he went into his closet to pray. Later he boldly announced that God had told him to start a new church, a Filipino one, which he incorporated with the Philippine government in early 1914.³ This date was later to have great significance (see below).

Felix began to preach passionately against RC teachings, and he encouraged his former colleagues and members of Adventist and Disciples congregations to join his new church. They came by the droves. In four short years, twelve congregations with a total membership close to 1,000 were formed. By the late 1930s the group had spread beyond the Manila area to peasants in provinces throughout Luzon.

However, in 1922 a power struggle began among the leadership, and as a result Manalo began to propagate his *Sugo* doctrine. Using Revelation 7:1-3 as a proof text, he claimed that he was the *Sugo* or “Last Messenger” prophesied. The four powers described in the passage were the U.S., Italy, France, and Great Britain, the “Big Four,” who had signed the Versailles Treaty at the close of World War I, hence the importance of the date of his church’s incorporation. Manalo taught that he was the “Angel from the East” described in the passage.

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Subsequent development of this doctrine saw history divided into dispensations, with each dispensation having its own appointed messengers: Noah, Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, the Apostles and, in “the last days of the Christian era preceding the end of the world,” Manalo himself. His role was to affect the re-emergence of the true church.

In 1939 the INC began publishing *Pasugo* (“God’s Message”), though this was interrupted during the Japanese occupation. Church members were not encouraged to read the Bible for themselves, but to use the magazine as their interpreter. Following World War II, publication resumed and by 1951 church membership was around 100,000.

Eraño, Felix’s son, was elected his successor by unanimous vote of the twelve Senior Ministers of the church in 1953. However, Eraño did not assume the office of Chief Executive Minister (CEM) until 1962. Felix died in 1963. Under Eraño’s leadership, the church has expanded throughout the Philippines, reaching an estimated two to five million members internationally. With growing congregations in every U.S. state, six Canadian provinces and 78 foreign countries, the group is composed primarily of Filipino émigrés, but claims a 25 percent non-Filipino membership.

Aggressive evangelism and social ministry, political clout, and the founding of the College of Evangelical Ministry (seminary), New Era University and New Era Hospital in the Philippines have been hallmarks of Eraño’s administration. As Eraño is getting older, his son, Deputy Executive Minister Eduardo V. Manalo, is being groomed to take on the mantle of leadership.

DOCTRINE

Oneness of God: The Iglesia believes in one God who is “the Almighty,” omniscient and displeased by sin. Because of his love and compassion for man he has worked throughout history by appointing special messengers to interpret his will. The church teaches that God is not, nor could he ever be a man, (using Hosea 11:9 as a proof-text) and denies the triune nature of God.

Jesus Christ: Jesus was not God, but a created being lower than God.⁴ He was a sinless man given a special mission and status by God. To fulfill his mission he was given certain characteristics which were not inherent in his nature but distinguished him from other men: he was anointed with power and made Lord because God was with him, and he had the fullness and image of the Godhead. He did not pre-exist from the beginning and was not the Creator of all things, but the “firstborn of all creatures.”

Jesus is the only way to God and his mission was to create and save the “one new man.” The “one new man” is the church of which Christ is the Head and the Iglesia ni Cristo the Body. Christ will come again to meet INC members in the air; dead members will also be resurrected at that time. Christ’s work is continuing today as he prepares a new Jerusalem, a holy city to which he will bring his disciples when he returns.

The Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit is not God, but merely a power sent by the Father in the name of Christ to aid his messengers and his church. It is the means by which God reveals the meanings of his words to his messengers (see *Sugo* below). Christ’s presence is felt and manifested in the congregation through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is subordinate to the Son and strengthens and edifies the INC.

Sugo: an angel or messenger. Only those appointed by God have the authority to correctly interpret God’s will and teach from the Bible. In the past these messengers included Noah, Moses, John the Baptist, Christ, and the Apostles. In this dispensation that task was given only to Felix Y. Manalo, the third Elijah.⁵ His teaching is infallible, and his mission and message of restoration have now passed to the Chief Executive Minister (CEM), Eraño Manalo, who was also chosen and appointed by God. All aspects of INC life are under the authority and control of the CEM. He approves the organization of all new congregations, ordains ministers and views all publications prior to printing. Weekly sermons and hymn selections are also

under his control. The same sermon outline and hymn selections are preached and sung in all chapels on a given Sunday.

Scripture: The Iglesia teaches that it “speaks where the Bible speaks and is silent where the Bible is silent.” It claims that the Bible is its source of authority, though in reality the highest authority is Manalo’s teaching. Members do not read the Bible and cannot understand it; it must be interpreted for them by those appointed by God, i.e., by Felix Manalo, the CEM, Senior Ministers and Pastors.⁶ When questioned, members will always say they will ask their pastor and often invite him to answer those questions in person.

One true church/One new man: The INC teaches that the true church was originally founded by Christ in Jerusalem through the shedding of his blood. However, that true church fell into apostasy following the time of the apostles because of false prophets who deceived the church.⁷ Hence it had disappeared by the time of the Council of Nicea. Felix Manalo’s founding of the Iglesia ni Cristo in 1914 marked the re-emergence of the true church.⁸ God’s plan of salvation is for all people to be gathered in Christ Jesus through the Iglesia, the “last work of salvation.” Membership in the INC is thus the only means of salvation.

As Christ and those in Him come together as “one new man,” the result is peace between God and man. The members of the INC form the “nation of God, a chosen people...the one true church founded by his Son Jesus Christ.” Membership in the INC is equated with passage through the door spoken of by Jesus in John 10:9. To enter Christ, a person must be “a member of his body, that is, the body of which Christ is the head.” That one body is the church that bears his name – the Iglesia ni Cristo. There are not many churches of Christ, but only one. His name is the mark “set by Christ Himself to identify His sheep (John 10:3).” Local congregations are called chapels or locals, because the word “church” is only used for the Iglesia ni Cristo as a whole.

Unity: Unity with the Church Administration (CA) is a central and overarching teaching of the INC. “Division or schism is strictly forbidden, because Christ is not divided.” Unity begins at the top, with the CA; each level of hierarchy submits to the next level above it. Disagreement, questioning, and attending another church are grounds for discipline. This gives the church incredible authority over the lives of its adherents. To be removed from fellowship is to lose one’s salvation.

Salvation: Reconciliation with God is impossible unless a person believes in the message of Felix Manalo. It is through receiving Manalo’s message that a person receives Christ and God. The Iglesia considers faith without works to be barren and dead. It requires the following works for salvation:

1. Joining the church: seen as coming through the door of Christ.⁹
2. Abiding in God’s words: being taught all the commandments to be obeyed and accepting the preaching of God’s messenger, Felix Manalo.
3. Remaining faithful: continuing in active membership in the INC, shown by observing requirements such as mandatory attendance at church services on Sundays and Thursdays and certain don’ts (e.g., marrying a non-church member, gambling, drinking, etc.).
4. Unity: obeying without question the directives and teachings of the CA.
5. Baptismal regeneration: water baptism by the Iglesia (not another church) is necessary.
6. Holy Supper: offered during February and March and required/taken once a year for the washing away of sins.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE¹⁰

Since at least 75 percent of the INC’s membership is Filipino, effective communication of the Gospel requires understanding important aspects of the Filipino worldview – particularly the fact that it is a “shame-based,” relational culture. This means that the best approach is

non-confrontational. Abstract truth is not valued as highly by Filipinos as it is by Westerners. Relationships (family, extended-family, circle of close friends) are valued much more highly. This means that friendship evangelism is a more effective way of gaining credibility than merely pointing out doctrinal error.

Strengths of the INC are its care and shepherding of members and its accountability structure. It is a group which values order in its worship services and meetings. Genuine care and concern for church members will communicate Christ's love for them; disrupting services or meetings with questions and confrontations will alienate them.

Christian joy is attractive to Iglesia members, as are testimonies of God's provision and answering prayer. Talking about your communion (your daily experience) with a triune God, not simply truths you believe, will gain an ear. Valuing friendships and encouraging strengths and talents of INC friends can open doors that allow them to observe in you what the true Lordship of a fully divine and fully human Savior looks like.

Beware of different understandings of Christian terms. For example, to the Iglesia, "relationship with Christ" means becoming a member of the Iglesia ni Cristo. "Receiving Christ" means accepting Felix Manalo's message. Avoid using these phrases.

Remember that church members do not read the Bible for themselves and may face discipline if they attend your church. Invite them to activities away from your church building. Don't hesitate to open your Bible (not just quote from it) to show Scripture passages in their proper context.

When presenting a true biblical view of Jesus Christ to them, don't simply rely on a few proof-texts. The Iglesia has developed detailed (although convoluted) rationales explaining why neither John 1 nor Colossians 2 means that Jesus was fully God. Use the entire scope of the Bible, not just a few verses. Be thoroughly prepared to defend your own Christology.

Finally, be aware that the historical basis of Manalo's interpretation of Rev. 7:1-2 is skewed. He claimed that the date of incorporation of the church, 1914, coincided with World War I, which was the "four winds of the earth," and that the "Big Four" who signed the Treaty of Versailles were the four angels who held back these winds. In reality, when World War I began in 1914, *five* nations were involved: Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia and Great Britain. The Treaty of Versailles was signed *in 1919* by the "*Big Five*:" the U.S., France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Trinity by Edward Henry Bickersteth. This book provides scriptural evidence regarding the Trinity, Index, soft bound, 182 pages.

Out of the Cults and Into the Church by Janis Hutchinson. Looks at the adjustment former cult members must make in transitioning to evangelical churches. Soft bound, 222 pages.

Notes

- ¹ Arthur Leonard Tuggy, *Iglesia ni Cristo: A Study in Independent Church Dynamics* (Quezon City: Conservative Baptist Publishers, 1976), 25.
- ² *Ibid.*, 34.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 40-41, 46-47.
- ⁴ *Pasugo*, (Quezon City, Philippines: Iglesia ni Cristo) August 1969, 16.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, July/August 1988, 7; May/June 1990, 5; July 1997, 10.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, October 1995, 4.

- ⁷ *Ibid.*, December 1966, 49; November 1973, 19; September/October 1991, 19.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, November 1976, 14.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, December 1969, 11; March 1970, 11; January 1977, 4.
- ¹⁰ See the author's extended discussion of evangelical responses to Iglesia ni Cristo and important evangelistic considerations in Anne C. Harper, "The Iglesia ni Cristo and Evangelical Christianity," *Journal of Asian Mission* 3/1 (2001), 101-119. Retrieved January 4, 2004 from <http://www.apts.edu/jam/01-1/a-harper.pdf>.



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