



## MOTHER IGNACIA'S ROLE BESPEAKS OF TODAY'S FEMINISM\*

If we go back to the unwritten pages of Philippine history, it is not surprising to find women who have struggled for freedom and came up with flying colors. Among these women was the maiden of Binondo who was born in 1663.

As early as the seventeenth century, Ignacia, the young woman at 21 years of age in 1684, demonstrated an assertive stance when she braved the objections of her parents who wanted to keep her from leaving them for a life of uncertainty and therefore for insecurity. A good future was in store for her as they wanted to marry her off to a promising young man. But the feminist in Ignacia made her decide to define her own future apart from her parents' designs for her. Her independent mind made her choose to live by the sweat of her brow. She was out to prove that with her scissors and needle she could make both ends meet instead of basking in the comfortable home which her parents could well afford to provide her. Most of all it was far beyond the imagination of the people in her time to see a woman living alone without a husband or children or family. But Ignacia's daring attitude spurred her on to plunge herself into living in solitude.

Defining her own future, surviving through the fruits of her own labor, and living in solitude are three significant traits which Ignacia showed in her struggle for freedom from the

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shackles of outside forces. And she ably nourished and strengthened these as she journeyed on in her earthly life.

Who could have thought of a woman of yesteryears to organize other women in order to work communally for freedom? Young children as well as adults were in dire need of education to release them from the clutches of ignorance. Yes. There was an Ignacia who initiated this.

She and her *beatas* stretched out their time in order to give lessons to them in the basics of literacy—reading and writing.

Yet simple and poor was the life of Mother Ignacia and her *beatas*. But they withstood their poverty with no complaints. Their meal was frugal and they would even eat outside under the moonlight to save oil for their lamps. Such a lifestyle could only be motivated by the desire to follow Christ who had gone before them. Strong was their faith that the God who called them to the life they were in, would be the very God who could sustain them. And so it was! They knew that they were in the right direction. Mother Ignacia's way of life drew more women to join her thus increasing the number of their membership. Consequently with more mouths to feed, they had to go out to beg and the people readily gave them rice. Such an act called for deep humility on the part of Mother Ignacia and the *beatas*. But they remained undaunted.

More and more children and adults sought admission to be catechized and to learn how to read and write. Spanish women, daughters of Chinese families and native women were received without discrimination. The Spanish women sought shelter under the *beatas'* care when their husbands would leave for business in Europe. Mother Ignacia, ever true to her calling, took them in. She opened the convent doors to

accommodate them. Indeed love of God was the sole motive that impelled Mother Ignacia to extend the needed services to them. The *beatas* imbibed the Christian attitude of availability that their leader spontaneously extended.

In war and in peace, Mother Ignacia and her *beatas* made their presence felt by those who witnessed their way of life. Sister Josefina C. Diaz, ICM has this to say in her book, KABABAIYAN:

Deeply prayerful and pious, the sisters were nonetheless concerned about the abuses inflicted by the Spanish authorities on the Filipino people. They were aware of the revolts of the natives against the Spaniards. Mother Ignacia and her sisters offered their prayers, sacrifices and work for the alleviation of the people's sufferings.

Even after the death of Mother Ignacia on 10 September 1748 the Ignacian spirit prevailed among her *beatas* to inspire and to strengthen them. This was evident during the Philippine Revolution in 1896 against the Spanish colonizers. The Sisters trailed the retreating revolutionaries as they moved out to the neighboring provinces in Bulacan, La Union, Pampanga and as far as Pangasinan. They nursed the wounded, cared for the sick, consoled the afflicted, counseled and encouraged them. All this they did knowing that some punishment can be imposed on them should they be caught by the Spanish authorities. The tenacity of Mother Ignacia has been ingrained in their very being.

Mother Ignacia is the "First Filipina" analogous to the Filipino historian Leon Ma. Guerrero's calling Rizal as the "First Filipino". It was Rizal who first came up to identify the Yndio as Filipino, "snatching the name from the Creoles or Philippine born Spaniards of his time. He appropriated it for his own people, making the men of his time aware that

they had a common past, that they were suffering from common present evils and that they could have a common future together based on common ideals" (Ferraris, . . . *and the woman's name is IGNACIA*).

Indeed Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo is the "First Filipina". In the same author's book, an explanation appears thus:

What justifies calling her "the First Filipina" is that she is the first woman in our history not only to lead a life worthy of admiration, but also found a genuinely Filipino institution devoted to the spiritual and temporal welfare of her people. It was an institution which would remain authentically Filipino and spread its good works all over the archipelago, and today even to other parts of Asia and Africa. Through that institution. . . She has left a lasting influence on the Filipino people in making them aware. . . That a special consecration to God in religious life was not only for Españolas, but for Yndias as well. Indeed she showed an historically precocious national consciousness of the Filipino identity of her Beaterio when she excluded Spaniards from becoming full members of it, except under special circumstances. This was not race prejudice in reverse. . . But she wanted to show, it would seem, that there was truly a Filipino way of living the religious life and that therefore its composition must be characterized by the way of life of the Filipina.

Today Mother Ignacia's Foundation—the Congregation of the Religious of the Virgin Mary—counts to almost 700 Sisters involved in different ministries, namely: Retreat, Education & Catechesis, Dormitory Work, Social Ministry and Special Ministry. They are spread all over the country and beyond Philippine shores like West Africa, Taiwan, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Italy, Nepal, Pakistan, Western Samoa, Canada, and the United States of America.

The big bulk among the areas served by the RVM Sisters is in the Education Ministry. Statistics show that this ministry covers close to 90,000 students as of SY 1996-1997 in the Philippines alone. School population served abroad is not included in this number.

For more than three centuries or 335 years now, the memory of the existence of this brave woman, Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, has never dimmed particularly to the RVM Sisters. She is not only a citizen of the Philippines but her followers are of the strong conviction that she is also a citizen of heaven. For this reason they pray and hope that she would be officially declared as beatified and eventually canonized as a Saint. This honor as the first Filipina Saint will redound not only for the Church in the Philippines but also for the Universal Church.

In this centenary of our country's independence, Mother Ignacia has her place among the great women the Philippines can be proud of because they have contributed in the struggle for freedom.

M. Maria Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, foundress of the Beaterio de la Campaña de Jesus now known as the Congregation of the Religious of the Virgin Mary, presented her organization's Rules and Constitution to the Provisor and Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Manila Doctor Don Manuel Antonio de Ocio y Ocampo on July 1, 1726. It was provisionally approved on July 3, 1832 by the Cabildo (Metropolitan Chapter of Canons of Manila).

The Rules and Constitution are as follows:

Chapter I— Concerning the Spiritual Formation of Beatas and which all should follow;

Chapter II— Spiritual Advice which should be observed by those who are engaged in the service of God.

Chapter III—On the Distribution of Time;

Chapter IV—On the Form of Government This House Shall Have;

Chapter V— On the Method of Electing the Rectors and Other Officers; and

Chapter VI—On the Method of Admitting "Beatas" and "Recogidas."

## ALLEGATION

I, IGNACIA DEL ESPIRITU SANTO, at present the Superior of the native women residing at the Beaterio, under the direction of Reverend Fathers of the Society of Jesus, hereby respectfully testify before your Lordship:

That as far back as 1685, several poor native young women started to live together who petitioned the Reverend Fathers of the Society of Jesus to help them in their desire to serve God;

Since then the Fathers have attended to them, encouraged them and showed them the way to perfection, and have continued to give them the same help, so that through their efforts, in 1725, the Beatas were recipients of an annual endowment from the legacy of General Juan Ignacio de Vertis, knight of the Order of St. James, in the amount of 300 pesos. This amount was used for the repairs and extension of their house in order to accommodate the increasing number of Beatas:

Official representatives of General Juan Ignacio de Vertis saw, at about this period, the increase in membership to 80 Beatas and Recogidas, who were bound by rules to regulate their mode of life. These rules, contained in three pages, are divided into Chapters.

I hereby present these rules for the consolation and encouragement of the Beatas, that they might continue to serve



and please God under the protection of the Most Blessed Virgin and under the guidance of the Reverend Fathers of the Society of Jesus.

I ask and beg your Lordship to whom I here present these rules, not only for you to examine them closely, but also for your Lordship to come and visit our House and Beaterio, so that you may see for yourself the benefices which have been obtained up to the present.

In view of these facts, I implore of your Lordship to approve these rules, and likewise entreat and recommend to the Reverend Father Provincial of the Society of Jesus, that for the love of God, to keep us in their charge, under his Province, so that thus the Society may continue the spiritual guidance of these native women. I also implore of your Lordship and of your successors to this office of Ecclesiastical Judge and Vicar General of this Diocese, to take said Beaterio under your protection, a favor by which I, and my Sisters, shall be blessed with the mercy and benefit that we hope to expect and obtain from such a patronage.

IGNACIA DEL ESPIRITU SANTO  
FEBRUARY 1726