

Our struggle for life in its fullness in the context of globalization : a challenge to our catholicity

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1. Our Struggle for Life in Its Fullness in the Context of Globalization: A Challenge to Our Catholicity

Eleuterio J. Revollido, Iglesia Filipina Independiente

For many years now the people of the Philippines have been suffering the effects of globalization, with poverty, economic exploitation, involuntary exile as migrant workers, and murder being just a few. The Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI), popularly known as the nationalist church, has since 1902 been fighting against the forces of oppression and degradation, with continual resistance from those in power. In the pages below I share some of the stories of the IFI's witness, its struggle for life in the context of globalization, and globalization's challenge to its catholicity.

The biggest issue that the Philippine people have been facing over the last decade is the San Roque Dam Project, the construction of the biggest dam in Asia, situated in the eastern part of Pangasinan province. The cost, US \$1.1 billion, was loaned to the Philippine government by foreign banks, thereby adding to this country's already ballooning billions of dollars of debt. As early as 2000 the IFI's Dagupan diocese vehemently opposed construction of the dam. In company with the New Patriotic Movement, we questioned propaganda saying that it would serve the people by providing cheaper energy, flood control, potable water, and irrigation to farm lands.

The dam was constructed to invite foreign investors and to create industrial zones in the northern Philippines. In its construction, it displaced hundreds of families in the lowlands (Pangasinan) and in the ancestral land of the Ibaloi tribes in the uplands of Benguet province. Today most of those people are unemployed, lack land to till, and live in resettlement areas. In 2003, the dam's first year of operation, our worst nightmare happened: half of Pangasinan experienced the biggest flood in the history of the province. Moreover, the dam did not produce the promised cheap electricity.

Opponents of the dam have been vindicated by these events. Further, we still doubt whether it can serve as a source of potable water, given that upstream of the dam are mining areas whose waste runs downstream toward the dam. Moreover, the claims that the dam will both produce energy and irrigate farmland contradict one another. During the rainy season, the farmers already have enough water, so water provided by the dam is not only unnecessary but also causes flooding. During the summer, farmers are in dire need of water, but the dam cannot give them the water that creates energy.

After some years of our campaigning against the dam and supporting the cause of the peasants through various fora, symposia, rallies, other forms of advocacy, and, especially, the formation of the Church-Peasant Conference, in 2001 I was informed by a friend in the police force that I was being watched by the province's intelligence unit. By the end of 2005 the unit had tried to force the janitor at Aglipay Central Theological Seminary (ACTS) to work for them. In February 2006, people claiming to be working with the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA) offered protection and funds to one of the seminary professors in exchange for information about my activities and those of people visiting ACTS. The head of the unit claimed that he was the case handler – the leader of the operatives responsible for my surveillance – in Pangasinan.

The following month, on March 9, 2006, my vice chairman in the New Patriotic Movement, Mr. Mariano Sepnio, was gunned down by men on motorcycles. He died after a week. On May 16, 2006, men also on motorcycles gunned down the general secretary of our organization and the chairman of the peasant organization opposing the dam, Mr. Jose Doton. The gunman made sure that Mr. Doton was dead by firing at his head at close range. As early as January 2006, suspicious-looking men were reported within the vicinity of the seminary, and their presence intensified in October, specifically on October 1, 6, 12, 13, 14, 20, 22, and 24, 2006, when I was in Manila. Their activities forced me to stay in four different places before leaving for the Netherlands to participate in the November ecumenical conference on Globalization and Catholicity.

The Bishop of the Poor Peasants and Workers

On October 1, the intelligence unit's case handler and his bodyguard attended the Sunday mass in our parish and stayed for ten minutes. During the mass I was informed of his presence. According to one of the seminarists, the bodyguard seemed to be observing what was going on. The following day, October 2, I phoned Bishop Alberto Ramento to remind him of our invitation to the planned October 7 celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of ACTS, on which occasion he was to receive a plaque of appreciation from ACTS for his decision as Obispo Maximo to reopen the seminary after it had been closed for over a year. After he confirmed his coming and made the usual jokes, his last words to me were "Have my coffee ready when I come early Saturday morning." I obediently said, "Yes,

Bishop.” He did not come and will never visit us again physically, for he was brutally murdered in the early morning of October 3.

Bishop Ramento’s death was investigated by the Alliance for the Advancement of People’s Rights in coordination with the IFI. Their joint report reads:

Bishop Ramento was stabbed (using a bayonet or a carving knife) while lying on his bed asleep, and he woke up after the first stab at his chest. . . . The intention of the assailant was to kill, as can be gleaned from the two chest wounds. There were no defensive wounds to show that the bishop was aware when he was stabbed. There is no evidence of bruises on his hands or on any other part of the body to show that he was restrained. . . . He was able to get out of the room, with the assailant then making his way to him . . . he kneeled because of weakness and lost consciousness, crumpling to the ground, curled in a fetal position with his head away from the floor.

The assailant came into the room and inflicted more stab wounds for show, as the bishop was already dead when the stab wounds on his back were made . . . The wounds on the neck and the left ring finger are not identifiable as either post mortem or ante mortem wounds. But clearly they were made to make the whole thing look like a robbery. The neck wound is superficial and can be seen as an afterthought or as a flourish by the killer, who was ordered to make it look like a robbery. This could not have been thought of by a robber. There was an intention to conceal the real purpose of the killing. There was no need to kill the bishop if robbery was intended, as there had been several occasions where robbery took place without any assault. . . .

The autopsy report is at best an incomplete report. . . . The Scene of the Crime Investigation leaves much to be desired. The scene of the crime was not thoroughly examined . . . other people not relevant to the crime scene investigation were allowed into the room . . . the place was not dusted with fingerprints . . . two priests of the IFI were not allowed to enter and to witness the investigation; however, the mayor and barangay captain were allowed entry . . . [it] was at best haphazard. . . . Clearly, the whole investigation is just a *moro-moro*¹ and points to the fact that the killing was a political one. (Findings)

Why political? Who was Bishop Alberto Ramento to attract the ire of big landlords, capitalists, and trumpeters of globalization? Why did he need to be silenced? On one occasion the beloved bishop said to his wife, “I know they are going to kill me next, but I will never abandon my ministry to God and my duty to the people.”

¹ I.e., ‘for show’.

Bishop Ramento, the IFI, and Globalization

At the time of his brutal murder Bishop Ramento was an ecumenist, as the co-chairman of the Ecumenical Bishops Forum; a peace advocate, as the initiator of Peace for Life, the convener for Pilgrims for Peace, and the co-chairman of the Philippine Peace Center; the founding convener of the Movement of Concerned Citizens for Civil Liberties, and the chairman of the Workers Assistance Center, Inc. He was also the bishop of the poor peasants and workers. Until his death he hosted in his cathedral the striking workers of Hacienda Luisita, the Philippine Rabbit Labor Union,² and other peasant organizations in his province.

As the ninth Obispo Maximo of the IFI, Bishop Ramento was known for issuing critical statements on issues affecting the country and its people. On August 24, 1994, the IFI published a statement that he signed, titled "Resist Modern Day Colonialism! Reject GATT/WTO." The statement explained:

Our opposition to the GATT/WTO lies mainly in the fact that the treaty perpetuates and strengthens a colonial and lopsided trade set-up where we exchanged cheap agriculture and semi-processed goods with high value added [for] manufactured and high-tech products from industrial and imperialist countries. This set-up, established since the colonial era, effectively hinders industrialization and brings us to further indebtedness and ballooning trade deficits. Worse, accession to the treaty means giving away domestic economy left in the hands of Filipino producers, mainly agriculture, to export crops, plantations, and agricultural importers dominated by foreign transnationals and their few Filipino business partners The Philippines has no transnational corporation and has few exporters to benefit from these principles as compared to the US, Japan, and European countries, that are spread all over the world. What we have abroad are human resources, read: overseas contract workers that are deliberately excluded from these principles of national treatment and the GATT/WTO accord. (IFI, *Our Heritage* 17–18)

In November 1997 another IFI Statement signed by Bishop Ramento was released, entitled "Opposing Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation [APEC] and Imperialist Globalization." It declares:

The present world order is the opposite of our vision (justice for the poor). Instead of giving signs of the realization of the reign of God, the new world order is ruled by world superpowers whose economic policy is to conquer the world through

² Philippine Rabbit is a major bus company in central and north Luzon.

the doctrine of free market enterprise. . . . While maintaining a hegemonic control through the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United States with Australia and Japan was able to control the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Armed with oppressive and exploitative economic policies such as liberalization (opening the country to foreign investment), deregulation (free trade) and privatization (the transfer of assets and social services to private sectors), powerful APEC members plundered the wealth and natural resources of the Philippines. . . . The peasants, the workers, the fisherfolks, the national minority, the urban poor, and other marginalized Filipinos are suffering in the name of Philippines 2000.³ Land use conversion, cash crop promotion, cheap labor, contractualization, and increase of prices of all commodities make the life of the Filipinos more miserable. Filipino-owned firms become the distributors and retailers of the foreign products. The Philippine government serves not the poor but its economic masters by selling the dignity and integrity of the Filipino people who Jesus Christ had promised abundant life. (IFI, *Our Heritage* 47–48)

Bishop Ramento's last official statement as the chairperson of the IFI's Supreme Council of Bishops, "A Pastoral Letter on Our Most Recent Reading of the Signs of the Times," issued on May 8, 2006, criticized the government's effort to change the constitution:

We do agree that the 1987 Constitution needs some changes. However, changes in fundamental law of the country must ensure the well being of the Filipino people and the environment and uphold civil liberties and national sovereignty over property and profit. Yet we know that the main agenda of charter change is to virtually amend domestic laws to conform to the exploitative demand of the World Trade Organization by removing the remaining hindrances to the destructive schemes of liberalization, deregulation and privatization, and unprotected human rights, the people's welfare, environment, and the country's national sovereignty.

In this same statement the bishops condemned the unabated political killings and harassment of people in the church who were critical of the Arroyo government:

We also share the pain and rage of our people and raise our voices even as we bow our heads in prayer over the brutal killing of our soft-spoken and courageous priest Rev. Fr. William Tadena and the ambush and wounding of Rev. Fr. Allan Caparro

³ Philippines 2000 was an economic plan promulgated during the presidency of Fidel V. Ramos (1992–1998), promising financial stability for all on the grounds that profit for foreign investors would alleviate poverty in the Philippines. Ramos was president when the Philippines joined the WTO in 1995.

and wife Aileen about a year ago which remain unsolved until this day. Our clergy and church workers continue to suffer unabated and intensified harassment from state agents as in the cases of Fr(s). Sediego, . . . Respicio . . . and Terry Revollido. . . . The persecution of church people manifests the degree of desperation by the Arroyo government to suppress the people's desire for fundamental social changes that promote decent and humane lives for all.

Bishop Ramento signed all these statements as the ninth Obispo Maximo and, later on, as the Chairperson of the Supreme Council of Bishops and Diocesan Bishop of Tarlac (an agricultural province in Central Luzon), indicating his great opposition to economic globalization and his support for the poor.

Globalization

Kavaljit Singh writes in the Introduction to his book *Questioning Globalization*:

Broadly speaking, globalization refers to intensification of trans-border interconnectedness in all spheres of economy, politics, society, and culture. In other words, globalization refers to a world in which complex economic, political, social and cultural processes operate and interact without any influence of national boundaries and distance. It also implies that a development in any part of the world can create far-reaching consequences elsewhere. . . .

Economic globalization – though not only an economic phenomenon – essentially refers to breaking down of national barriers on trade, production and finance. The cross-border movement of trade and capital flows is often used as an indicator of economic globalization. (Singh 13–14)

In January 2001, a National Consultation on Globalization sponsored by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) declared in its final statement:

Globalization is an attractive, seductive, cosmetized and dressed-up world order to hide, cover up and make acceptable the exploitation by the rich making the rich even richer and the poor even poorer. It controls rather than liberates. It exploits and oppresses instead of enhancing and promoting life. It is supposed to be a force of unity, but instead it heightens class contradictions and widens the gap between the rich and the poor; it disintegrates and fragments families, communities and nations. Thus, instead of building and promoting human community, it actually becomes “*anti-Koinonia*.” In other words, the goals of globalization clash with the vision of the whole inhabited world (*oikoumene*) and for these reasons it must be opposed and resisted. (NCCP 5)

Bishop Ramento's ministry was to the poor, deprived, and oppressed, for the promotion of life, for *koinonia*, and for liberation. On October 12, 2006, the Supreme Council of Bishops, on behalf of the whole IFI and with overwhelming support from other churches and ecumenical groups, rejected the police conclusion that Bishop Ramento's death was merely a case of robbery with homicide:

We are convinced that his murder was the consequence of his principled engagement with the Filipino people's struggle for the fullness of life. The Church is strongly convinced that his brutal death is part of the worsening cases of extra-judicial killings in the country. . . . Not long ago, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) maliciously named the IFI among the list of organizations and institutions to be in the "echelon of alliances with the Communist Party of the Philippines" and as "enemies of the state" that needed to be "neutralized." . . . We pray to God that the death of Alberto, our bishop, a martyr for peace, will not be in vain but give courage to the people to continue the Filipino people's struggle for justice and peace in the world.

Understanding our Catholicity and the Challenge of Globalization

The IFI was born out of the Filipino people's struggle for political independence and religious reformation. It is a church proclaimed by the workers to serve God and country. When the IFI separated from Rome in 1902, she repudiated the authority of the papacy by declaring her "faith in Peter . . . but not in his diplomacy or his politics or his despotism." The 1903 IFI Constitution explains: "Our Church is Catholic, or Universal, because it considers all men without distinction children of God, and it bears the designation 'Philippine Independent' to identify this association of free men who, within the said universality, admit servility to no one."

The IFI's Declaration of Faith, approved in 1947 in preparation for the bestowal of apostolic succession on three IFI bishops by the Episcopal Church of the USA, declared the IFI to be part of "The Church, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, which is the Body of Christ, founded by Christ for the redemption and sanctification of mankind, and to which Church He gave power and authority to preach His Gospel to the whole world under the guidance of His Holy Spirit" (IFI, Declaration III).

To help to explain the IFI as a church, an introduction to the 1977 IFI Constitution and Canons says: "The IFI is a congregation of new men, educated in and liberated by the teachings of Christ, dedicated to the wor-

ship of God in spirit and in truth, nourished and sustained in the Eucharist and commissioned to preach God's love to the world."

In 2000 the IFI Executive Commission issued a statement entitled "Rediscovering the Local Church," inviting the whole church to look into the particularization of her ministry (through local churches) amid her universality. The statement declares:

The IFI is an ecclesial community that 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 the exercise of mission and ministry of the local Churches—the dioceses exist in ecclesial communion [in such a way] that no individual local Church can claim autonomy and independence, but only nurturing interrelatedness, mutual responsibility and interdependence with other local Churches. (IFI, Incarnating 87)

In her practice of catholicity, the IFI maintains itself as a structured community of people, led by bishops, whose task is to proclaim the good news of salvation about the kingdom. The Supreme Council of Bishops describes the IFI as "episcopally-led and synodically-governed." It is governed by a church assembly that delegates and mobilizes various bodies to carry out their respective responsibilities and by a bishop to oversee mission and ministry, ensuring the people's fidelity to the apostolic faith and working in communion with the national and universal church in service and witness to the world.

Catholicity

The IFI Constitution's definition of catholicity means recognition and respect for all human beings as children of God, who "admit servility to no one." It means *koinonia*, which includes everyone so that all may experience life in its fullness. Economic globalization subscribes to the opposite principle, one based on the logic of exclusion. Grounded in the capitalist idea of accumulating wealth, networks of companies employ unjust structures, for example cutting benefits, laying off workers for larger profits, and denying people decent lives. It is a great challenge, especially to the churches and people in the affluent societies, not to be tempted toward selfishness and greed, excess and injustice – to reflect that bread for one can be death for the other. The world is so rich, but scarcity exists because unknown forces exclude the majority – the poor – from the market and deny them their basic needs.

Catholicity means subscribing to the faith handed down by the apostles; it means being dedicated to the worship of God in spirit and in truth. The basis of the IFI, in all its teachings, doctrines, and dogmas, is the Word of God. As a new congregation, her focus of worship and basis of education are the teachings of Jesus Christ, which liberate and heal people. Globalization is the idolatry of the market; it is the worship of Mammon. Its teachings are for the sake of wealth, accumulation, and endless consumption. Economic globalization uses people and loves material things. Saint Paul teaches that “the love of money is the root of all kind of evil” (1 Tim 6:10). The basis of truth is not a robust economy, tempting people to consume; the economy must exist for the sake of people’s lives, not people for the sake of economic laws aimed at accumulating wealth.

Catholicity means being nourished and sustained in the Eucharist. In 1998 the SCB stated:

the Holy Eucharist as a sacrament is one venue for God’s new people to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God and humankind (Micah 6:8). . . . The Eucharist is a venue to remember not only the saving acts of God through his passion, death, and resurrection but to remember oneself in the Body of Christ, which is the Church. We are thereby asked, like our Lord, to be broken in pieces, to be of service and food to others. (IFI, Towards 2)

Economic globalization propagates the culture of contentment, offering satisfaction with bread alone while denying people their humanity in God. It propagates a theology of prosperity, which sees holiness in injustice and feasts on gifts while forgetting the gift-giver who can be encountered in the Eucharist.

Catholicity means preaching God’s love to the world. We are commissioned to preach God’s love to the world; we are the extension of the incarnation of Christ, the voice of the poor, the exploited, and the deprived. Our catholicity is seen if we become a community of people who struggle for life and dignity, a community that cares for the poor and fights the exploitative structures of the global society, endeavoring to build the kingdom on earth, where peace based on justice reigns.

Conclusion

We are catholics in the context of globalization. We transform the essence of our catholicity in our everyday encounter in the world, using our faith perspective in life and in death. God judges not the manner in which we

come face to face with death, whether as solemnly as Mother Theresa or as brutally as Bishop Ramento. God judges the way we live our lives in the service of God and our neighbor.

On March 13, 2005, the IFI priest Fr. William Tadena was brutally murdered because of his commitment to struggling peasants. In a homily delivered at Fr. Tadena's funeral, our beloved Alberto B. Ramento – ecumenist, peace advocate, and bishop of the poor – spoke these words:

A gunshot was made hitting his neck, piercing his brain, to vanish his understanding and sense of being. A bullet penetrated his heart to eradicate, to kill his innermost desire hidden inside it. Another bullet shattered his neck, aimed at destroying his voice, denying his capacity to preach the vision and the belief of a priest whose only sin was to proclaim what he felt. What was the vision that our brother, our priest, and our pastor William proclaimed? It was the vision of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente. It is the vision of the Aglipayanos that was given to us by our forebears, who offered their lives and shed their blood so that we can freely preach the vision, the vision of how to become a true Christian.

Anyone who does not serve his or her neighbor, especially the poor, anyone who denies support to the deprived, the needy, the oppressed, those who are thirsty, the political prisoners, is not a true Christian. A Church that worships God but fails to serve her country and people performs false worship, because a life of a person, his or her words and deeds in every minute of life, is his or her true worship. . . . [We] have to use our pulpit . . . and utter words to stop their wickedness!

Can we preach this? Can you? You? You? Stop your evil doings! Can you say that word "Stop!" while a .45 caliber gun is being pointed at you? All of you! Can you do it? Can you? Can you? Can you preach the gospel of the Lord if when you are driving your vehicle someone wearing a helmet and with a gun is following you and upon reaching your outstation . . . can you still utter the words "Stop it!"? "Stop your injustices!" You! Can you do it? Can you do it? Fr. Tadena did it! Do you think this kind of death is simple? Fr. Tadena aroused the world of those who sleep. I hope we Christians are like that, to continue it, especially for us Aglipayanos. Just as I already said and am now still saying, I am afraid, we are all afraid! But it is in our blood to serve.