

MOTHER IGNACIA DEL ESPIRITU SANTO
(1663-1748)

Founder of the Religious of the Virgin Mary

Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo was the founder of the Religious of the Virgin Mary (R.V.M.), the only Filipino Catholic women religious congregation recognized by Rome, through a decree issued by the Pope on January 12, 1948.

This pious woman was born on February 1, 1663, the feast day of St. Ignatius of Antioch. She was baptized the following month. The baptism was officiated by Fray Alberto Collares, O.P., at the Iglesia de los Santos Reyes de Parian de Manila. On the baptismal records, Catalina Macalinang appeared as godmother, with a wealthy and prominent couple – Jusepe Incua, a Chinese, and Maria Jeronima, a Chinese mestiza – as parents. She received her early Christian education from her family.

When she turned 21, her parents wanted her to marry *Capitan* Ricardo de Lodero y Salvacion. Having determined to lead a religious life, she sought the advice of Fr. Paul Klein, a Bohemian Jesuit, who, aside from being a friend of the family, also served as her guide in spiritual matters. The priest suggested that she go on a spiritual retreat before making an important decision. That was in 1684, when *indios* were denied admission in any religious congregation.

She emerged from the retreat firmer in her resolution to dedicate her life in the service of God. She started living a religious life on the day she founded her congregation, known as the Beaterio de la Compañia de Jesus, located at the corner of Calle Victoria and Calle Lucia in Intramuros, Manila. In this *beaterio*, she housed 50 girls whom she taught the fundamentals of education and trained in the womanly arts as well household chores. It took 19 long years of hardship before her first recruits joined her in vowing to live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Among them were niece, Cristina Gonzales, followed by Theodora de Jesus, Agustina Geronima, and Ana Margarita. These novices became the original R.V.M. members. Led by Mother Ignacia, everyone in the congregation, through some home craft like sewing, contributed to its income. Nevertheless, supplies were seldom sufficient.

It was noted that the congregation had been intended from the start to counteract the immoral practices in the seventeenth century. To be able to bring about the personal sanctification of the members, the rule stressed moderation in food and drink, avoidance of gossip and a well-apportioned schedule of prayers, meals, work and recreation time. Penance was also stressed. Mother Ignacia, in an act of penance, “would sometimes prostrate herself on the floor, and beg others to step on her.” Sometimes she would carry a heavy cross while walking in the corridors. She was also known to expose herself to the midday sun, with arms outstretched. Such practices were dissuaded as too damaging to the health of the pennants.

The text of the original constitution (1732) of the beaterio cannot be located. However, it is known that Fr. Klein was the spiritual director during its formative years and that Mother Ignacia specified that her congregation would be open only to women of Filipino and Chinese-Filipino parentage.

Today, the R.V.M. is an established educational and religious institution that provides Christian education to Filipino youth. It runs 11 colleges, 63 high schools, and 30 elementary schools throughout the country. For every 60,000 students, there are 1,000 R.V.M. sisters to attend to their educational and spiritual needs.

In addition, the R.V.M. maintains a catechetical apostolate in parts of Zamboanga del Sur and in Malaybalay, Bukidnon; seven dormitories at its regional outposts in Manila, Cebu, and Bukidnon; hospital apostolate at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Manila; catechetical classes at the U.P. Elementary School, and weekly retreats at the beaterio attended by professionals, employees, teachers, students, etc. It has missions in Sacramento, California.

The works and efforts of Mother Ignacia did not go unnoticed but were given due recognition in her lifetime by both the church and the state. On July 19, 1748, exactly two months before her death, the then archbishop of Manila, Msgr. Pedro de la Santissima Trinidad de Arrizala, recommended her beaterio to King Ferdinand IV of Spain for royal patronage and protection.

Mother Ignacia died on September 10, 1748 at the age of 85. Although she was not a Spaniard, the government and the church paid their last homage to her. It was said that many public officials attended her burial and acted as pallbearers. She was laid to rest inside the vault in the basement of St. Ignacius Church in Intramuros.

On March 4, 1980, the National Historical Institute installed a marker in her honor in Intramuros, Manila.

References:

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