

# Feminist Ethos in the Life of Venerable Ignacia Del Espiritu Santo

Kurt S. Candalas

Arts and Sciences Program, Lourdes College,  
Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines  
*mrkurtz21@gmail.com*

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**Abstract -** *The study explored the feminist ethos of the Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo. Specifically, it determined the following: the historical background of the Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo; the feminist ethos as found in the account of her life as a holy woman; and the significance of her life vis-à-vis education ministry. The study employed qualitative research using documentary analysis and the feminist hermeneutics in acquiring the data. Sources of data included key informants, biographies, stories, articles, and transcribed speeches of priests. The Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo espoused a collective feminist ethos centered on religiosity, heroism, and education. Such traits were revealed in the historical roots and biography of Venerable Ignacia.*

**Keywords:** *Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, Feminist Ethos, Religious and Education ministry*

## INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is a country whose people are dominantly Roman Catholics. Most of the Roman Catholics are devotees of different saints and even angels. These devotees commit to a litany of prayer offered to their venerated saints or angels with the hope that what they pray for such as solution to a problem, protection from harm and fulfillment of a dream or desire will be granted. Such devotion and belief make Catholicism an integral part of the Filipino culture.

Among the many Filipino devotees was a great nun whose prayers were not centered on her own interest but that of others. She was the Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, also known as Mother Ignacia. She was known for her deep devotion to God and to the Blessed Mother. According to Sister Ma. Anicia Co, RVM, Mother Ignacia devoted her life to the suffering of Jesus Christ and tried to imitate Him through a life of humble service to her fellows. With humility, she earnestly prayed and performed penances to move God to show mercy to those who

were consumed by earthly desires [1]. Her humility was expressed in her capacity to forgive, to remain forbearing, and to stay gentle. Her spirituality was clearly a manifestation of an interwoven peace and harmony in the community, mutual love and union of wills, thereby witnessing to the loving compassion of Christ and the maternal care like that of the Blessed Mother.

Mother Ignacia, considered a foundress of hope and piety of the Religious of the Virgin Mary, was an essential catalyst in the country because of her magnanimous dedication to the service of others to the glory of God. In her was the unwavering commitment to providing quality Christian education to the Filipinos. Ignacia's saintly character endeared many to follow her.

This study aims to extract and interpret the distinguishing characteristics and morals or guiding beliefs of the Venerable Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo. It also determines the significance of this Filipina nun who created an immeasurable and enduring impact to the lives of every Filipino especially to the religious ministry and education apostolate. In the religious ministry for instance, the congregation of the Religious of the Virgin Mary in the Philippines whom Mother Ignacia served as a foundress envisions to provide Filipinos with their spiritual quenching. Through the intercession of Mother Ignacia in their prayers, the RVM Sisters likely to believe that she was a living image of Mary. Inspired by her holiness, the RVM Sisters, thus, thrive to make bold initiatives in spirit of obstacles to be of service to others; hence, this was the greatest service whom Mother Ignacia rendered and responded to such apostolic challenges in the country. On the other hand, Mother Ignacia had also contributed herself in the education ministry or apostolate. Her call of mission in education was inspired by the call of the Triune God to her to defy social changes. Recalling the RVM Philosophy of education, it emphasizes that the school is where the process of growth is directed towards

reverence for creation and persons which fortifies the spirit of communion [20]. A more concrete manifestation of this is that the formation of the whole being of a person through the systematic integration of quality Christian education gratifies Mother Ignacia's ideologies and social movements and the like for the common good.

In such pursuit, the significance of this study may provide solace to her followers and believers that they may have a steadfast faith. This translates to an active engagement in the call of the congregation for the beatification of the Venerable Mother Ignacia. Also, the propagation of this research study may be of a great help to know the life of Mother Ignacia not just in the confine of the Philippine settings but also across countries. Hence, this study was conducted.

## FRAMEWORK

This discourse analysis is grounded on the assumption that Venerable Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo revealed a collective feminist ethos traits on religiosity, heroism, and education. Notwithstanding, the researcher would attempt to enter into the discourse of interpreting the life of Mother Ignacia based on the previously mentioned character traits. One of the evidences that the Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo espoused collective ethos principles is through feminist hermeneutics.

Accordingly, Feminist hermeneutics deals with the struggle for the achievement of women's freedom of choices to control lives and bodies. Essentially, feminist hermeneutics principles espoused the experience of women and how this experience is based on suffering due to the patriarchal domination.

To Collins [2] the essence of feminist hermeneutics is the empowerment of women by bringing out new interpretation in a new light. In the context of examining the life of Mother Ignacia, such ideology is obtained in an in-depth information through the perspectives of her pious life and as an empowered woman. More so, Agrey [3] opines that feminist hermeneutics is, generally, a result to persistency of searching answers from questions pertaining to its meaning. Hence to find out such bliss, the phase of the study dwells into the art of deciphering and interpreting the life of Mother Ignacia as far as reciprocating her collective feminist ethos traits or principles.

Further, Ruether (cited by Fricke) emphasized that the task of feminist hermeneutics today is not only to develop and solidify the principles by which women

appropriate the good news of liberation from patriarchy and develop the stories and texts to proclaim this good news. The task of feminist hermeneutics is also to establish this theory of interpretation as normative and indispensable to the understanding of the faith [4]. With this concept, Mother Ignacia's collective ethos traits can also be attributed or emulated to her faith as she offers her whole self to God and to the Blessed Mother. Thus, it is with her faith that propels her to lead and become empowered.

Another relevant theory that the study can also be gleaned upon is "*post-modern feminism*". This theory is based on the assumption that the world is male oriented, devised by men and dominated on a male emphasis on systems of inflexible rules. The goal of post-modern feminism, then, is to create a plan that will hopefully counter the patriarchal culture. More accurately, it is a conglomerate of beliefs that the female perspective of the world can be shaped into a value theory [5]. Conversely, this universal appeal of woman in the society verifies collective ethos traits to empower others amidst patriarchy.

From the foregoing discussion, this critical discourse analysis would have been impossible to attain without the above mentioned theory that will look into the interpretation, analysis, and evaluation in the life of the Venerable Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study assessed the feminist ethos in the life of Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo. Specifically, this study sought to achieve the following objectives: (1) to describe the past of Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo; (2) to interpret the feminist ethos found in the account of her life as a holy woman; and (3) to extrapolate the significance of her life in relation to the education ministry.

## METHODS

This study utilized the feminist hermeneutics design in studying the life of the Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo. Feminist hermeneutics is a theory and art or a practice of interpretation with concentration to woman's empowerment in the society. In its broad sense, feminist hermeneutics addresses a broad domain of interpretation of things based on the biblical or theological perspective. It endeavors to have an equality of both the sexes and defy changes in a patriarchal society or a community that is mostly governed by men. Feminist hermeneutics, thus, makes women's manifold

experiences to be the fundamental resources for the hermeneutic process, no matter what expressions of human life be at its lenses [6]. In light of this theory, the life of Mother Ignacia was interpreted on the historical and sociological perspectives. This analysis was deepened using the feminist hermeneutics' lens for magnifying a woman's distinguishing quality in the society.

For the purpose of the study, written accounts about the life of the Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo were utilized. These accounts included her autobiography, web information, historical data, and past research works.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### ***Roots of the Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo***

Ignacia Iuco, commonly known as Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, came from a not so wealthy family. Ignacia was the eldest among the four children of Maria Jeronima, a Filipina, and Jusepe, a Chinese Christian migrant from Amoy, China. She was the sole surviving child. The Iuco's other children, one boy and two other girls, died in infancy. There is no existing record of the exact day and month of her birth, but the Religious of the Virgin Mary in the Philippines and the Vatican Church recognized her existence in a baptismal record dated March 4, 1663 [7]. She was christened in the *Church of the Holy Kings in the fifth Parián de Chinos* by Fray Padre Alberto Collares, O.P.

The young Ignacia must have gotten her name "*Ignacia*" from St. Ignatius of Antioch. It was the custom of the early Christian Catholic family in the Philippines to name a newly baptized child after the name of a saint whose feast falls on the date of the birth of the child [8].

Since Ignacia's father had a Chinese blood, her parents had to conform to an early marriage [9]. According to Father Murillo Velarde, Ignacia's parents wanted her to get married early at the age of twenty-one [8]. Ignacia, bewildered by her parents' decision, sought the advice of her spiritual director, Father Pablo Clain, S.J. At such time, Father Clain had her perform the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, which developed in her strong devotion to God and the Blessed Mother. Not wanting to marry as desired for her by her parents, she left her parents, bringing only a needle and scissors. She had decided to live a religious life in the house that is now known the Mother House of the Institute [7].

At the said house, Ignacia religiously dedicated her life to prayer. Taking the path of holiness was the turning point of her life. She had the guidance of her confessor as she took that path of life. She lived a life of prayer, piety, and penance. Because of such life of holy devotion, she was admired by groups of women known as the "yndias" and the "mestiza women". Inspired by Ignacia's pure devotion, some of these women received the prompting of following Ignacia's way of life. Thereafter, they joined her cause. They grew in number and called themselves the "beatas", paving way for the formation of the first religious community of women in the Philippines. Ignacia was joined by group of women - native Filipinos, mestizas, and Spaniards among others. The group was known as the "Beatas de la Compañia de Jesus."

For some time, the Beatas' faith was tested. They lived in poverty, hunger, and penance. By God's providence, the group received offerings from different sectors that became its patrons. The priests of the Society of Jesus, being the beatas' spiritual directors and confessors, formed them to be a religious community [8]. As one religious community, the beatas stayed in the same vicinity near to the College of the Society of Jesus from where they had access to the church of the said college.

Soon, the beatas grew in numbers, thereby leading to the setting of rules and to the engagement in livelihood. Ignacia always reminded the beatas to uphold always the teachings of Christ and to develop among them a heart full of bliss, purity, and humility as they serve others. Ignacia's unwavering leadership for the established community of women was inspired by her devotion to the Blessed Mother.

Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo endeavored to live a life reflecting the very image of Mary. Together with her beatas, she led others to the virtues of Mary, the mother of God. According to Father Murillo, he admired the beatas or beaterio for their devotion, humility, and service [8]. Today, the community known as the Religious of the Virgin Mary remarkably continues to embrace the legacy of Mother Ignacia. Hence, Mother Ignacia's lamp continues to shine as her beatas strive to respond to the call of evangelization.

### **Feminist Ethos in the Life of Mother Ignacia**

#### **1.1. Religious Vanguard**

At an early age, Mother Ignacia submitted her life to the path of holiness. She did not trade her love for God and Mary for earthly marriage. She chose to become a spiritual inspiration for Filipinos and other

nationalities during her time. She brought many lives to God, gaining her the admiration of other women who then joined her cause. She defied social order in order to attain religious freedom.

The Philippines was once conquered by the Spaniards who introduced Christianity to the Filipinos. According to Father Gutay, the Spaniards played a great role in the Filipinos' encounter with God. Thus, common among the Filipinos is the expression of Christ's presence in every facet of life. Christianity in the country was greatly conditioned by factors that were intrinsically woven into the geographical and chronological context of the period [10].

During Mother Ignacia's time, the Spaniards did not allow any native Filipino to become a nun or a priest. Although there was already an attempt to spread Christianity in the country through the help of the first ever Spanish nun through the establishment of a convent for Filipinos, Spaniards, and others, the Spaniards were just too radical in their beliefs that in no way would they allow any native Filipinos to be part of any religious congregation. Because of the Spaniards religious prejudice, Mother Ignacia lived alone in a house at the back of the headquarters of Jesuits in Manila. There, she lived a life of public prayer and labor, which attracted other women in the community to pursue religious life at a time when they were prohibited from joining any religious activity.

What was so admirable in Mother Ignacia was her undying dedication to and faith in God amidst circumstantial odds. Aware of the risk of breaking the Spaniards' religious prohibition imposed on the native Filipinos, Mother Ignacia still accepted a group of women to join her advocacy in the hope of changing the existing structured ecclesiastical limitation. It took a strong disposition on the part of Mother Ignacia to venture on what was risky during a period of war, revolution, and suppression brought by a patriarchal society. The risks did not deter her from pursuing her mission in life. The Bible makes it clear that 'testing' or 'trials' are the work of both God and the devil (Luke 22:28; Acts 20:19; James 1:2; 1 Peter 1:6; 2 Peter 2:9).

They are testing situations in which the servant of God faces new possibilities of both good and evil, and is exposed to various inducements to prefer the latter. Russ [11] espoused that God tests His people by putting them in situations that reveal the quality and sincerity of their faith and devotion, so that all can see what is in their hearts. Likewise, Mother Ignacia was tested that she could be purified by God in the same

way a metal is purified in the refiner's crucible. In the process, God strengthened Mother Ignacia's patience, matured her Christian character, and led her into an enhanced assurance of His love for her.

Mother Ignacia's faithfulness to God and the Blessed Mother helped her in guiding the beatas. Her being intrepid, adventurous, and open to the Holy Spirit made her a strong leader of the beatas. Mother Ignacia's valiancy was rooted in her willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit. She found new ways to reflect on things, fellow beatas, other people, and other significant events in her life. She experienced God's call amidst her limitation as human being. As she continued to be open to her vocation, she came to know the perfect plan of God for her. Thus, her leadership was all rooted in her interminable faith, which made her eager to discover daily the will and action of God in her life as a religious vanguard across centuries [12].

## 1.2. Heroic Degree

Pope Benedict XVI under a papal decree recognition accepted the findings of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints of the Vatican dated July 6, 2007 that read "...the Servant of God, Ignacia, foundress of the Religious of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is found to possess to a heroic degree the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity toward God and neighbor... [13]"

The papal decree recognized Mother Ignacia as "venerable," which means two steps away from sainthood. Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo walked this earth in union with the holy sacraments of God and the sanctity of the Blessed Mother. The life of Venerable Ignacia inspired many Catholics especially the women across the country. In her words, she encouraged women to be a humble servant of God.

To Reverend Salmon [14], "... Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, like the Blessed Mother to whom she was devoted, was a disciple of Jesus Christ. She, like Jesus, and like Mary, heard the word of God and kept it by living it in her life. In the Gospel according to St. Luke, how Jesus was out preaching and teaching and saying all sorts of wonderful things. There was a little old lady sitting in the crowd and she looked up at Him and cried out: 'Blessed be the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you.' And Jesus said 'blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it'" (Luke 11:27). His statement signified that Venerable Ignacia chose to live by the call of God for her. Therefore, she dared to do something unheard of,

something very deep and very intimate but all in her response to the call of God.

At this point, it is of paramount importance to discuss the foregoing virtues bestowed by Pope Benedict XVI to Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo: the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

### **1.2.1 Theological Virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity)**

Pope Benedict XVI from the Vatican Church recognized the holiness and virtues of Venerable Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo as theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. The theological virtues in Christian philosophy are the moral characters embodied by a person who is infused by God into the souls of the faithful and who has opened his/her horizon in His call to the path of holiness. The legion of Mary emphasizes that a person who has been a recipient of theological virtues being given by the supreme church pledged the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of his/her disposition living a relationship with the Holy Trinity [15].

#### **Theological Virtue of Faith**

Faith is a theological virtue by which a Christian believes in God and in what He has said and what He has revealed and in the Holy Church that proposes for one's belief because it is the truth itself.

Venerable Ignacia's faith is so big. Because of faith, she freely committed her entire self to God at that moment when she left everything -- her parents, friends, and all. She listened wholeheartedly to the call of the Triune God for her to be one of His followers. For this reason, Venerable Ignacia, a great believer of God, sought to know and do God's will instead of following her parents and her own desires in life. Thus, she righteously lived her faith. Father Salmon rejoins that "...*Mother Ignacia had heard the word of God and chose to live by that word... She heard God's word... My favor rests on you, Yndia and mestiza that you are, therefore, live in my love and bring that love to your sisters.*"

*And so she dared to do something unheard of because she knew she was loved and wanted others to taste and to share in that love of God and therefore she did indeed find a new religious community made up of her fellow Yndias and mestizas. ...in those days any community of religious women had to stay behind the monastery walls...but don't dare go out. And as time went on, Mother Ignacia, again living the faith in her, kept the word she heard, moved out and the sisters moved out with her [14].*" This belief signified

that Venerable Ignacia's endearing expression of faith sprouted to give the entire humanity a message of surrendering to God and come before Him with a resignation of her self-centered desires.

This recognition of God as the One granting this gift of faith was echoed by Richert who asserted that a person can open himself to the gift of faith through the practice of cardinal virtues but without God's action, faith will never reside in that person's soul [16].

Mother Ignacia's faith did not only keep her faith and live by it but also ardently professed that faith unto others with an inclination to lead. For doing so, she had some of the women in the community joined her advocacy.

#### **Theological Virtue of Hope**

Hope is a second theological virtue by which a Christian desires the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as her happiness, placing her trust in Christ and relying not only on her strength but also on the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Venerable Ignacia responded to this virtue of hope by finding joy in God's plan for her life. Though the Spanish colonizers in the Philippines prohibited every native Filipino to be a nun or priest, the Venerable Ignacia was never shaken in her faith in God and the Blessed Mother. Without any reservation, she gave herself to God for service. With the guidance of Father Clain, she served God intently and prudently [7]. Her desire for true happiness inspired others especially the women to join her calling.

In view of that, the Venerable Ignacia modeled and led her group as they were all chosen by God. Further supported, Bishop Galeone [17] reiterated that "*the holiness of the Servant of God as manifested in Mother Ignacia's prayer life up to her last moment on earth. Dying on her knees after receiving Holy Communion was indeed an extraordinary situation. It is a privilege given to whom God chooses. And for Mother Ignacia, it was a culmination of a life that had Christ for its center--a life spent in ministering to those who needed help without discrimination, especially to the poor. This can only be possible when one has a deep faith in God and has love for Him.*"

Additionally, Reverend Schumacher [18] recounted that "*Those of us who know the life of Venerable Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo will conclude that very probably when God first called her, she had very little idea of apostolic service. She thought at the beginning probably to gather herself and those who would offer themselves to God, but very soon as is evident, she came to realize that God*

wanted something of her. He wanted a life of apostolic service. So we find that very early in the history of the Beaterio de la Compania de Jesus (now Congregation of the Religious of the Virgin Mary) that Mother Ignacia and her Beatas gave first opportunity to the Filipina to come closer to God by means of the Spiritual Exercises, and the first opportunity for young Filipino girls to be educated." Mother Ignacia was blessed abundantly and purified by the test of the sacrifice. Hoping against hope, she believed, and thus became the first ever Filipina woman to establish a congregation with approved pontifical status.

### Theological Virtue of Charity

Charity is a third theological virtue by which a Christian loves God above all things and His sake alone.

According to the Legion of Mary, Jesus made charity the greatest commandment when He said: "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love (John 15:19).*" And again: "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12).*" This is likely to mean that God wants His children to spread love above all else. Venerable Ignacia advocated the values of the Blessed Mother. A better way of looking at the actions of Venerable Ignacia is to speak of it in the lenses of her fellow beatas. They spoke of her as a religious vanguard of time. Venerable Ignacia was a patriot, nationalist, feminist, and leader. Her devotion to God's fervent love was demonstrated through her love for her companions and for the people in the community.

Like the other theological virtues, charity is supernatural in the sense that God is both its origin and its object. Fr. Hardon contended that charity is the "*infused supernatural virtue by which a person loves God above all things for his [that is, God's] own sake, and loves others for God's sake.*" Hence, like the other two theological virtues, charity is an act of the will and the exercise of charity for God's mercy and compassion [19].

Venerable Ignacia, throughout her life, manifested the fruit of spirit and the fulfillment of the law of God. Never had she given up her love for and faith in God and the Blessed Mother. Her spirituality was animated and inspired by charity. It can be recounted that the Venerable Ignacia by all means dedicated herself to God, did penance for others' mortification, and prayed hard for others' guidance and safety. Her spiritual

exercises made her love God and others to the fullest [14].

### **Significance of Mother Ignacia's life vis-à-vis the Education Ministry**

Historical accounts also point to the Venerable Ignacia's education ministry. That is, she was an educator as well. Foremost, she led the group of women to enlightenment; she educated them. Venerable Ignacia was to the beatas a teacher. She taught them the value of valiance amidst the Spaniards' religious restrictions. Mother Ignacia's valiance inspired the natives to take that path of holiness without fear. Her strong faith in God and the Blessed Mother sustained the faith of her growing congregation. Father Murillo commented that throughout the years, the community of the beatas has proven that a community that affords the society with spiritual and temporal benefit can be established without any cause for scandal [1].

Mother Ignacia also taught young girls and women who came in contact with her and the fellow beatas. She educated these young girls and women not only about Christianity but also about their role as women in the society. According to Sister Co, the kind of education Mother Ignacia and her beatas gave to the women of their times went beyond knowledge and skills. Her teachings included positive disposition and perception about life and the qualities and dignity of a woman. More to that, the group proved that women could exercise their right and could equal men in some terms [1].

Further, Sister Co portrayed Mother Ignacia's education ministry as follows: she led by example, she exemplified the Christian values, she listened to the voice of God, and she educated herself by never ceasing to be a learner. She was an educator because she was always a learner and a faithful disciple of God. She learned to lead the group because of divine wisdom and because she herself experienced what it meant to be led by the Holy Spirit.

The teachings of Mother Ignacia and the beatas have survived for many decades and will still ignite the spirit of those in the coming generations. In fact, her evangelical mission is kept alive in this present generation by the beatas now known as the Religious of the Virgin Mary (RVM). By the example of Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, the RVM sisters, true to their Marian identity and orientation, adhere to their Education Philosophy that education is a life-long process whereby human persons grow and develop

their potentials in the pursuit of their God-given mission of transforming all things in Jesus Christ [20].

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo espoused a collective feminist ethos of a religious person, of a leader, and of an educator. As a whole, Mother Ignacia addressed a broad realm of holiness endeavoring to challenge and correct the effects of the Spanish patriarchy through her unceasing and consistent dedication to God and the Blessed Mother. Her leadership is construed as an offshoot of her being a woman of the century embodying the teachings of God and the morals like that of the Blessed Mother. Thus, feminist hermeneutics affirms Mother Ignacia's aforementioned traits as revealed in her historical roots and biography.

For further investigation, the study is limited to cover the collective ethos traits of Mother Ignacia orchestrated by the tool of feminist hermeneutics. Thus, it is recommended that future researchers may seek to unveil other collective feminist ethos of Venerable Ignacia del Espiritu Santo especially in terms of other heroic degree of cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude as pronounced by Pope Benedict XVI.

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