

THE IGLESIA NI CRISTO

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The Iglesia ni Cristo (öChurch of Christö in Tagalog) is a New Religious Movement which originated in the Philippines in 1914 under the leadership of Felix Y. Manalo. Its members are primarily Filipino, but it has spread with the Filipino diaspora to a claimed 85 nations and territories.

At the turn of the twentieth century the Philippines was in a state of unprecedented cultural transition. After many centuries of Spanish political, social, economic, and religious domination, the United States had taken political control of the islands, opening the door to Protestant missionary work and distribution of the Bible. The resulting cultural changes created an environment ripe for the rise of New Religious Movements. The Iglesia ni Cristo was one of these, and, unlike many others, has survived and prospered.

Born in 1886, Felix Manalo was raised a Roman Catholic but spent time in his late teens and early twenties in the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Disciples of Christ, and the Seventh-Day Adventists prior to founding the Iglesia ni Cristo. The latter's early converts came through Felix's contacts among the Disciples and Adventists. Its first chapel was built in 1915, and by 1919 membership had grown to 1500. The group's first schism, the Ora rebellion, occurred in 1921. Spin-off groups arising from this as well as three later schisms have not stood the test of time.

The Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II initially had a negative impact on the group's growth, but the scattering of the Iglesia ni Cristo's membership to the provinces ultimately resulted in its expansion throughout the archipelago. From 1948 to 1990 the group experienced explosive growth which brought its membership to 1.4 million. In the decade after 1990 growth had slowed substantially. Today the group numbers approximately 2.7 million.

Felix died in 1963, and his son Eraño Manalo became Chief Executive Minister. Born in 1925, Eraño is now in his eighties. His son, Eduardo V. Manalo, currently Deputy Executive Minister, is expected to assume leadership in the future. Under Eraño's administration the Iglesia ni Cristo has expanded to North and South

America, Europe and other parts of Asia. The church notes its opening of chapels in Jerusalem, Rome and Athens as particularly important in that these are said to fulfill biblical prophecy.

As a group this church bears many marks of a New Religious Movement in teaching and culture.

Teaching

The Iglesia ni Cristo teaches that the Bible is its sole source of authority, but that only Felix Manalo and those appointed by him and the leaders who have followed him (Iglesia ni Cristo administration and preachers) can authentically interpret and teach from it. God is the Father who created all things, the only true God. Jesus Christ is not God; he is a created being to whom the Father has given holiness and whom the Father has sanctified so as to be without sin. Christ is called öSon of Godö and öLordö as honorifics but these do not reflect his nature: they were bestowed on him by God.

Humanity is in need of salvation not because of original sin, but because of particular sins committed in transgressing the law. The only way of salvation is through membership in the Iglesia ni Cristo, because this is the true church which bears Christ's name. Members of the church are saved by Christ's blood. Man is called to serve God, but the only acceptable service is through the Iglesia ni Cristo. Love for God must be expressed through works; faith alone is insufficient for salvation.

God has worked in three dispensations: the era of the Patriarchs, from creation to the birth of Moses; the era of the Prophets, from the birth of Moses to that of Jesus; and the Christian era, from the birth of Jesus to the Day of Judgment. The Christian era has had four messengers: Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul, Martin Luther, and Felix Y. Manalo.

In the Christian era, the early church rapidly apostatized because of false teaching. Only with the preaching of Felix Manalo, the öLast Messengerö based of Revelation 7, has the true church reappeared. The öLast Daysö prior to the return of Christ have begun.

When a person dies, his or her body and soul both die and go into the grave. They remain there until Christ's second coming. At his return the dead of the Iglesia ni Cristo will be raised. This is the first resurrection. They will join living church members in the clouds to meet Christ and will gain the reward of joining God the Father, Christ

and the Last Messenger, Felix, in the Holy City and dwell there forever.

After 1,000 years the second resurrection will occur. Those outside the church will be destroyed in the Second Death. They will be thrown into a lake of fire.

Culture

The group is highly authoritarian and hierarchical with a strong central administration and clearly delineated local leadership at the *ölocaleo* or chapel level. Members must fulfill *ödutiesö* in order to remain in the church and gain salvation. These duties include twice weekly attendance at worship services, participation in assigned-group weekly prayer meetings, making three types of financial offerings, offering prayer at particular times in Christ's name, engagement in mission, and maintaining unity, especially by voting for approved political candidates and by not joining labor unions or other organizations outside the church. Eating blood or food mixed with blood is forbidden. Marriage outside the group is reason for expulsion and thus the loss of salvation. Because of Felix Manalo's pivotal role in the formation of the Iglesia ni Cristo, those who have benefited from his preaching are urged to remember him regularly. The group is strongly anti-Roman Catholic, hence it is at odds with the general Philippine population.

In recent years the Iglesia ni Cristo has gained status, recognition and power in the Philippines through a variety of efforts: the courting of political candidates with members' bloc votes in exchange for appointments to governmental positions of power; the founding of a university with extension programs in several Philippine provinces; the founding of a hospital and offering of regular medical, dental and community service outreaches; the establishment of free summer kindergarten programs throughout the Philippines and overseas for members and non-members; the construction of resettlement communities for victims of calamities; and more.

The church publishes an attractive monthly magazine, *Pasugo* (*öGod's Messageö*), and effectively utilizes radio and television programming.

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Additional Resources

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For videos of Iglesia ni Cristo television teachings see:

<http://www.iglesianicristo.ws>