

“Liberated in Faith”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

May 5, 2024

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The Rev. Toribio Quimada wasn't looking to become part of a new church when he opened the letter from a member inquiring about having her child baptized. But, there it was. An old bit of newspaper used as packaging that included a list of churches in North America.

At the time, Rev. Quimada was in his early 30s and was pastoring several congregations of the Iglesia Universal de Cristo across Negros Island in the Philippines. He had joined the church eight years prior in a major conversion from the Roman Catholic religion of his upbringing to this Protestant Christian denomination.

Rev. Quimada asked many questions as a child growing up on the island of Cebu and being raised in the Catholic church. He wanted to read the Bible for himself. This was a privilege reserved only for priests at the time and so he was not allowed. Rev. Quimada's uncle, a minister in the Protestant Iglesia Universal de Cristo, gave him his first Bible. And he devoured the words voraciously.

By the time Rev. Quimada discovered the newspaper listing of churches, he had grown the church and was looking for additional resources to educate the children and adults in his congregations. He read down the list of churches starting with the letter “I” and then moving down to the letter “U.” He didn't find the name of Iglesia Universal de Cristo, but he did find the Universalist Church of Wisconsin.

Rev. Quimada wrote to them, but his letter was returned. He tried again, this time writing to the Universalist Church of Gloucester, MA. This time he received a warm letter from their minister who had forwarded his unexpected correspondence to the Universalist Service Committee. The USC sent religious education and other materials, and this began an ongoing relationship with the Universalist Church of America.

More and more, Rev. Quimada began to preach the message of a loving God and universal salvation for all - the core tenets of Universalism which were quite different from the beliefs of his church at the time. His most frequently preached topics included: universal salvation for all humankind; Hell is hatred to your neighbors and heaven is love to them; and Jesus the Son of God or Man?.

A few years later, Rev. Quimada was excommunicated from Iglesia Universal de Cristo because he was deemed to not be teaching and preaching the church's faith. The Universalist Church of America stood ready to assist and in April of 1955, having filed all the appropriate papers with the Philippine government, the Universalist Church of the Philippines was registered and established. Thirty years later this would be renamed the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines.

Negros Island, where the church was founded, was and still remains a primarily rural island populated by poor farmers. Rev. Quimada got to know many farmers, especially those living near the village of Nagbinlod, where Rev. Quimada had bought some land to build a new house and the headquarters of the Universalist Church. He learned about the farmers' struggle to maintain possession of their land. Land which was often inherited and passed from one generation to the next. Corporations and wealthy families would often use loopholes to take possession of farmland leaving most of the poor farmers with little to no recourse for getting their land back.

Challenging abuses of power had long been part of the fabric of life in the Philippines whether it was challenging the abuse of corrupt religious leaders or challenging the abuse of corrupt political leaders.

Rev. Quimada continued to preach the controversial message of universal salvation made possible by a loving God and to support poor farmers struggling for the right to live freely and in relationship with the land they had stewarded for generations.

These stances made Rev. Quimada an outlier and a target.

In the early morning hours of May 23, 1988, the Quimada home was set on fire. His wife and children fled, however Rev. Quimada remained in the house. Gunshots were heard. His family later found his body in the rubble and learned that this wasn't an accident. Rev. Quimada had been deemed a threat and was murdered for his justice-making ministry.

In January earlier this year, I visited the UUCP Congregation in Nataban which was built downhill from where the original Quimada home and the first congregation of the Universalist Church of the Philippines once stood. (Photo 1) Although my parents are from the Philippines and I still have many family members there, I hadn't know any of this history or these stories until becoming a Unitarian Universalist in my mid-twenties.

Standing with me is Rev. Quimada's grandson, Persie Mark Sienes, (Photo 2) who was part of a delegation of the UU Church of the Philippines who took me on a tour of a few UU congregations on Negros Island in early January. After the service, we walked through the forest and up to this clearing. In the few brief moments I was there, I knew I was standing on holy ground.

And, this is a photo of the current church building of the UUCP Congregation in Nataban. (Photo 3) The morning that we worshipped there some people had walked for hours to attend the service, as they do every Sunday. (Photo 4) During the worship service, children led us in song. We sang Spirit of Life. And, several people shared their stories of why they are Unitarian Universalists. Afterward, they broke out platters of food to share and eat together.

(Photo 5) The Universalist Church of the Philippines became the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines in 1985 and became a formal member of the UU Association in 1988. Today, Unitarian Universalists in the Philippines continue to exist as a religious minority. The hundreds of members of the UU Church of the Philippines primarily live and worship on Negros Island, though there is now also one congregation in metro Manila in one of the most densely populated, poor urban areas of the country.

The Philippines has been shaped by its long history of domination by colonial powers. Colonization began with the landing of Ferdinand Magellan in 1521 marking the start of the Christianizing occupation of Spain. The period of colonial rule continued through the Spanish-American War in 1898 which began the United States' neocolonial occupation of the islands. The domination of foreign powers continued through the occupation by Japan from 1942 to 1945 until the Philippines finally gained full independence in 1946.

Since the occupation of the islands in the sixteenth century, Filipinos have had a long history of fighting for their freedom.

The brief history of Unitarianism in the Philippines has its origins in the struggle for freedom led by the nationalistic resistance movement that engaged in the Philippine-American War.¹ This armed struggle began in February of 1899 almost immediately following the U.S. takeover of the Philippines and continued until 1902.

Shortly after the Philippine resistance was put down by U.S. forces, Filipino Catholic bishops came together to demand their independence from the Catholic Church and the United States, two powers seen as standing in the way of true independence and freedom for Filipinos.

Bishop Gregorio Aglipay and Don Isabelo de los Reyes were leaders within the Philippine Protestant Reformation who called for an independent Philippine church.

They were continuing in the tradition of the Filipino priests, José Burgos, Mariano Gómez, and Jacinto Zamora, who had resisted the abuses of the Spanish friars in the 1860s and 70s. The execution of these priests is considered the start of the revolutionary independence movement, fueled in large part by the writings of the national hero José Rizal, which eventually led to Filipino independence from Spain.

In the early years of the founding of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI), Bishop Aglipay developed a relationship with the American Unitarian Association. He and Don Isabelo de los Reyes traveled to Boston to attend the AUA convention in 1931. The Unitarian Convention passed resolutions for Philippine Independence and admitted the IFI to the International Association of Liberal Christianity. The president of the AUA, Dr. Louis Cornish, traveled to the Philippines in 1939 and was made Honorary President of the IFI.

However, Unitarian theology did not appeal to most members of the IFI, and after Bishop Aglipay's death in 1940, the church moved solidly towards more traditionally trinitarian theology.

The IFI continues to thrive today in affiliation with the American Episcopal Church and as a member of the World Council of Churches. I visited one of their congregations in Mandaluyong in metro Manila.

¹ Centenary of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente: A Historical Sketch, <https://www.dgma.ph/about-us/ifi-history.html>

Here's a photo of Bishop Aglipay that was on a wall inside the church. (*Photo 6*) The quotation next to his photo reads: "In as much as the revolution tends to liberate politically the Filipino people from Spain, it is necessary that we also work to overthrow the yoke with which the Spanish clergy pretends to subjugate us so that we may be worthy successors of the Filipino priests who sacrificed themselves in defense of our unquestionable rights which were usurped with the greatest impudence by the friars who made themselves Lords of our beloved country."

This is the sanctuary. (*Photo 7*) You can tell that we visited shortly after Christmas. These are statues of Mother Mary and the Santo Niño, or Holy Child. (*Photo 8*) Both figures are ubiquitous in Philippine churches and also in people's homes. In this case, Mary is dressed in the colors of the Philippine flag and the Holy Child is dressed as a guerrilla fighter of the Philippine revolution.

And, this is me standing outside the church with their current pastor and his wife. (*Photo 9*)

While I was familiar with the origins of the UU Church of the Philippines, I hadn't known any of the history of Filipinos being connected to Unitarianism until reading a book written by UU minister Fred Muir², and visiting this IFI church with a colleague who lives in metro Manila.

It was a profound and quite indescribable feeling to discover that among my ancestors, not by blood but by place and religious lineage, are these radical thinkers and leaders. Individuals driven by the desire and need to live out their sacred agency and self-determination especially in the face of oppression and control.

And how profound for UUs today, for all of us gathered here, to know that people all across the world, including in the Philippines, have been motivated by the longing for religious freedom, the ability to think and believe freely, and have struggled and persevered to gain this freedom, sometimes at great cost.

Today, progressive Christians in the Philippines are among those taking a prophetic stance against the human rights abuses of the government, many of them risking their lives. And, progressive churches, including the UU Church of the Philippines, are among the few religious bodies in the country that ordain women as well as trans people.

² Frederic John Muir, *Maglipay Universalist: A History of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines*, 2001.

To maintain a pluralistic society, people must be free to espouse diverse and oftentimes conflicting viewpoints, ideas, and beliefs. Valuing pluralism means opening our arms wide to embrace our multiplicity.

Our ability as human beings to live with pluralism is being tested on many fronts. Authoritarianism across the globe seeks to squelch all opposition and diversity of voices and identities. Yet, true freedom cannot exist when any group seeks domination over another.

For me, it was a revelation to experience the pluralism and multiplicity that is found within Unitarian Universalism in those Philippine congregations. Congregations spreading the good news of God's all-inclusive and all-embracing love and offering hope amidst people's struggles with poverty, a changing climate, loss, and grief as well as hope in celebration of community, new life, and the beauty of the earth.

(Photo 10) It is a blessing in our free church tradition to have these co-religionists, these siblings in faith, reminding us that across our differences, the human and holy will to live freely and faithfully echoes across generations, cultures, and communities. And, the resounding song of truth and freedom will continue to fill our hearts and point us on our way.



