

The Aguinaldo Masses: Origins, Setbacks and Survival

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Every year, as the popular novena of "Aguinaldo Masses" is about to begin on December 16, journalists in our daily newspapers think it timely and relevant to write a column in the editorial section on the nature and significance of this Filipino religious tradition. Reviewing at random various mid-December issues of some newspapers in the last forty years, one finds the write-ups rather repetitious, superficial and stagnant. There is little progress in the field of research about the origins of these Masses and the reason for their celebration. There is confusion even about the names *de Gallo* and *de Aguinaldo*.

Fruitless are also the efforts of these writers to establish the origin of these Masses. For while this religious custom looks and sounds typically Filipino in songs, atmosphere and surroundings, some will think about possible pagan survivals in these Christian rites, others place their origins in Mexico or perhaps in Spain; or perhaps not, because they are unknown today there. And finally there exists a variety of opinions about the reason or intentions for which the Masses are celebrated at such early hours of the morning.

These Masses being among the oldest if not the oldest and most venerable religious traditions still existing in the Philippines, it seemed to me worthwhile to undertake a work of research on this matters in order to clarify, as far as possible, the various points of doubt often asked about the *Misas de Aguinaldo*.

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Votive Masses

Before discussing the origins of the Aguinaldo Masses in the Philippines, a short preamble on the liturgical character of these Masses may be in order, especially for lay readers who are not acquainted with technicalities regarding rituals and the great variety of Masses that are celebrated throughout the year.

The Aguinaldo Masses belong to a special kind of masses called *votive* in the liturgical books, in the old Missals as well as in the Post Vatican II Missals. *Votive Masses* are those that do not correspond with the Office of the day (the prayers said by priests in the Breviary and the Mass offered by them), but are said by choice of the celebrant, with special text and for particular intentions.

Anyone handling the small daily Missal books for the use of the faithful will realize that proper masses are provided for *every day* of the year. These are daily proper Masses distributed throughout the various seasons of the liturgical year, namely, Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and the long post-Easter season called "Ordinary Time" until the next Advent season opens a new cycle. This applies to both the Sundays and the weekly masses. Then, there are Masses proper to the celebration or commemoration of the feasts of saints, which replace the Mass of the corresponding seasonal Mass.

But aside from these daily masses assigned to every day of the year, there are in the Roman Missal, and found at the end of it, a great variety of special masses called *votive Masses*, which the priest, not arbitrarily but following certain liturgical norms established by the Church, may choose to celebrate in special days for particular reasons and needs in substitution of the masses assigned to a given day: like a votive Mass of the Virgin Mary, of the Holy Spirit, of St. Joseph, for the dead, on a death anniversary, etc.

The practice of saying *votive Masses* is very ancient in the Church, going as far back as the fourth century. Christians then begun to ask for, and the Church to celebrate, special Masses for particular intentions, for instance, for the dead, for protection against enemies, for unity, for peace; Masses in time of earthquakes or storms, for a good harvest, for refugees, etc. Later, in the Middle Ages, the Church introduced the votive Masses in honor of saints (aside from the saints of the day), saints considered as special intercessors before God for obtaining certain spiritual or temporal benefits; Masses, for instance in honor of St.

Raphael in view of a long journey to be undertaken, to St. Roche (San Roque) against plagues, and so on.

In addition, there were also *votive* Masses celebrated for one or other day of the week connected with some saint or Christian mystery, under certain liturgical norms. For instance, in honor of the Trinity on Mondays, of the Blessed Sacrament on Thursdays, of the Passion of Christ on Fridays, and, the most commonly celebrated, even in our times, the votive Mass in honor of the Blessed *Virgin Mary on Saturdays*.¹

Votive Masses have been preserved through the centuries, but as the centuries passed, some of them were kept in the Roman Missal, as most appropriated to the times, while some were eliminated. It is worth noting that the reformed Post-Vatican *Roman Missal*, instead of reducing the votive Masses with respect to earlier periods, increased their number considerably.²

The Aguinaldo Masses being *votive* masses introduced by a particular church (Spain, Mexico or the Philippines) do not have a special text of their own in *universal Roman Missal*. But Rome has recognized them as privileged votive masses, celebrated "for grave or weighty reason" (*pro re gravi*) and with massive attendance of the faithful.³ The privilege given to them is manifested in allowing them to be celebrated instead of the daily Masses for the Advent season, which are catalogued in the liturgical calendar as first class ferial days.

The "Novenas" of Advent and the Expectant Mary

As every Catholic knows, the Church's Liturgical Year begins with the first Sunday of the season of Advent. Advent is a period of prepara-

¹ Cf. MARIO RICCHETTI, *Historia de la Liturgia*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid, 1956, II, pp. 114-119.

² In the pre-Vatican *Missale Romanum* (*intra* note 2), there are forty votive Masses added to the Ordinary Masses; while in the new Roman Missal in English, ed. New York, 1985, the number of Masses for special occasions increased to seventy nine.

³ See *Missale Romanum*, Milan 1962, Introd., De Missis Votivis, n. 366: "Votive Masses 'pro re publica et gravi simul' is understood the Mass that, by order or by consent of the Ordinary [i.e. the local Bishop] is celebrated with big assembly of the faithful, for grave spiritual or temporal need and utility that affect the whole community or part of it" (p. xxxi).

tion for the celebration of the Nativity of Christ. The entire liturgy of Advent, including the Divine Office recited by the clerics, and the Holy Mass, express in beautiful mystic spirit the deep feelings and the ardent longings of the Church for the arrival of the awaited Messiah and Savior of the World.

In that atmosphere of waiting, two biblical persons dominate the sacred readings, the antiphons and the songs, as symbolic of the nearness of the great event. Of the four weeks of Advent, the liturgy of the first two focus on the Precursor St. John the Baptist preaching in the desert with the powerful voice of a gigantic prophet. In the third and fourth weeks, the liturgy is centered on the person closest to Christ, Mary the expectant Mother.

It is of special interest for our study to underline how as Christmas looms near, the liturgy uses several series of prayers in the Office and in the Mass in numbers of seven, eight and nine. One of these series is precisely the novena of Masses celebrated in the Philippines known as Aguinaldo Masses.

To be more specific, starting December 17 and ending with December 23, the Divine Office uses new hymns to introduce Lauds and Vespers. On the same days, a set of seven antiphons are used before and after each Psalm of Lauds and Vespers. The new hymns and the seven antiphons convey with greater intensity than in the previous days a sense of urgency in the spiritual preparation for the mystery of the God's appearance in the world.

Among the series of antiphons used in the liturgy in those days, there are seven that are called "major antiphons" and also "O Antiphons." These antiphons are recited or sung before and after Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, at Vespers, from December 17 to the day of Christmas Eve. All the antiphons begin with the exclamation "O" (*O Key of David, O Emmanuel, O Flower of Jesse*, etc.), and end with the vivid cry of "come" addressed to the approaching Redeemer.⁴ Such antiphons are christological in content, but also Marian in the sense of being prayed together with Mary's *Magnificat*.

Even more significant for our case is that the Aguinaldo Masses are votive in honor of Mary, something that escapes the knowledge of

⁴ Cf. JOVIAN LANG, OFM, *Dictionary of Liturgy*, New York 1989, p. 461; *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, art. "Antiphons"; *Enciclopedia ESPASA*, 39, p. 232.

the ordinary faithful. To make a brief digression at this point, the *votive* Masses in honor of Mary, which are said on *Saturday* all throughout the year, are provided with a special text on the Saturdays of Advent (*de tempore Adventi*). They are called "Rorate" Masses from the first words of the entrance song *Rorate coeli desuper* ("Let the clouds rain the Just One"); the verse before the Gospel is *Hail Mary full of Grace*, the angelic salutation at the Annunciation; and the Communion antiphon begins with the words *The Virgin is with Child*.

Further to show the intimate connection between the last period of Advent and the devotion to Mary the Expectant *Theotokos* (Mother of God), let us turn attention to Spain, where the Aguinaldo Masses had their origin.

In former times, the Church in Spain and in some parts of France celebrated on December 18 a feast in honor of the Virgin Mary called the "Expectation of the Delivery of Mary," and by other names "*Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza*" and "*Nuestra Señora de la O*." Our Lady of Hope obviously referred to the hope that soon a Child would be born of Mary. Our Lady of the "O" had reference to what we have explained earlier, that is, to the recitation of the major antiphons "O" before and after Mary's song *Magnificat* at Vespers of the Divine Office. In this connection it is interesting that *Maria de la O* is a name formerly used in Spain for women, perhaps not very commonly, and probably not given to any woman in our times.

For the purpose of the present study, what is more important to note is that the Aguinaldo Masses were and are, in fact, *votive* Masses in honor of Mary. The color of the liturgical vestments of these Masses are not the purple of Advent, but the color of all Marian Masses, white; and the text of the Aguinaldo Masses were those of the *votive* Masses for Mary "tempore Adventus" (in Advent). And for further and final proof of their Marian character, there is the explicit intention of dedicating them to Mary as it was done in the countries of Spain, Mexico and the Philippines from the beginning.

The Aguinaldo Masses in Spain

It is not possible for us to determine the exact time in which the practice of celebrating the Aguinaldo Masses was introduced in Spain. We know, however, that as early as the seventh century the Holy Mass was already said there for the particular intentions of certain persons, and that before the 8th century *votive* Masses were celebrated there in

honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁵ But it is not until the last decades of the sixteenth century that documents show that Masses called *de Aguinaldo* were celebrated in Spain.

The first available testimony to this effect comes from the famous Jesuit canonist and missionary in the Philippines, Fr Pedro Murillo Velarde. In his work *Cursus Juris Canonici Hispanici et Indici*, published in 1743, Murillo quotes a certain classical canonical book under the name of *Grijalbanus* as stating that "Pope Sixtus V granted a plenary indulgence to those who attended these Masses, which we call in Spanish *de Aguinaldo*."⁶ Now Sixtus V was Pope from 1585 to 1890. This grant presupposes that such Masses were well established at least in some parts of Spain before the last decade of the 16th century. Furthermore, from other testimonies, we have knowledge of the fact that in 1585, the Aguinaldo Masses were said in Mexico, and that being the case, they must have existed in Spain much earlier.

Even the very appellate name of these Masses denotes Spanish origins. In relation to them, there has always been in Spain the *Misa de Gallo*, which is celebrated at midnight of December 24 even today, and is wrongly used by many Filipinos when referring to the novena of dawn Masses celebrated in this country. In Spain, when the Masses *de Aguinaldo* existed, they were celebrated in the early hours of the morning. It is curious that the old documents in this regard use two different spellings of the word. For instance, we find in a work of Aloysius Gardellini (1856) the use of "Aguilando" and "Aquilando," while other authors, like Vicente Salazar, O.P. (1742), the *Anales Eclesiásticos de Filipinas* (end of the 18th century) and Benito Corominas, O.P. (1875) write it as we do today, that is, "Aguinaldo."⁷

⁵ VILLODAS, "Misas," quoted by Giovanni Devoti in BENITO COROMINAS, OP, *Joanni Devoti Insitutionum Canoniarum Libri IV*, Manila 1875, II. p. 153.

⁶ PEDRO MURILLO VELARDE, *Cursus Juris Canonici Hispanici et Indici*, Madrid 1743. This work had two other editions, in 1763 and in 1791. We are quoting from the 1791 edition through B. COROMINAS, OP, *Joannis Devoti*, II, p. 153, and JUAN YLLA, OP, "Sobre las Misas de Aguinaldo," in *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas*, November 1935, p. 724.

⁷ Cf. ALOISIUS GARDELLINI, *Decreta autentica Congregationis Sacrorum Rituum*, Roma 1856, I p. 491; II, pp. 35-36; VICENTE SALAZAR, OP, *Historia de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario de Filipinas*, Manila 1742, pp. 493-494; B. COROMINAS, *op. cit.*, II, p. 151; *Anales Eclesiásticos de Filipinas*, ms., microfilm of the Archives of the University of Santo Tomas, fol. 120. — Although the word *Aguilando* is

Aguinaldo is a Spanish word of very limited use, for it means a Christmas gift, that is, a gift given during the Christmas season, especially on Christmas Day, New Year's Day, and Epiphany or "Three Kings." And it is never used when making a "regalo" throughout the rest of the year.⁸ As to why this name is used for these Masses, one interpretation could be that the Christian faithful offer to God nine Masses as a gift on the occasion of the Birth of Jesus, to him and to his mother. Another could be that the Church rejoices at receiving from God the gift of his son, the Word, at the time he is born human.

From their inception in Spain, a peculiar trait of these Masses was that they were said much earlier than the ordinary daily Masses. In three documents of the 17th century referring to these Masses, they are said to be celebrated "summo mane" (*very early in the morning*), "ad auroram" (*ad dawn*) and "antequam dies illuxerit" (*before daybreak*).

We come now to the establishment of historical facts. Two authoritative documents testify to the existence of the Aguinaldo Masses in Spain by the end of the 17th century in two dioceses of Spain, namely, Seville and Granada. Interested parties in both dioceses submitted queries to the Sacred Congregation of Rites describing the Masses and asking for clarification of some doubts.

1. In December of 1676, the Presbyter Diego Diaz de Escobar, Master of Ceremonies of the Cathedral Church of Seville, presented to the Sacred Congregation of Rites a list of nine queries regarding various customs practiced in that Archdiocese. Question 7 refers to the Masses popularly called de *Aguinaldo*. From the terms of the exposition, we cull the following elements that describe them:⁹

in fact the original Spanish form (still used in very limited areas of Spain), the form *Aguinaldo* is the one currently adopted by practically all Spaniards, and the one preferred by the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*.

⁸ The Dictionary of the Spanish Academy gives a probable etymology of the word *aguilando*: "perhaps from the Latin *hoc in anno*, of this year. The word is included in the Webster's dictionary, with this explanation: "Aguinaldo." [Spanish (also, gift given on festive occasions, especially Christmas and New Year's Day), alteration of earlier *Aguilando* and *Aguinando*, perhaps from Latin *hoc in anno*, in this year (a phrase common in the refrain of old popular songs sung on New Year's Day)]" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Massachusettes, 1981).

⁹ The complete text of the query is in A. GARDELLINI, *Decreta autentica*, II, pp. 490-491.

- The Aguinaldo Masses are celebrated nine days before the Nativity of Christ;
- they are said at dawn;
- these votive Masses are called by the people *de Aguilando* [sic];
- they are celebrated in honor of the expectant Mother of God;
- they are said not only in ordinary weekdays (*ferial* days), but even on special feasts days (of *duplex* class) and on Sundays;
- like in great feasts, *Gloria* and *Credo* are sung, and only one *Prayer* is said;
- there is a great popular devotion to these Masses.

The exposition and query end by informing the Sacred Congregation about certain anomalies and abuses that had crept in the celebration of the Masses, which called for a remedy.

2. Notwithstanding the condemnatory declaration of the Holy See against the abuses mentioned in the above query, five years later, a similar query was received in the Holy See from the city of Granada. In 1681, Fr. Juan de Arjona Valle, of the Franciscan Friars of the Observance, wrote to the Sacred Congregation of the Rites presenting three doubts and queries.

The request of the petitioner implies that there was some decree already issued by the said Vatican Congregation downgrading the solemnity of the Aguinaldo Masses sung in honor of the Virgin Mary 'popularly called *de Aguinaldo*.' Now, the request explains, the elimination of the festive and solemn elements of the Masses, by taking away the *Gloria*, the *Credo* and the single *Prayer*, and their reduction to the category of an *ordinay votive* Mass, has resulted in great inconveniences "in Spain, and especially in the convents of the Friars," for two reasons: first, because in many convents such Masses were celebrated by special request and intention of the people, with massive attendance of the faithful, and with a sermon; secondly, if now the Masses were not to be sung and the sermon not preached, the convent would not perceive the stipend or offering given for an Aguinaldo Mass, which constituted a source of maintenance for the community.

Fr. Arjona is asking, therefore, whether the Sacred Congregation of Rites would allow the return to the former solemn celebration, the characteristics of which are similar to those found in the earlier request of the church of Seville:

- They are nine Masses said before Christmas at a very early hour of the morning;
- they are sung with *Gloria* and *Credo*;
- the custom “comes from very ancient times beyond memory”;
- the Masses are celebrated due to the great popular devotion to the Virgin Mary;
- and the devotees want the Masses offered “*pro re gravi*” (for a grave and weighty reason or intention), that is, “for the recently sowed fields and for the well-being of the whole people” (*pro agris nuper seminatis et pro salute totius populi*).¹⁰

From these two expositions, it is clear that the Aguinaldo Masses were celebrated in Spain much earlier than the seventeenth century with a solemnity and festive mood not dissimilar to what we see today in the Philippines. In view of the second request made from Granada, it is well to take note here of the explicit intention for which the Masses were celebrated: the fertility of the sowed fields and health and well-being of the people. The intention was timely. A great part of the arable lands in Spain are sowed in the autumn season waiting to sprout in spring.

I must not bypass an objection commonly made against the Spanish origins of the Aguinaldo Masses. The objection comes from what we read in a report written in the seventeenth century by a Jesuit missionary in the Philippines, Fr. Francisco Ignacio Alcina, a report to be quoted more fully later in this study. In his extraordinary studies on all aspects of the Philippines of his times, specially the Visayas region, Alcina does not fail to deal with the religious celebrations, and in particular with the Aguinaldo Masses. About them he says that the first time he saw them was in Mexico, but not in his native Spain: “*Que en España yo no lo vi*” (in Spain I did not see them).¹¹

This statement needs a brief commentary. Fr. Ignacio Alcina was born in the town of Gandia, province of Valencia, Spain, in 1610, and he entered the Society of Jesus in 1624. In 1631 when he left for the Philippines, his residence was the city of Zaragoza, in the northern

¹⁰ For the complete text of the query see A. GARDELLINI, *op. cit.*, II, p. 35.

¹¹ “Alcina’s Report on the celebration of the feasts in the XVII Century Samar and Leyte,” in *Philippiniana Sacra*, XVI, 46 (January-April 1981), p. 134.

region of Aragon.¹² That Fr. Alcina never saw Aguinaldo Masses celebrated in Spain, as he states, is one thing; that the Masses were not said anywhere in Spain is quite another. Eastern Spain, where Valencia is, and even more northern Spain where Aragon is, have extreme cold temperatures in December, while southern Spain, the Adalucian region of Seville and Granada, has a temperate climate even in winter.

To celebrate Aguinaldo Masses for nine days in northern Spain at dawn in the middle of winter would have entailed excessive inconvenience to people especially the elderly and the children. It is unlikely that these Masses would have had a favorable massive response. It is, therefore, very possible that Fr. Alcina did not actually see the Aguinaldo Masses in the areas where he spent his early life, while such Masses were certainly celebrated in the southern cities of Granada and Seville where they were very popular and where they were attended by big assemblies of the faithful.

The Aguinaldo Masses in the Azores and in Mexico

Explorers, conquistadors, colonizers and missionaries; language, laws, customs and traditions: all of them traveled from Spain to the New World westward with the sails of the galleons. This was also the case with the practice of the Aguinaldo Masses. They were carried by the Spanish missionaries to Mexico (New Spain) in the early years of the evangelization of America.

In relation to these traveling of so many things from the Old Continent to the New, we have found with surprise that the Aguinaldo Masses existed, some time in the past, in the Azores Islands, a bridge or stepping stone placed in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The Azores have never been linked to Spain; they were always a colony (today an autonomous region) of Portugal. In 1534, the small archipelago of nine islands became a diocese, suffragan of Lisbon, which was called "*Anagrenesis*" from the town of *Angra*, capital of one of the islands, the Terceira.

Now we come to the point of interest for our study. On a date we have not been able to establish, a document related to this Diocese

¹² See KANTIUS J. KOBAK, OFM, "The Great Samar Leyte Bisayan Missionary of the 17th Century," in *Philippiniana Sacra*, XIII, 39 (Sept.-Dec. 1978), p. 402.

speaks an *ancient custom* of celebrating nine Holy Masses in honor of the Virgin Mary before the Nativity of Christ. The document is a query elevated by that Diocese to the Sacred Congregation of Rites: "Whether, in consideration of being a very ancient (*antiquissima*) custom, it could be licit to celebrate the nine votive Masses in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary before the Nativity of the Lord, even though some of them coincide with the feast of St Thomas the Apostle [December 21] and on the 3rd and 4th Sundays of Advent." The Sacred Congregation replied that, considering the multitude of the faithful who attend those Masses, they may be sung.¹³ No name is given to this novena of Masses, but it is clear that they were no different in character from the Aguinaldo Masses of southern Spain.

The voyage across the Atlantic ended in Mexico, New Spain. In Mexico, the Aguinaldo Masses must have been introduced in the sixteenth century by the earliest missionaries. For they are the subject matter of a decree enacted by the Third Provincial Council of Mexico held on 1585. That Council, presided over by Archbishop Pedro Moya de Contreras, was convoked with the aim of implementing the doctrinal and disciplinary decrees of the Council of Trent. It was the most important and complete of all the Mexican Councils and its influence was transcendental for two centuries.¹⁴

The aforementioned decree is part of the chapter on "the celebration of Masses and of the Divine Office," and it reads as follows:

"Nullus Missam ante auroram nec post meridiem (nisi privilegio sibi ad it concessio) celebret. Missae vero quas hispanice de Aguinaldo vocant antequam dies illuxerit ne celebrentur." (No one may celebrate Mass before sunrise, nor in the afternoon, unless a privilege has been granted to him to do so. Besides, the Masses called in Spanish *de Aguinaldo* must not be celebrated before daybreak).¹⁵

¹³ The text of the Declaration of the Sacred Congregation is taken from JUAN YLLA, OP, "Sobre las Misas de Aguinaldo," in *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas*, November 1935, p. 724, quoting *Decreta Authentica Sacrae Rituum Congregationis*, n. 1093.

¹⁴ Cf. ELISA LUQUE ALCALDE and JOSEP IGNASI SARANYANA, *La Iglesia Católica en América*, Colección MAPFRE 1492, VI/10, Madrid 1992, pp. 198-199.

¹⁵ "Concilium Mexicanum Provinciale celebratum Mexici anno 1585, lib. III, tit. XV: De celebratione Missarum et Divinorum Officiorum," #8, published in JOSE SAENZ DE AGUIRRE, *Collectio Maxima Conciliorum Hispaniae et Novi Orbis*, Roma 1693.

From this conciliar provision it can be surmised that the Aguinaldo Masses were well established in Mexico by the year 1585, for the Council introduces a change in its celebration, that is, regarding the *hour* of their celebration that should not be before daybreak.

Forty years after this Council, the Aguinaldo Masses continued to be very popular in Mexico, judging from a report coming to us from the personal experience of the Jesuit missionary Fr. Ignacio Francisco Alcina, already quoted in this study. Father Alcina arrived in Mexico on August 1, 1631 on his way to the Philippines, leaving Mexico on February of the following year. It was therefore in the season of Advent of 1631 that he witnessed the celebration of the Aguinaldo Masses there. Here is his report:

“The first time that I heard about and saw these festive manifestations of the nine Masses (de Aguinaldo [*sic*]), was in Mexico, where their celebration is very much spread. It was in the Seminary for the natives which our Society [of Jesus] has in that city, called St Gregory Seminary, where I first began to appreciate it, [and this not only] for the well-known and revealing circumstances of its celebration, but also for its reverential, religious and solemn air. I say that it came here [to the Philippines] from Mexico without any doubt (in Spain I did not see it.¹⁶ It must have been brought to these Islands where it is celebrated with no less ostentation.”¹⁷

And this is the last time we hear about the Mexican tradition before the Masses were prohibited in 1677, as it is will be seen below.

The Aguinaldo masses in the Philippines

As far as I can know, no historical document has yet been found giving us a clue about the first time and place of the celebration of the Aguinaldo Masses in the Philippines. Two Jesuit missionaries will lead us to establish approximate dates of their celebration in the 17th and 18th centuries. They are Fr. Francisco Ignacio Alcina and Fr. Pedro Murillo Velarde. Later on, a Dominican will be added as witness: Fr. Vicente Salazar, in the 18th century.

¹⁶ See *supra*, “The Misas de Aguinaldo in Spain,” with Alcina’s text and our interpretation.

¹⁷ “Alcina’s Report,” in *Philippiniana Sacra*, XVI, 46 (Jan.-April 1981), 134-135.

Fr. Ignacio Alcina, "one of the most outstanding and indefatigable missionaries in the entire Visayas region", has already been quoted in this study. Born in Spain, and after entering the Society of Jesus in 1624, he arrived in the Philippines in 1631. After staying two and a half years in Manila, he was assigned to the Visayan missions in 1634, where he worked as missionary for the rest of his life, except for another brief period of residence in Manila from 1658 to 1660. All through these years Alcina moved from one island to another in the provinces of Samar, Leyte, Panay and Cebu. He died in 1674.¹⁸

Alcina's references to the Aguinaldo Masses do not specify particular places, but apply to the Visayas in general and presumably Manila also, but they might apply to the entire Philippines as well. These references are found in his monumental work *Historia de las Islas e Indios de Bisayas... 1668*, which he left unpublished.¹⁹ The voluminous work has been praised as "true, meticulous and most exhaustive," "the achievement of a very erudite man," "a masterpiece of history."²⁰

In Chapter 12 of the Second Part, dealing with the Advent celebrations in this country in his times, that is, between 1634 and 1674, Alcina describes, among the Advent devotions, those in honor of St. Francis Xavier (December 4), the great evangelizer of India and of the Far East, and those in honor of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (December 8). Explaining the latter feast, Alcina ponders how the "new Christians" in Visayas are pleased with everything that pertains to the devotion to Mary. And he continues:

"As a result of this devotion, there are established in our communities the Masses they called de Aguilando [*sic*].²¹ This devotion consists of nine Masses and begins on the 16th of December (and continues on) till the 24th, which is the Vigil of the Nativity."

¹⁸ For more biographical details of Alcina, see KANTIUS KOBAK, "Ignacio Francisco Alcina" (*supra*, note 12), pp. 402-404; HORACIO DE LA COSTA, SJ, *The Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581-1768*, pp. 614-615.

¹⁹ A great part of his work has been published in its original Spanish with parallel English versions, starting in 1978, in *Philippiniana Sacra*. The editing work has been done by Kantius Kobak, OFM, Pablo Fernández, OP, and Lucio Gutiérrez, OP.

²⁰ C. KOBAK, *op. cit.*, pp. 408-409.

²¹ About the words "Aguinaldo" and "Aguilando," see *supra*, footnote 7.

Then Alcina refers to the practice of these Masses in Mexico, as we have previously described. And he adds:

“It [this devotion] must have been brought [from Mexico] to these Islands, where it is celebrated with no less ostentation [than in Mexico]. And in this new ministry [Visayas], as far and as much as possible, we say the nine Masses, all sung [to the accompaniment] of excellent music, carols, musical instruments and all that fosters devout expression of such a holy Expectation [i.e. of Christ’s birth]. Although the Masses here are not as early as elsewhere...”²²

It is unfortunate that, at this point, one folio is missing in Alcina’s original text, depriving us of further details about the celebrations he was describing. But from the little that was left, we are informed not only about the early existence of this religious celebration but also about their connection with the veneration of the Virgin Mary the expectant Mother of God and with the Nativity on earth of God’s Word.

The second Jesuit missionary reporting on the Aguinaldo Masses in this country is Fr. Pedro Murillo Velarde, whose testimony proves the continuation of this tradition one century after Fr. Alcina. For a brief situationer, let us say that Murillo was born in 1696 in Laujar, Granada, Spain. Having joined the Society of Jesus in 1718, he arrived in the Philippines in 1723. After working in these Islands for twenty six years, he returned to his native Spain, where he died in 1753.²³

Besides a very valuable history of the Jesuits in the Philippines,²⁴ Fr. Murillo wrote a canonical treatise entitled *Cursus Juris Canonici Hispanici et Indici*, printed in 1763 and re-edited in 1779.²⁵ This work was very much appreciated by canonists here, and in fact it was used in the nineteenth century as textbook in the Faculty of Canon Law of the University of Santo Tomas.

It is in this book that Fr. Murillo, discussing the ecclesiastical norms about votive Masses, enters into certain details about the

²² See KOBAK, *op. cit.*, pp. 136 and 192, footnote 15.

²³ Cf. H. DE LA COSTA, *The Jesuits*, pp. 614-615.

²⁴ PEDRO MURILLO VELARDE, SJ, *Historia de la Provincia de Filipinas de la Compañía de Jesús, desde el año 1616 hasta 1716*, Manila 1749.

²⁵ M. VELARDE, SJ, *Cursus Juris Canonici Hispanici et Indici*, Madrid 1762.

Aguinaldo Masses. Although we have not been able to find a copy of Murillo's work, we know his information through quotations made from him by a nineteenth century Canon Law professor of the University of Santo Tomas, Fr. Benito Corominas.²⁶

In the Philippines, Murillo Velarde wrote in 1763, a solemn Mass is celebrated *every Saturday* in honor of the Virgin Mary, using texts appropriate of the Advent season. This Mass is said with special solemnity, with *Gloria et Credo*; and the intention of the celebrants and assistants is:

"pro constantia Indorum in fide and pro religionis conservatione in his partibus, quae causa gravissima sane et publica est; quippe maxima est ratio quae pro Religione militat" ('for the perseverance of the natives in the faith and for the preservation of Religion in this part of the world; certainly a very weighty reason for the advancement of Religion').

At this point Velarde passes from the Saturday votive Masses to the Aguinaldo Masses:

*Then, in the nine days preceding the Nativity of the Lord, some Masses are celebrated in the same way and for the same intention, but with a text pertaining to the Advent season. The faithful who attend these Masses, called by us in Spanish de Aguinaldo, gain a plenary indulgence granted by Sixtus V in 1585.*²⁷

By way of summary, these testimonies of Alcina and Velarde are sufficient to prove that the Aguinaldo Masses existed in the Philippines from the early years of evangelization, through the 17th and 18th centuries. Shortly we will see that such a venerable tradition would continue until our times, except for a brief period when the Masses were prohibited by the Sacred Congregation of Rites in the Holy See.

Prohibition of the Masses

It is a fact that today the celebration of the Aguinaldo Masses has disappeared from Spain, the Azores Islands and Mexico, while it is still holding out in the Philippines. Here the Masses are attended with

²⁶ BENITO COROMINAS, OP, *Joannis Devoti*, see *supra*, footnote 6

²⁷ M. VELARDE, *Cursus*, in tit. 41, lib. 3, decret. 565, quoted by B. COROMINAS, *Joannis Devoti*, II, p. 43.

undiminished enthusiasm in spite of the defying changes of modern life and mentality. This surprising phenomenon must be explained. In the first place, the disappearance of the Aguinaldo Masses in those countries was not due to loss of popular fervor, but to excess of it and to the intervention of the high ecclesiastical authorities.

By the year 1677 several abuses were reported to have crept during or around the celebration of the Aguinaldo Masses. Those abuses scandalized many people who were 'zealous for the observance of good liturgical rites, also causing 'scruples to learned and spiritual men" on account of the disorderly manner of expressing the joyful anticipation of Christmas. The abuses had nothing to do with the sacramental aspect of the Mass itself, nor with attitudes of the celebrant priest, but with the behavior of the assembly and specially of the choir.

The complaints of such zealous people moved the Master of Ceremonies of the Cathedral Church in Seville, Spain, to submit, at the end of 1676, a query to the Sacred Congregation of Rites, asking this Roman dicastery to issue a formal declaration on the matter. In his exposition, the petitioner describes in Doubt 3 the character and traditional celebration of these Masses, as we have described above, and then he passes on to explain the abuses:²⁸

"Under pretense of popular devotion and to add more flavor to the celebration, improper things are done which need to be corrected. For many lay people assemble in the choir of the church for the purpose of singing certain light songs (cantinelas)²⁹ that provoke to laughter and are improper of the time and place. Opportune remedy must be applied to this abuse, so that the public scandal may be totally eliminated."³⁰

²⁸ There are two texts of this query and of its answer. One published, probably with some slight editing changes, in A. GARDELLINI, *Decreta Authentica*, I, p. 491, containing nine questions proposed to the Sacred Congregation; and another, in a manuscript copy of the *Anales Eclesiásticos de Filipinas*, II, fols. 119-121. We have followed the latter, using a microfilm of the Archives of the University of Santo of Tomas. The grammatical differences between the two text are minimal.

²⁹ The text in Gardellini uses the word *cantilenas*, which is the correct Latin form, while the text in *Anales* uses *cantinelas*. In Spanish both forms are accepted in the official *Diccionario* of the Spanish Academy, but the current form today is *cantinelas*: "A song, couplet or short poetic composition, composed generally to be sung."

³⁰ The Dominican historian Vicente Salazar, writing in 1742, specifies that "those Masses were tainted by superstitious practices opposed to the Sacred Rites of the

On January 16, 1677 the Sacred Congregation replied with the following declaration:

In as much as this custom, or to put it better, these abuses, exposed in Doubt 3 are contrary to the Rubrics and to the opinion of the exponents, they must be suppressed totally, because not only are they not laudable, but rather they are scandalous, more so to those who are zealous for the observance of good liturgical rites. This is so declared and decreed [by this Sacred Congregation], which hereby orders the above to be totally suppressed.³¹

The decree took effect immediately upon receipt of it in Spain, Mexico and the Philippines. Therefore, the Aguinaldo Masses were either totally discontinued or they were reduced to a lower rank of ordinary votive Masses in honor of the Virgin Mary, without solemnity, without the singing of *Gloria* and *Credo*, without sermon and other festive manifestation used until then.

In Spain an attempt was made to have the Aguinaldo Masses reestablished in some places. In 1682, the Superior Provincial of the Franciscan Province in Granada, Fr. Juan de Arjona Valle, presented to the Sacred Congregation of Rites a request for dispensation from the prohibition, alleging several great inconveniences (including the loss of alms for the maintenance of the Community) that the Roman decree of prohibition had caused to them. But the Sacred Congregation, with a Declaration dated Jan. 24, 1682 answered with a laconic "negative."³²

Their Suppression and Survival in the Philippines

It took about three years for the Roman decree of 1677 to arrive in the Philippines, via Spain and Mexico, not a surprising delay considering the bureaucratic procedures of the Royal Patronage of the Indies and the slow system of communications through two oceans and the

Church. They were tolerated under the guise of devotion, and although they seemed bad to some, these ones did not dare to denounce them publicly for fear of attracting the ire of the piety of the common people. The handling of these matters belongs to the zeal and care of the Prelates" (VICENTE SALAZAR, OP, *Historia de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario de Filipinas*, Manila 1742, p. 494).

³¹ *Anales Eclesiásticos*, *ibid.*

³² See the query of Arjona and the answer in A. GARDELLINI, *op. cit.*, II, 35-36.

American continent. We are informed by the *Anales Eclesiásticos de Filipinas* that "a copy [of that Decree] was received from the Archbishopric of Mexico, where the Masses had already been prohibited and are no longer sung." That was in 1682.

In this year the Archdiocese of Manila was governed by Archbishop-Elect Felipe Pardo, O.P., who had been promoted to that office in 1676. For all canonical purposes, he had all the faculties to govern the Archdiocese even though he had not received the Pontifical Bull of nomination and had not received the Episcopal Ordination. He received both in 1681.³³

Now, in 1680, having received the Roman declaration prohibiting the Aguinaldo Masses, Archbishop-Elect Pardo "communicated the matter to, and asked for the advice of, learned persons of the Religious Orders," and consequently issued an "auto" or decree which he "ordered to be posted at the doors of the churches" of Manila. This being a document of transcendental importance for our subject, we may well transcribe in full, but in English version, from the *Anales Eclesiásticos de Filipinas*.³⁴

DECREE

We, Dr. Don Fray Felipe Pardo, Archbishop-Elect of this Metropolitan Church of Manila, of the Council of his Majesty, and Governor of this Archdiocese, etc.

Whereas it has come to our knowledge that a decree has arrived prohibiting the celebration of the Masses that are sung for nine days before the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ (which are commonly called de Aguinaldo), enjoining that they absolutely may not be sung, forbidding also all kinds of music and instruments and light songs (*chanzonetas*),³⁵ since it is proper that this

³³ Archbishop Felipe Pardo, an outstanding ecclesiastical personality in the 18th century Philippine Church, had been professor and Rector of the University of Santo Tomas, Prior of Santo Domingo Convent, twice Prior Provincial of the Dominican Province of the Rosary and Commissary of the Holy Office (Cf. HILARIO OCIO, O.P., *Compendio de la Reseña Biográfica de los Religiosos de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario de Filipinas*, Manila 1895, pp. 172-173).

³⁴ *Anales Eclesiásticos*, II., fols. 119-121.

³⁵ *Chanzonetas*. From the French *chanzonette*, "name formerly given to light and festive couplets, compositions or verses, composed generally to be sung on Christmas

prohibition be observed and kept in this archdiocese;

Therefore, by this present decree We order that absolutely in no way may such Aguinaldo Masses be sung or said, that no rejoicing of music be made, no instruments be played or light songs or any other songs be sung even if they are transformed into religious tunes (*aunque sean a lo divino*).³⁶

Those who will do the contrary, disobeying the commandments of our Holy Mother Church and our injunctions, will suffer the public punishment that will be inflicted on them. And we order that this decree be posted at the doors of the churches of this City and that it be forwarded to the (Cathedral) canons for their information.

Given at San Gabriel, "Extramuros" of Manila, on this 12th day of October of the year 1680.

Fray Felipe Pardo,
Archbishop-Elect of Manila

By order of the Archbishop, my Lord,

Andres Escoto,
Secretary

The author of the *Anales Eclesiásticos* comments: "And so in this year 1680 [the Masses] begun to be omitted and not to be sung." For how long? We do not know exactly. But the Dominican historian Fr. Vicente Salazar, writing the history of his Order in the Philippines, published in Manila in 1742, gives us a sure answer and an approximate date: "While [Archbishop Pardo] lived, the Masses were not celebrated, but after [his death] they began to be celebrated again, although with some moderation (I do not know if this was universal) with regard to the abuses with which they had been celebrated."³⁷ Archbishop Felipe Pardo died on December 31, 1689.

or in other religious feasts"; also *chanza*, from the Italian *ciancia*, "festive and jovial phrase. Burlesque action to amuse people and to exercise one's wits" (See these words in *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*).

³⁶ *A lo divino*. In Spanish literature, a "romance" or poetic composition with a religious theme, called a "*romance a lo divino*."

³⁷ V. SALAZAR, *Historia*, p. 494.

On with the Tradition

Historian Salazar assures us that the celebration of the Aguinaldo Masses was resumed after Archbishop Pardo's death, but he does not inform us about the exact date or about the authority on which the Masses were permitted again. Nor can we find any document to that respect. What is not difficult to assess is that the celebration once resumed has continued through the centuries without interruption. Here are some testimonies:

In the 18th century, Pedro Murillo Velarde, writing his manual of Canon Law before 1763, describes the celebration with the details we have already mentioned.³⁸

In the 19th century, Fr. Benito Corominas, O.P., writing in 1873 his commentaries on the canonical works of Giovanni Devoti, attests to the celebrations of these Masses in his time ("*et hoc anno celebrantur*", they are celebrated this year).³⁹

At the beginning of the 20th century, Fr. Serapio Tamayo, another Dominican canonist, in his inaugural address of the school-year 1906-1907, at the University of Santo Tomas, states that this religious "custom has been continued in this capital [Manila], where the Aguinaldo Masses continue to be celebrated in some churches [of Intramuros]."⁴⁰

In 1953, the First Plenary Council of the Philippines, attended by the entire Philippine Hierarchy, drafted a special decree regarding the Aguinaldo Masses, which may be considered as the most solemn ratification and consecration of one of the oldest traditions of the Philippine Catholic religiosity. The decree is worth transcribing here:

There is a legitimate tradition in these Islands coming from ancient times to celebrate the Masses popularly called de Aguinaldo for the perseverance of Filipinos in the [Christian] faith and for the preservation of religion in this area of the world. For nine days preceding the Nativity of Christ the Lord, the solemn votive

³⁸ See the text of Murillo Velarde *supra*. no. 5, "The Aguinaldo Masses in the Philippines."

³⁹ B. COROMINAS, *op. cit.*, II, p. 152.

⁴⁰ SERAPIO TAMAYO, OP, *Idea General de la Disciplina Eclesiástica en Filipinas durante la Dominación Española* (Discurso Inaugural, UST, Manila 1906, p. 78)

Mass *Rorate Coeli desuper* is sung with great solemnity and with massive attendance by the people, one Mass every day in the churches, especially the parochial and conventual ones. These Masses are celebrated with Gloria, a proper Prayer with other commemorative prayer of the concurrent Advent ferial Mass, with preface of the Blessed Virgin Mary and with the Gospel of St. John at the end, except on Sundays and on First Class feasts that may coincide [with the Aguinaldo Mass].⁴¹

But six years after this statement of the Hierarchy in a Plenary Council, a new *Code of Rubrics* or Code of Liturgical Norms valid for the universal Church was published in 1961 by the Sacred Congregation of Rites, with the approval of Pope John XXIII. The Code revoked "all statutes, privileges and customs of any kind, even the multisecular and most ancient ones, which are not in accordance with this Codex."⁴² However, the Vatican new rulings left some leeway for special Masses celebrated "for grave and public reasons."

This exceptive clause notwithstanding, since some people thought that the Aguinaldo Masses might fall into the category of the suppressed customs, the Philippine Hierarchy, through their President, Archbishop Julio Rosales of Cebu, decided to elevate to the Holy Father in the same year 1961 a suppliant letter "humbly asking that, in spite of the promulgation of the new *Code of Rubrics*, and for as long as the same grave reason, namely the conservation of the Faith [in the Philippines] continued, the *Aguinaldo Masses* be allowed to be sung for nine days preceding the Nativity." And the petition was granted on March 24, 1961, for a period of five years.⁴³

The historical study on the origins of the Aguinaldo Masses should end here, leaving the canonical and liturgical aspects to canonists and liturgists. There is the question of the expiration of the above-mentioned authorization of the Holy See valid for a period of "five years." This writer has not found any document as to whether a renewal of the authorization was requested and granted or whether there was no need for renewing it.

⁴¹ *Acta et Decreta Primi Concilii Plenarii Philippinarum*, Manila 1956, n. 356, p. 126.

⁴² See ALBERTO SANTAMARIA, OP, "Misas de Aguinaldo," in *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas*, April 1961, p. 409.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 470-471.

We doubt about that need because before the concession expired in 1966, the Vatican Council came upon the Church marking a new era in many aspects of the Church in our modern world. One of the most visible changes introduced were the liturgical reforms. It is for canonists and liturgists to explain how the conciliar and post-conciliar documents affected the Aguinaldo Masses. For such study there are several basic documents issued after the Council, plus a new *Roman Missal*.⁴⁴

As the Second Millenium is ending this month of December, Catholic Philippines still clings strongly to the centuries old tradition of celebrating the Aguinaldo Masses, with undiminished popular attendance and festive joy, for the same reasons adduced in ancient times, but with some changes and trends caused by the "Filipinos' changing life style" in our consumer society.

Regarding the reasons or main intent of the celebration, it is significant to observe something most people cannot notice. That is, that the "grave reasons" that our ancestors in Spain, Mexico and the Philippines adduced for celebrating these Masses, were the reasons repeated in the Plenary Council of 1953, and exactly the same ones stated in the ORDO 1999 [Liturgical calendar for guidance of priest reciting the Divine Office]. Here is the informative note of the ORDO on December 15, 1999: "Tomorrow begin the *Aguinaldo Masses* (white color), to be celebrated on the nine days before Christmas for *the perseverance of the nation in faith and the preservation of our holy religion in this part of the world.*" Let us note also that "white color" is the color of the Marian celebrations, while the color of the Advent Masses is purple.

The new trends introduced in the last few years are not essential to the Mass itself, but to circumstantial –yet very typically traditional– aspects of these Masses. We refer to the time and places of their celebration. Some Masses are now being said in the evening, and not only in the churches and chapels but also in megamalls and commercial

⁴⁴ For interested readers, the main documents of the Church regarding liturgy in the conciliar and post-conciliar periods are: Vatican II, Constitution "Sacrosanctum Concilium" on the Sacred Liturgy; Postconciliar documents: *Motu Proprio* "Sacram Liturgiam," on the Sacred Liturgy, January 25, 1964; Instruction of the S.C.R. on the proper implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 26 September, 1964; Apostolic Constitution "Missale Romanum" [on the Roman Missal], Paul VI, 3 April 1969. These four and other documents can be seen in AUSTIN FLANNERY, OP, *Vatican II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, 7th ed., Minnesota, 1984.

centers, "obviously geared for the mall's clientele, especially those rushing to finish their Christmas shopping," or "to accommodate employees in the commercial districts who find free time only after office hours."⁴⁵

These are still considered *Aguinaldo Masses*, preparatory for Christmas, but the mystic of the "Dawn Masses" must be missing when celebrating the "Simbang Gabi" Masses in those places. One wonders what the new trends will become one century hence. □

⁴⁵ See some reports and comments on the Aguinaldo Masses in the local dailies of last year: SUSAN A. DE GUZMAN and DONA Z. PAZZIBUCAN, "They are taking the dawn out of the 'Simbang Gabi'," in *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 16, 1998; MARILOU JUMILLA, "More churches hold *Misa de Gallo* at night," in *The Manila Times*, December 16 1998; BRENDA P. TUAZON, "Nation prepares for 'Simbang Gabi'," in *The Manila Bulletin*, December 15, 1998.