

Witnessing to a Liberating God: On the Hermeneutics and Theology of *Obispo Maximo* Alberto Ramento (1936-2006)

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Filipino church leader and theologian Alberto Ramento (1936-2006) and adds to the study of this leading Filipino bishop by focusing on his hermeneutics, which gives an impression not only of what his theology stood for, but also of how this theology was anchored in the two main sources that Ramento can be shown as having drawn on: Scripture and history. In order to analyze Ramento's hermeneutics, use will be made of selected sermons, as a small selection of these has been preserved in the archives of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, as they are being kept in Aglipay Central Theological Seminary in Urdaneta City, Philippines. Although the sermons are few, they do stem from various phases of Ramento's career and the hermeneutics that can be found in them seems to be rather consistent, which would support the suggestion that they are representative for his interpretation of the faith, i.e., by means of reading Scripture through the lens of Philippine experience and history and by understanding the same in the light of Scripture. Given the importance of the Philippine context in Ramento's work, the present essay is also a contribution to the history of Philippine contextual theology.

Keywords: Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Alberto Ramento, Theology of Struggle, Biblical Interpretation, Martyrdom; Ecumenism, Philippine History; Hermeneutics

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Introduction

Filipino church leader and theologian Alberto Ramento (1936-2006) is often best remembered for the way he died and for his commitment to social justice, which to him was the same as the proclamation of the Gospel. Ramento, namely, was murdered on 3 October in his rectory in Tarlac City. The *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, the church of which he was a leading bishop, and from 1993-1999 *Obispo Maximo*, i.e. “supreme bishop,” ensures that he is remembered as a modern martyr by commemorating him annually, upholding his heritage and witness, demanding justice for him and naming a variety of initiative and institutions after him.¹ Churches in the Philippines,² such as those represented in the National Council of Churches in the Philippines and the Ecumenical Bishops’ Forum (which includes the Roman Catholic Church) and churches worldwide have followed this lead, sometimes even canonizing him; this applies in particular to churches in communion with the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, such as the Churches of the Anglican Communion,³ the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Churches (Union of Utrecht).⁴ Also, Ramento features in a number of scholarly publications,

¹ A number of statements by the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* on Ramento’s murder exist, including the following two early ones: Obispo Maximo Godefredo J. David, ‘Statement of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente on the Extrajudicial Killing of Bishop Ramento’ (4 October 2006), <https://sites.google.com/a/ifi.ph/www/statement-of-the-iglesia-filipina-independiente-on-the-extrajudicial-killing-of-bishop-ramento> (accessed 20 August 2023), Supreme Council of Bishops of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, ‘Statement of the Supreme Council of Bishops on the Brutal Slaying of Bishop Ramento’ (12 October 2006), <https://sites.google.com/a/ifi.ph/www/statement-of-the-supreme-council-of-bishops-on-the-brutal-slaying-of-bishop-ramento> (accessed 20 August 2023). An overview of campaigns for justice for Ramento can be found in the section ‘Justice for Bishop Alberto Ramento’ of the IFI website (<https://sites.google.com/a/ifi.ph/www/remembering-bishop-ramento>, accessed 20 August 2023). As far as initiatives and institutions named after Ramento are concerned, two examples include the Manila-based “Ramento Project for Rights Defenders” that develops a range of advocacy initiatives and the “Alberto Ramento Professorial Chair,” a visiting professorship program of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente through its Aglipay Central Theological Seminary (Urdaneta City) and the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches, acting through the Old Catholic Seminary at Utrecht University.

² Interestingly, the memory of Ramento is also honored and kept alive through cultural expressions, see, for instance, Noe M. Santillan, ‘Musikang Bayan (People’s Music) and the Militant-Materialist Progressive-Nationalist Music,’ *Philosophia* 23 (2022), 181-201, 194n21 (on a song by *Musikang Bayan, Patuloy*, the text of which addresses the social issues that Ramento also focused on).

³ See, for example the calendar of liturgically commemorated saints of the Episcopal Church (USA): *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 708 (feast day: 3 October). Also, other churches in the USA have taken notice of the murder, see, for example: *The Acts & Proceedings of the Regular Session of the General Synod* (Reformed Church in America: Board of Publication and Bible-school work, 2007), 255.

⁴ See, for example, contributions such as: Joris Vercammen, ‘Commemoration of Bishop Alberto Ramento,’ *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 102 (2012), 300-304, or the liturgical calendar of the Old Catholic Church of Germany, ‘Liturgischer Kalender 2023,’ <https://www.alt-katholisch.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/LiturgischerKalender2023.pdf> (accessed 19 August 2023), with

both from the field of theology and of social or more general historical studies,⁵ the latter usually concentrating on questions of human rights.⁶ This contribution will add to the study of this leading Filipino theologian by focusing on his hermeneutics, which gives an impression not only of what his theology stood for – this has, for example, been analyzed by Revollido already –,⁷ but also of how this theology was anchored in the two main sources that Ramento can be shown as having drawn on: Scripture and history, especially the history of the struggle for Philippine independence, of which the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* is both a product and a constant reminder. In order to analyze Ramento's hermeneutics, use will be made of selected sermons, as a small selection of these has been preserved in the archives of

as feast day 3 October. – Also, a joint statement of a theological consultation on “Catholicity and Globalization,” involving the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, the Episcopal Church (USA), the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, was dedicated to the memory and witness of Ramento, cf. ‘The Bishop Ramento Statement: A Eucharistic Vision for a Globalized World,’ *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 100, supplementary volume to issue 4 (2010), 237-242.

⁵ Theological contributions and contributions from the field of the sociology of religion include a commemorative volume: Franz Segbers and Peter-Ben Smit, *Catholicity in Times of Globalization. Remembering Alberto Ramento, Martyred Bishop of Workers and Peasants* (Luzern: Exodus, 2011); this publication appeared in multiples languages, besides English also in French, German and Dutch. See also: Francis A. Gealogo, ‘History, Globalization and Catholicity: A View from the Philippines,’ *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 107 (2017), 247-264. Ramento features regularly in publications by Segbers, a German ethicist, see, for instance his ‘The Catholicity of the Churches, Globalization and Forced Migration,’ *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 107 (2017), 232-246. – See further also accounts in Joaquin Jay Gonzalez, *Filipino American Faith in Action: Immigration, Religion, and Civic Engagement* (United States: New York University, 2009), 169, and a mention in passing in Steven Rood, *The Philippines: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2019), 152, that show to what extent this murder has become part of general accounts of Philippine history.

⁶ See, for example, a mention in Epifanio San Juan, Jr., *U.S. Imperialism and Revolution in the Philippines* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 250; George Katsiaficas, *Asia's Unknown Uprisings. Volume 2: People Power in the Philippines, Burma, Tibet, China, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand, and Indonesia, 1947–2009* (Oakland: PM, 2013) (unpaginated Kindle edition). Also, governments and international juridical bodies have concerned themselves with the murder of Ramento, see: *Repression & Resistance. The Filipino People vs Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, George W. Bush, et al. : Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, Second Session on the Philippines, the Hague, the Netherlands, March 21-25, 2007* (Quezon City: IBON Foundation, 2007), 26, 231, as well as *Stop the Killings, Abductions, and Involuntary Or Enforced Disappearances in the Philippines* (Quezon City: IBON Foundation, 2007), 191; Alberto Ramento also features in various reports on human rights violations in the Philippines, such as: *Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines: Strategies to End the Violence. Hearing before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundredth Tenth Congress, First Session* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 11. Such mentions also occur in many newsletters and web publications, both from within the Philippines and from abroad, see, for example the Canadian KAIROS Policy Briefing Paper 13 (March 2008), 2 (http://216.19.72.137/e/humanrights/PolicyBriefingPaper13_Philippines.pdf, accessed 19 August 2023), or reports such as: *Workers' Consortium Assessment, re: Chong Won Fashion, Inc. (The Philippines) (Facility recently renamed "C. Woo Inc.")*. Report of Findings and Recommendations, February 21, 2007 (https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/100267/WRC_Report_ChongWon.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, accessed 19 August 2023), 45-49.

⁷ See Eleuterio J. Revollido, ‘Obispo Maximo Alberto B. Ramento, D.D. (9 August 1936 – 3 October 2006). A Tribute,’ in: Segbers and Smit (ed.), *Alberto Ramento*, 48-53.

the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, which are being kept in Aglipay Central Theological Seminary in Urdaneta City, Philippines. Although the sermons are few,⁸ they do stem from various phases of Ramento's career and hermeneutics that can be found in them seems to be rather consistent, which would support the suggestion that they are representative for his interpretation of the faith, i.e., by means of reading Scripture through the lens of Philippine experience and history and by understanding the same in the light of Scripture. In their analysis, much space will be reserved for quotations, in order to show what the texts themselves look and read like. Given the importance of the Philippine context in Ramento's work, the present essay is also a contribution to the history of Philippine contextual theology.⁹ Prior to discussing the sermons at stake, a brief biographical outline of Alberto Ramento's life will be provided, which is prefaced by a very brief contextualization of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*. This study, therefore, combines a historical and biographical approach with regard to the person of Alberto Ramento while a form of close reading is used to analyze the sermons, which are, subsequently, contextualized systematic-theologically.

The *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*

The outline of the history of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* that can be offered here must remain all too brief, given the available space.¹⁰ A number of

⁸ The sermons are numbered in the sequence in which they are kept in the appertaining file in the archive (unnumbered box, file 'Sermons'); accordingly, they will be cited in a numbered way with additional references to page numbers. Some sermons have, with some overlap, also been published in Segbers and Smit (ed.), *Alberto Ramento*; this contribution focuses on sermons in English, in order to avoid having to draw on translations in the analysis.

⁹ In particular, it builds on essays on biblical interpretation and the reception of tradition in the tradition of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, to wit: Peter-Ben Smit, 'Von Kolonialkirche zur indigenen Theologie. Die Geschichte der *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* anhand ihrer Interpretation der Bibel,' *Jahrbuch für europäische Überseegeschichte* 11 (2013 [2011]), 95-115, 'Contextualizing the Contextual: A Note on the Revolutionary Exegesis of Gregorio L. Aglipay,' *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 65 (2017), 71-83, 'The Bible in the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*,' *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 69 (2021), 457-480, and 'Masculinity and the 'Holy Child' of the *Birhen sa Balintawak*,' *Religion & Gender* 10 (2020) 76-96.

¹⁰ Recent historiographical surveys of the IFI and its theology can be found in: Peter-Ben Smit and Ineke Smit (ed.), *The Iglesia Filipina Independiente: Being Church 'Pro Deo et Patria'* (Sliedrecht/Amersfoort: Merweboek/Pascal, 2022), see in this volume esp. Eleuterio J. Revollido, '117 Years of Revolution: The History and Ministry of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*' (31-46) and Mariefe I. Revollido, 'Mary and Empowerment: The *Birhen sa Balintawak* and the Spirituality of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*' (47-68), as well as the papers collected in: Marsha L. Dutton (with Emily K. Stuckey, ed.), *Globalization and Catholicity: Ecumenical Conversations on God's Abundance and the People's Need* Beiheft zu *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 100 (2010), An important perspective is also offered by: Tomas A. Millamena, *The Iglesia Filipina Independiente and Her Centenary* (Manila: *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, 2002), as well as idem, *Ecumenical Journal towards Shalom* (Manila: *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, s.a.), and idem, *Struggle is our Heritage* (Manila: *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, s.a.), see also: Peter-Ben Smit, *Old Catholic and Philippine Independent Ecclesiologies in History. The Catholic Church in Every Place* Brill's (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

characteristics can be mentioned, however, in particular as they are of importance for understanding what is to follow. One the best-known statements about the IFI is one by Agoncillo, referring to the church as the only tangible result of the revolution (against Spain) of 1896;¹¹ another observation that underlines the uniqueness of this church is that it is the only church that has been founded by a labor union through its proclamation on 3 August 1902 by the intellectual and activist Isabelo de los Reyes, Sr., at a meeting of the Unión Obrera Democrática, appointing former revolutionary fighter and priest Gregorio Aglipay as its first head. These two observations are, together with the motto that was soon adopted by the church and its heraldic motto, i.e. “Pro Deo et Patria” and “Scripturae, Scientia, Caritas, Libertas,” important pointers to the origins and concerns of this church. First, it was a church born out of a desire for independence, and, given the background of it all in the Spanish colonial system that was characterized by a fusion of church and state (through the so-called “royal patronage” with orders of friars acting as key colonial agents), ecclesial and political independence were but two sides of the exact same coin in this context. The newly proclaimed church was most certainly understood as continuing a struggle for independence that had failed by other, more military means – the Philippine forces had had to surrender to the American invaders of the Philippines in 1902, after the Philippines had wrested their independence from Spain in the late 1890s. This fits the “Pro Deo et Patria” motto. Yet, this church not only intended to be independent and indigenous, it also sought to be modern and progressive rather emphatically, by embracing not only the kinds of (Marxist and to some extent even anarchist) thought current in the Unión Obrera Democrática, but also underlining modern science as a source of also religious knowledge, stressing the importance of Philippine history for the same (e.g., by canonizing the heroes of the Philippine revolution), and developing its own, rather this-worldly oriented interpretation of the faith, notably of Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom. While it can be wondered to what extent these insights, which, in the course of the 1910s-1930s developed evermore into a decidedly liberal religious, Unitarian direction, ever penetrated the rank and file of the church, it is clear that following the death of De los Reyes, Sr., in 1938 and of Aglipay in 1940, the church sought a closer proximity to the (US) Episcopal Church’s presence in the Philippines prior, during and after the Second World War and returned to a more broadly recognizable form of Christian theological orthodoxy in that context. The generation of clergy of Alberto Ramento, however, usually trained at a joint Episcopal-IFI seminary in St. Andrew’s in Manila began, while retaining the new, more orthodox dogmatic paradigm of the IFI, to retrieve the more socially critical and progressive-nationalist insights of the founders of the

¹¹ Teodoro Agoncillo, *A History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: R. P. García, ⁸1990), 232, 243: ‘The only living and tangible result of the Revolution was the Filipino Church popularly known as the Aglipayan or Philippine Independent Church.’

IFI. This would prove to be a key source of inspiration for Ramento – the kinds of sources that he must have drawn on were often published and produced through the so-called *National Priest Organization* and provided by authors such as William Henry Scott and Ambrosio Manaligod.¹² These are developments taking place while Ramento serves as a parish priest and begins his ministry as a bishop; they will also deeply characterize his theology, as it will become apparent below.

Biographical Sketch of Alberto Ramento

In what follows, an outline will be given of the life of Alberto Ramento, albeit without being able to offer a full biography, or even to be exhaustive when it comes to his various involvements; what is being mentioned serves as examples.

Alberto Ramento y Baldovino was born on 9 August 1936, in Guimba, Nueva Ecija.¹³ His parents were Felipe Curpoz Ramento and Margarita Bermudez Baldovino, in a land-owning and relatively well-to-do family with deep roots in both local politics, Ramento's father served as the local chief of police, while his paternal grandfather had been the town's mayor in the 1920s, and the tradition of the church that Ramento would also serve, given that three of his granduncles served among the pioneers of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (to wit: Adriano Mendoza, Anastacio Curpoz and Luis Curpoz) that had, at the time of Ramento's birth, been proclaimed for about 34 years and was still led by its first *Obispo Maximo*, Gregorio Aglipay. Both the latter founding figure of the IFI and his long-time companion, Isabelo de los Reyes, Sr., would die in the years following Ramento's birth (in 1940 and 1938 respectively).

Following his primary and high school education, Ramento pursued a B.Th. degree at St. Andrew's Theological Seminary in Quezon City (Metro Manila). This institution served the training of priests for both the IFI and the Episcopal Church's presence in the Philippines. In 1990, he would obtain a further degree from the same institution, an M.Div., while his services to church and society would be recognized

¹² See, for example: William H. Scott, *Union Obrera Democratica: First Filipino Labor Union* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1992), idem, *Aglipay Before Aglipayanism* (Quezon City: Aglipayan Resource Center, 1987); Ambrosio Manaligod, *Gregorio Aglipay, Hero or Villain* (Sta. Mesa: Foundation Books, 1977), idem, *The Ecclesiality of the Philippine Independent Church* (Quezon City: National Priest Organization, 1988), idem, *Towards a New Heaven and a New Earth : A Theology of Struggle* (Manila: Aglipayan Resource Center, s.a. [1980s]). See for an overview: National Priest Organization, *A Decade of Struggle and Service Towards a New Heaven and a New Earth : National Priest Organization: The Tenth Anniversary Celebration May 4-7, 1988, St. Andrew's Theological Seminary Cathedral Heights Quezon City* (Quezon City: Iglesia Filipina Independiente, 1988).

¹³ For biographical information, see especially: Revollido, 'Obispo Maximo.'

through the awarding of a D.D. h.c. from the Episcopal General Theological Seminary (New York) in 1994. Following on his graduation from the seminary, Ramento service in parish ministry, being ordained to the diaconate on 8 April 1958 and to the priesthood three weeks later, on 28 April of the same year. His first assignment was as an assistant parish priest in the Parish of *La Purisima Concepcion* in Malabon (June-August 1958), which was followed by a long ministry as parish priest of the Parish of St. Anthony of Padua in Cavite City. During this time, he became known for his dedication to his ministry in all of its respects, in social outreach, in advocacy for marginalized groups in society, for a socially critical style of preaching, for an ecumenical attitude, and for a conscientious building up of the parish. In this period Ramento also married Celerina V. Mendoza on 4 May 1963, with whom he would have four children (Alberto II [Aldos]; Aleli; Alberto III [Altres] and Liezel).

Having been duly elected, Ramento was consecrated to the episcopate on 9 May 1969, serving first as an auxiliary bishop in the Diocese of Cavite, where he soon became the ordinary until 1993, when he was elected as *Obispo Maximo*.

During his various ministries, he was active in regard to workers' rights, founding, for instance, the Workers Assistance Center (WAC) with (the Roman Catholic priest) Fr. Joe Dizon, bringing together various churches to support workers, especially in the Export Processing Zone Area (EPZA) in Tanza, Cavite, where many foreign multinational companies operated. During his tenure, from 1993 onwards, of the highest office in his church, he continued, as will also become clear from the sermons that will be discussed below, his socially and politically outspoken style of ministry, albeit not just through the spoken word, but also through a continued commitment to acting for social justice, for instance through his co-chairpersonship of the Ecumenical Bishops' Forum, involvement as a member of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, and, moving beyond typically ecclesial organizations, roles as a member of the National Social Action Commission, as a Third Party Depository on the GRP-NDF Peace Talks, as Convenor of the "Pilgrims for Peace," as Co-Chairman of Philippine Peace Center, as of the Peace for Life organization and as the founding convenor of the Movement of Concerned Citizens for Civil Liberties. It is a kind of commitment that he kept up when stepping down as *Obispo Maximo* and taking charge of the diocese of Tarlac, a province where he also was the provincial chairperson of KARAPATAN-Tarlac, a NGO and human rights alliance, and supporting striking workers of a local plantation, Hacienda Luisita, for instance by opening up the parish of San Sebastian as a meeting place for workers and being engaged in the setting up of a local branch of the IFI's Workers Assistance Program, commitments that would prove to be fatal in the end.¹⁴ This is, to be sure,

¹⁴ Kind communication of Rev. Fr. Edoi Ruazol, 25 October 2024.

but a selection of his ecclesial and social commitments, which also included his membership of the “Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons.”¹⁵

An impression of his commitments and the appreciation of the same worldwide is offered by the citation used at the conferral of the above-mentioned degree of *Doctor of Divinity honoris causa* by the New York General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church:

In 1993 he was elected the Obispo Maximo of the *Philippine Independent Church*; he is a champion of human rights and a person concerned with peace among peoples and nations, serving as a member of the Continuation Committee of the Christian Peace Conference, as Vice- chair of the Asia-Pacific Christian Conference, as onetime chair of the Human Rights Committee of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines; and as a member of the ‘Christian and Muslims for Peace in Mindanao’; one whose understanding of and action in accord with the social imperative of the Gospel of Christ and its reconciling love, this Seminary is pleased to recognize.¹⁶

That he continued to be held in high regard in his church also after his tenure as *Obispo Maximo* is evidenced by his election as president of the Supreme Council of Bishops of his Church in 2005. He still held this office when he was murdered in the parish rectory of Tarlac, where he lived and served as a bishop and parish priest simultaneously, preaching and living out the gospel as a message of liberation and life in abundance for all, which in all likelihood led to his being stabbed to death in the night of 3 October 2006. His murder was ruled the result of a robbery with homicide by the Philippine National Police,¹⁷ which is questioned by Ramento’s family and the IFI, who doubt the quality of the police investigation and argue that it is much more likely that the death was a way of silencing bishop Ramento and removing him as an advocate for social justice.¹⁸

¹⁵ Many clergypersons in the Philippines are members of a masonic lodge – freemasonry, anything but a truly “secret” society in this context, has its own distinct history that differs from that of the masonic tradition in Europe or North America. On 9 May 2023, for instance, I, myself not a mason, attended an entirely public Mass at the Church of the Divine Shepherd, Urdaneta City, presided over by a priest who was himself not a mason either, and which was celebrated commemorating Alberto Ramento by the masonic lodge of which he had been a member – the members of the lodge attended the liturgy in full masonic regalia. – Ramento’s membership of the freemasonry has not been a topic of serious contestation in his ecumenical relationships, as far as it could be ascertained, which has everything to do with the character of Philippine freemasonry, as this was a movement tightly connected to the striving for Philippine emancipation and independence.

¹⁶ Cited in Revollido, ‘Obispo Maximo,’ 49.

¹⁷ According to news outlets (as cited in note 1); despite various efforts, the official police report of the investigation into the murder of Alberto Ramento could not be obtained.

¹⁸ A report on these efforts can be found on the following website: <https://sites.google.com/a/ifi.ph/www/brief-guide-notes-on-the-extrajudicial-killing-of-bishop-alberto-b-ramento> (accessed 20 August 2023).

The Hermeneutics of Alberto Ramento in Selected Sermons

Scripture and Contemporary Philippine Experience

A good starting point for researching the hermeneutics of Alberto Ramento is a sermon that he preached in the context of a service on the occasion of the reinvigoration of the concordat of communion between the Church of England and the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, preached in the context of the Lambeth Conference of 1998 at Hatherley Church, Cheltenham. As the service was a “Solemn Mass of Our Lady of Perpetual Succor,”¹⁹ Ramento could take the Magnificat as his homiletical point of departure, in particular Luke 1:54: “He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors, and has come to the help of his servant Israel.”²⁰ The promise of God, Ramento states next, is liberation, and he refers to Exodus 3:8 to indicate the contents of such liberation (“So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”). In Ramento’s words:

He came down to help his servant Israel and promise them a land where milk and honey flow, which means pasturelands and vegetation. It also means enough meat and wheat, a promised land where no child goes hungry.²¹

This, then, Ramento connects with Revelation 21:1-4:

“There is the promise of a new heaven and a new earth where God dwells with his people where death, tears, grief or crying or pain is no more. The old society is transformed into the kingdom of God.”²²

¹⁹ Sermon 4, p. 1. Ramento also notes the ecumenical potential of the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help: “I [am] happy to know that the devotion to our ‘Lady of Perpetual Succor in Filipino English, ‘Our Mother of Perpetual Help’ is practiced in England. In the Philippines, millions of devotees, Roman Catholic[s] and Aglipayans, go to church every Wednesday to offer devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help and they do not care which church they go to. It is in the devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help that RC and IFI become unconsciously one.” – The manuscript of the sermon has a note identifying Hatherley Church, Cheltenham, as the place where the sermon was preached. N.B. this sermon is also included in Segbers and Smit (ed.), *Ramento*, 70-73, for the analysis the original manuscript was used. The same volume also contains a presentation given by Ramento at the same Lambeth Conference, entitled: “Worship in the Iglesia Filipina Independiente” (pp. 74-76).

²⁰ Sermon 7 of 8 May 1999 has a very similar structure and provides in part the same text on pp. 1-3. This sermon has also been published as “Transformation. Homily at the Celebration of the Eucharist at the General Synod of 1999, at the End of the Six-Year Period of Office as Obispo Maximo in the National Cathedral of Manila on 8 May 1999” (Segbers and Smit [ed.], *Ramento*, 77-80; also in this case the original manuscript has been used for the analysis).

²¹ Sermon 4, p. 1.

²² Sermon 4, p. 1.

For Ramento, this is a key dimension of salvation, in particular salvation for those in dire straits:

If we look at the promises closely, the first one, a promise of abundance of life, come[s] at a time when Israel was suffering in Egypt and the second one came at the time when [C]hristians were about to be sacrificed on the altar of injustice. The two promises are actually one and the same promise of salvation, of hope in the midst of hopelessness.²³

In this sermon, Ramento next asks the question whether the promises have been fulfilled, giving a double answer: yes, because Christ “came and dwelt among us” (John 1:14) and because “through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, the kingdom of God has been inaugurated here and now.”²⁴ This also has consequences for human beings:

Just as Yahweh called Moses to participate in the liberation of Israel, He now calls us to participate in the building of the kingdom of God, of the New Heaven and new earth, so that life after birth becomes a foretaste of the life after death and the kingdom of God here and now a foretaste of the kingdom that is yet to come.²⁵

Yet, there is also a negative part to Ramento’s answer of his own question whether the promise has been fulfilled. This is not the case, because those who have been called do not heed this call and because there continues to be “rampant poverty, oppression and injustice in the third world countries and in some degree, even in the first world countries like England.”²⁶ Ramento elaborates on these evils with reference to the Philippines, noting that though the country is rich in natural and human resources, neither of which is developed in such a way that the country profits from it – for example, the best trained professionals, in which the Philippines invest substantial amounts of money, are all serving abroad, for instance in England. As this country, consequently, has to train less professionals, such as nurses and doctors, itself, Ramento states: “Sometimes we think that the poor Filipinos subsidize your education here in England.”²⁷ In a similar manner, Ramento dwells on another

²³ Sermon 4, p. 2.

²⁴ Sermon 4, p. 2.

²⁵ Sermon 4, p. 2.

²⁶ Sermon 4, p. 2.

²⁷ Sermon 4, p. 3. In Sermon 6 (10 August 2002, St. John’s Cathedral, Hong Kong), p. 1, Ramento also touches on this subject and develops it further, reflecting on Genesis 37:28 (“For 20 pieces of silver they sold Joseph to the Medianites [sic] who took him with them to Egypt”) in relation to Overseas Filipino Workers in Hong Kong: “...I invite you to ask yourselves why am I here in Hong Kong? Am I not supposed to be in the Philippines to help build the nation? Am I not to be home according to the long cherished tradition of close family ties? Poverty, you say is the culprit – that there

dimension of the Philippine experience, by noting that the policies resulting from GATT, the IMF and the World Bank, do not serve the people of the Philippines, but only make the rich richer and the poor poorer. He sketches a rather vivid picture of the consequences:

...very little of the budget is allocated for social services so that thousands of children in Manila alone who are supposed to be in the playgrounds, school rooms or in bed, beg at street corners or sell themselves to pedophiles from mid-day to mid-night.²⁸

This situation is allowed to exist because those who are called to change it by building the kingdom of God do not live up to their vocation and worked to bring about that what the Magnificat describes when it talks about the mighty that are being brought down and the lowly being lifted up. Although God's promise has not been fulfilled yet, it can be fulfilled nonetheless:

The promise[d] kingdom would come to us if we and those who are strong, powerful and rich would tell the weak, the powerless, and the poor as Peter said to the powerless lame beggar, "Rise up and walk," and live a life of dignity.²⁹

Ramento explores this further with the example of the feeding of the five thousand, which he understands as a story about sharing inspired by both the boy who came forward to offer his loaves of bread and fish and by Jesus, who is "always there to move us, to open our natural loving heart to share to others the bounty that God has already given us."³⁰ This has a price, as it means giving up things or, when advocating for justice, being treated unjustly oneself, but this Ramento understands

is no job available for you in the Philippines. The fact is the government which seems to be helpless in solving the growing problem of unemployment, treated you as commodities and like Joseph, sold you at a bargain price of 20 pieces of silver." Criticizing the glorification of OFW's as "modern day heroes" by the government, he states that "It appears to me that our government is more interested only in your remittances to boost the foreign currency reserve at Central Ban than in your welfare. Human resource is now a major export of the Philippines, replacing coconut, abaca and sugar. What I cannot accept is the fact that the morally hard-earned money that you remit are used to service the country's immoral foreign debt which in the first place did not alleviate the life of the masses but did fatten the pockets of those who were and are in power." (Sermon 6, p. 2 – this sermon has also been published in Segbers and Smit (ed.), *Ramento*, 'Committed to History and Biblical Tradition. Homily on the Centenary Celebration of the IFI, St. John's Cathedral, Hong Kong, 10 August 2002,' 81-84; the analysis follows the original manuscript).

²⁸ Sermon 4, p. 3. In Sermon 7, of 8 May 1999, which has Romans 12:2 as its point of departure and focuses on transformation has a very similar analysis, although adding the "Visiting Forces Agreement" (1999) that facilitated quasi-temporary but factually permanent presence of US American forces in the Philippines to the list of unwelcome treaties.

²⁹ Sermon 4, p. 3-4.

³⁰ Sermon 4, p. 4.

to be part of the way of the cross.³¹ He concludes his sermon as follows, referring not only to Our Lady of Perpetual Help again (“When we run to the Lady of Perpetual Help, let us also be ready to help when those who need us run to us for help.”), but also to the liturgy of his church:

At a PIC [Philippine Independent Church, *pbs*] post communion we pray, “May we now be bread, broken already to be distributed to all people. In our service our fellow people, we become the sacrament of the people. We give ourselves and lose our life but remember, ‘he who loses his life shall find it’ – Matthew 10:39. And shall fit it the promise[d] kingdom and in the kingdom hereafter where we shall see God.”³²

The hermeneutical move that Ramento makes, is relatively clear: he understands, first, salvation in both this-worldly and otherworldly terms, with a focus on the former. The content of salvation is redemption to a life of dignity and abundance, as it can be seen to be part of the narratives about God’s promised future in both testaments of the Christian Bible. Next, he connects to this the notion of the vocation of people to work for God’s kingdom in this world, which means working for life in its fulness for all, drawing on the experience of the Philippines to show what sort of social transformation and what kind of struggle against unjust structures this entails. The Philippine experience thus concretizes what it means to build God’s kingdom, the contours of which are, in turn, derived from Scripture.

History and Hermeneutics

Drawing on contemporary Philippine experience is, however, but one layer of Alberto Ramento’s hermeneutics. There is also a more historical dimension, as he can also draw on the (religious and political) history of the Philippines to interpret Scripture for his day and age. A good example of this can be found in a sermon that Ramento preached on 3 April 1983, Easter Sunday, preached in the National Cathedral of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* in Manila.

Ramento starts his sermon by interpreting Easter as a victory, “For today we celebrate a victory over a battle in which we did not even take an active part to win it.”³³ The concept of victory functions then as a bridge to connect with Philippine history, as it “calls to mind the idea of heroes from our history books.”³⁴ These are people defending the rights of their people and it is soon becomes clear what kind of heroes Ramento has in mind precisely:

³¹ Sermon 4, p. 4.

³² Sermon 4, p. 4-5.

³³ Sermon 5, p. 1.

³⁴ Sermon 5, p. 1.

As champions of their own people's rights and aspirations, these heroes find commonality in opposing foreign oppressions and interferences in their own way of life. Like the prophets of old, they boldly denounce all forms of injustice in society, for which militant crusade they are always uniformly tagged as subversives and rebels by the foreign masters.

We recall to mind the likes of Frs. Burgos, Gomez and Zamora who championed the cause of their fellow Filipino priests for whom they fought for equal treatment and status with their foreign Roman Catholic counterparts. In return they received from their foreign masters trumped-up charges, found guilty of subversion and rebellion, and finally garroted.

Much later, Dr. Jose Rizal, fighting for political and religious equality for his own Filipino people by means of his incisive prolific pen was similarly charged and tagged as a rebel and a subversive and shot to death at Bagumbayan by order and influence of the powerful Roman Catholic foreign friars.³⁵

Although this narration of Philippine history is obviously transparent for events from 1983, as also ecclesial actors in anti-Marcos protests were precisely tagged and persecuted as subversives, its focus is mainly historical. In doing so, Ramento employs a strategy that has deep roots in the history and spirituality of his church, which has, since its inception, also drawn on the witness of "Philippine heroes" to interpret the faith.³⁶ The hermeneutical function of this historical appeal becomes clear in the sermon's next paragraph:

³⁵ Sermon 5, p. 1 – the remark about friars refers back to the colonial experience of the Philippines, as noted above. In Sermon 6, which also has Exodus 3:7-8 as one of its points of departure, Ramento dwells at length at the Philippine experience of colonization, noting the Spanish phase ("We are not ignorant to the truth that the land was taken away by the Spanish colonizers from the Filipinos either by confiscation or by false donations. Farmers became works in the land alienated from them. Like the Hebrews in Egypt, they were dragged to forced labor and if they were paid at all, the amount was only enough to exist but not to live their full humanity. The Revolutions of 1896 and 1898 promised freedom but when the fruit of the struggle was about to be harvested, the Americans came and took away that sweet fruit of freedom." – p. 1) and the American phrase, noting that this was characterized by the pernicious shape "of friendship, of special relations and education" (p. 1), which favored the wealthy in the land, while the churches Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, turned their back on the people, focusing on their own interests. In this context Ramento says: "Indeed, while the Spaniards took away our body and souls, the Americans took away our minds, to the effect that the Filipino identity and consciousness were lost. One American friend asked me some time ago: 'Why do you want to go to the US?' I answered, 'because you taught me to sing "God Bless America, My home sweet home. Why don't you want me to go home?"' All of this left the Philippines a country with a damaged culture, without much of a sense of values, pride, or responsibility. (Sermon 6, pp. 1-2)

³⁶ Excellent case studies of this have been presented by Francis A. Gealogo, 'Time, Identity, and Nation in the "Aglipayan Novenario Ng Balintawak" and "Calendariong Maanghang,"' *Philippine Studies* 58 (2010), 147-168. See also Smit, 'Masculinity.'

About 1900 years earlier [sc. than the Philippine revolution, *pbs*], a baby boy was born to an ordinary Jewish family at a time when the Jewish nation was groaning in travail under the political pressure of a foreign Roman government. Like Frs. Burgos, Gomez and Zamora, and Dr. Jose Rizal, Jesus Christ saw and experienced the injustices suffered by his own people at the hands of the oppressive Roman rulers. Like them he loved his Jewish country so much that he prepared for the time when he might be of help to his fellow Jews. Like them he condemned oppression. Like them, too, he denounced the religious leaders who preyed like hungry vultures upon the poor Jewish worshippers and fraternized with Roman political agents in order to gain more wealth for themselves.³⁷

The analogy between Jesus and the heroes of the Philippine revolution helps to cross the historical and cultural gap between first century CE Palestine and the postcolonial Philippines. This outline of Jesus' life and ministry is followed by a sketch of Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God, which is clearly deeply political in nature:

To top his denunciation of the foreign oppressors and their Jewish stooges, Jesus preached hope of ultimately liberating his own people from foreign domination. He talked about an empire or kingdom, a higher power, of which he claimed to be emperor or king. For all this he was accused of being a subversive and a rebel by the Roman oppressors. He talked about being the promised Messiah, the Son of God, and he was blasphemously accused as an impostor by the Jewish religious leaders. In the end he was arrested on trumped-up charges, mockingly tried and sentenced to death by the Roman authorities with the tacit approval of Jewish religious fanatics.³⁸

Next, Ramento reflects on the reason for equating – his terminology – the fate of the heroes of the Philippine revolution with that of Jesus; the point is that this helps to refute the idea that with the death of someone also means the death of a person's ideals. This is manifestly not the case with Jesus and hence also not with regard to Burgos, Gomez, Zamora, and Rizal.³⁹ Ramento, subsequently, both reiterates and further develops the parallel between Jesus and the aforementioned Filipinos further:

Frs. Burgos, Gomez & Zamora, and Dr. Rizal on the one hand, and Jesus Christ on the other similarly fought to liberate their respective peoples

³⁷ Sermon 5, p. 1-2.

³⁸ Sermon 5, p. 2.

³⁹ With regard to clergy and the Philippine revolution, see still: John N. Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy: The Filipino Clergy and the Nationalist Movement, 1850–1903* (Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University, 1998); regarding Rizal, see, e.g., Hélène Goujat, *Réforme ou révolution ? Le projet national de José Rizal (1861-1896) pour les Philippines* (Paris: Éditions Connaissances et Savoirs, 2010).

from the oppressive foreign rulers, and denounced religious malpractices in their respective situations so that God might be worshipped in the pr[i]stine simplicity of his divine splendor. We would expect the entire Filipino people to be grateful to GOMBURZA and Dr. Rizal, and continue to support their crusade to ultimately place the administration of God's Filipino Vineyard at the hands of Filipinos and get rid of foreign gardeners whose only expertise is in their ability to harvest the fruit of the garden and salt [sic] them out of the country and in sowing seeds of rebellion against the Filipino government.⁴⁰

With this, the synthesis between Jesus, GomBurZa – an acronym consisting of the first letters of the names of the three aforementioned executed priests – and Rizal is complete. And it has also become clear that Ramento, on the one hand, sees legitimization of a striving for national autonomy in the life and proclamation of Jesus, and, on the other hand, considers the life of the Philippine heroes a continuation of the kind of ministry that Jesus understood in a different context – looking at their lives means, in other words, to grasp what it means to live out the Gospel in the Philippines. Ramento acknowledges that certainly not all Filipinos see it this way, but his church, which also venerates these heroes as saints, does; he notes that the “Aglipayans,”⁴¹ unlike others, do “continue his [sc. Jesus’] ministry of liberating people from foreign oppressors.”⁴² This theme also occurs elsewhere, when Ramento uses the much cited historiographical trope that the IFI is the “only tangible result of the Revolution of 1896 and 1896.”⁴³ Somewhat implicitly, Ramento also connects this point of view to some of the doctrinal convictions of the early *Iglesia Filipina*, which understood the restoration of the worship of God in its original splendor as its central vocation, to which it was inherent, to be sure, that such worship also led to a worshipping community that embodied freedom and equality (as well as a clear desire for national independence).⁴⁴ The specific heritage of his own tradition also plays a role in this sermon, therefore, as it also becomes clear in its continuation.

⁴⁰ Sermon 5, p. 2; Ramento's liturgical theology is developed further in: Ramento, 'Worship,' which culminates in the following statement: “to serve the people whom God loves most that, ‘he gave his only begotten Son’, is to ‘worship of the Lord in the beauty of holiness.’” (76)

⁴¹ As the members of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* are often referred to (and as they also refer to themselves frequently), using the name of their first *Obispo Maximo*, Gregorio Aglipay.

⁴² Sermon 5, p. 3.

⁴³ Sermon 7, p. 4 – the quotation is from Teodoro Agoncillo, *A History of the Filipino People* (as mentioned above), Ramento has a point historically speaking when he adds the Philippine-American war of 1898 to the text.

⁴⁴ Cf. e.g., the first section of the ‘Doctrina y Reglas constitucionales de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente,’ *La Iglesia Filipina Independiente. Revista Catolica* 1 (11 October 1903), 1: ‘El objeto de la Fundación de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente obedece principalisamente á la imperiosa necesidad de restablecer en todo sue splendor el culto del único Dios verdadero y la pureza de su santísima Palabra...’ (I.I – referring to Fundamental Epistle III of the ‘Consejo Supremo de la Iglesia Filipina Independiente’).

The theme of the role of the “Aglipayans” occurs in a fuller form in a sermon that Ramento preached in Hong Kong, on 10 August 2002, in a service commemorating the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*:

In the text taken from Exodus Yahweh heard seen [sic] and knew the suffering of his people then he said “I come down to free from slavery.” In 1902, Isabelo de los Reyes Sr. saw, heard and knew the suffering of workers so he came to organize UOD. When women can no longer give milk to their babies, when parents can no longer feed their families, when the society has turned from Doctors [sic], nurses, and engineers into squatters and slum dwellers. Then the already brewing social volcano would spew its flaming lava convert [sic] the whole society worse than hell.

As we celebrate our Centenary, let us ask ourselves, “What is The Role [sic] of the IFI in present situation [sic]? What significance, what meaning can we give to this celebration?” The answer is, for every IFI to be truly committed to concretize her [sic] historical heritage and biblical tradition.

On August 3, 1902, the workers proclaimed the IFI with Aglipay as the first OM. Thus the ideology of the workers was strengthened and given meaning by the Theology [sic] of the IFI. Thus the IFI became the church of the poor. As a church of the poor, the IIF’s reason for existence is to serve the people. Every Aglipayan must commit herself/himself to change the existing oppressive system, to establish a new social order in the society, so that it could be called the Kingdom of God here and now.

The IFI teaches that by virtue of our baptism, we all become one body in Christ, all sharing his incarnation. When we vowed or our godparents vowed for us to renounce the devil and his works, it did not necessarily mean personal renunciation. It is a vow, a commitment of the whole being of all the baptized as one in the Body of Christ...

If we share in the incarnation of Christ, then as the Body of Christ is broken in Holy Communion, we must also be like bread broken, ready to be distributed to people. We are the living sacrament of the people who need us.⁴⁵

Here, the history of the church is the hermeneutical lens through which Ramento understands the gospel, in particular as to how it is to be lived out in the context of the Philippines. What this may mean in practice, Ramento indicates in another sermon, in which he lists concrete examples ranging from high level political

⁴⁵ Sermon 6, p. 3. – This post communion prayer is also cited in Ramento, ‘Worship,’ 75.

negotiations, for instance concerning the New People's Army, a militant (communist) revolutionary organization in the Philippines, social advocacy for migrant workers in Hong Kong, and the organization of the church for social work and advocacy in the Philippines itself.⁴⁶ Thus, the particular history of the IFI not only provides a means for understanding Scripture, but also for analyzing and understanding contemporary society. Also, in his use of the term 'sacrament,' Ramento alludes to the 'Statement on Development' issued by his church in 1987, in which the formulation of Agoncillo about the IFI's being the only tangible *result* of the 1896 revolution is transformed into a statement about the church being 'the living sacrament of the 1896 Revolution.'⁴⁷ The language of sacramentality at least suggests that the IFI not just the factual result of a particular historical development, i.e., of the revolution, but that it also makes this revolution and what it aimed for present through its existence as a church.

Next, Ramento addresses a key hermeneutical issue: the relationship of the world of today to that of the Bible. This challenge exists because Ramento seeks to understand today's world in the light of Scripture. The hermeneutical position that enables him to cross the "ugly board ditch" (Lessing) between "then" and "now," is that, despite technological advances, evil has the same shape as it had two millennia ago:

Great men today have conquered the outer space by virtue of the tremendous achievements of science and technology, and yet this is basically the same old world because of the same evils we deplore today. Still much tears will surely fall this Christmas eve. At least if in our imagination ay dadalawin natin ang tahanan ng mga maralita, mga maysakit at mga nagdurusa, mga inaapi, mga walang matuluyan, mga napipit ["we will visit the home of the poor, the pregnant and the afflicted, the oppressed, the homeless, the oppressed"] – those who cannot afford to sing for joy, much less to celebrate.⁴⁸

In the midst of all of his social criticism, Ramento is also attentive to questions of complicity and the dilemmas that this leads to. In a(n undated) Christmas sermon, he writes, for instance:

And then, another equally important may be asked: What about the soldiers of Herod whom he sent to round up the male children of Israel? We may

⁴⁶ See Sermon 7, pp. 4-6.

⁴⁷ The statement is available on: [https://ifi.org.ph/on-development/#:~:text=The%20Iglesia%20Filipina%20Independiente%20\(IFI,social%20malady%20and%20political%20repression](https://ifi.org.ph/on-development/#:~:text=The%20Iglesia%20Filipina%20Independiente%20(IFI,social%20malady%20and%20political%20repression) (accessed 12 October 2023). It was issued by the IFI's 'Consultative Assembly of the National Consultation on Development July 28-30, 1987.'

⁴⁸ Sermon 3, p. 3.

wonder how in conscience they would carry out such an order from above. It must have been a terrible dilemma for them. In all likelihood, some of those infants may have been their own children. It must have been such a critical choice between their loyalty to the king and their moral conscience. But in any case, the Herodian order was final[y] executed and fulfilled and the stillness of the first Christmas eve was broken by the lamentations and weeping of sorrowful homes.

Had their military discipline become so irrelevant or were they simply obedient to King Herod for being dismissed or beheaded? Apparently, some of them must have wept and gnashed their teeth over it. Others who had seen the blood of innocent children spilled on the ground must be beating their breasts for a feeling of guilt they could not contain and yet it was too late. Like Herod, they belong to the unfortunate ones who had experienced the joy and comfort of the first Christmas. They were most unfortunate because they allowed themselves to be used for a selfish end. Although Christmas was offered to them also, they had no reason to celebrate and to rejoice. Because they were captives of a power that knew no justice, no love, no peace.⁴⁹

This quotation shows empathy with those who have become complicit in Herod's brutal rule yet also intimates that these people did exclude themselves from God's rule ("Although Christmas was offered to them as well" suggests that they did not accept it). This is made more explicit in a next segment of the sermon:

Those of us how sing the music of Christmas and yet remain captives of powers other than Christ's cannot really find the melody of true freedom. Those of us who rejoice in the advent of Christ's birth and [are] yet unfree to denounce injustice and deception in a world of broken[n]ess, would never see the shining of the Yuletide star. They would remain in the dark shadows of death, and no Christmas would ever dawn upon them. They are the ones who deserve nothing but tears on Christmas Eve.⁵⁰

Hermeneutical Profile

On the basis of the above presentation of examples of Alberto Ramento's hermeneutical *modus operandi* in selected sermons, an outline can be given of his hermeneutical approach and profile.

First, it can be argued that Ramento understands Scripture on the basis of a particular view of what redemption amounts to, i.e., on the basis of a specific

⁴⁹ Sermon 3, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Sermon 3, p. 3.

soteriology. This soteriology understands salvation in terms of God's liberating actions in history, leading humans to a dignified life in fulness. The more otherworldly dimensions of salvation do figure in the sermons analyzed here, but more as the fulfillment of a historical process than as, for instance, the transfer to a transcendent realm for which one needs to prepare in one's devotions and through one's endurance of an earthly vale of tears. One could well say that Ramento underlines the material and social dimensions of redemption in the here-and-now.

Second, this soteriology is conceptualized with reference to two central concepts found in Scripture, i.e., the Exodus and the Kingdom of God, the latter in particular in the manner in which it was made manifest in Jesus' earthly ministry (which receives more attention than the kingdom as a future and transcendent entity) which function, for Ramento as the centres of gravity of Scripture; in doing so he also creates a "canon within the canon" as a hermeneutical tool for being able to order, prioritize, and paraphrase the way in which he understands the message of the Bible. Constant references to this message are characteristic for his way of preaching, it would seem, which accesses the faith by drawing primarily on the Scriptures – the only other main source is the history of the Philippines and that of his own church.

Third, the aforementioned soteriology is, also because of its biblical basis, which is much concerned with God's acting in history, tightly connected with a clearly profiled ecclesiology, in which the church is both created through God's liberating acts and the place where these acts should be continued through their performance by the church and its members. In this way, the church is a concrete and liberating anticipation, or prefiguration, of God's kingdom in its fullness. It is in the acts of the church that it can become apparent what it is that God wishes for the world – the church has, in this way, also an important hermeneutical function and is more than merely the recipient of the biblical message, it is also the instrument of its embodiment.

Fourth, what the church is for Ramento, is both informed by his interpretation of Scripture and by what he seems to see as events from the history of the Philippines, in particular the history of the 19th century struggle for independence and the history of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, that are to a very high degree congruous with or even expressive of God's liberating actions in history. These histories witness to what it means to struggle for independence and human dignity and against foreign domination and dehumanizing dynamics in society. At this background, he also uses the expression 'sacrament of the 1896 revolution', thereby indicating that the IFI does not just happen to have its historical origins in this revolution, but that it is also a continuing representation of the dynamics and ideals of this revolution.

Fifth, the (revolutionary) history of the Philippines and the history of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* function furthermore as interpretive lenses for both Scripture (or even of the faith as a whole, but Ramento has strong focus on Scripture in his sermons) and society. What the message of Scripture, testifying to a liberating God, means concretely in the context of the Philippines can be learned from examples drawn from these two (intertwined) histories, while these two histories, the heroes thereof, and especially their commitments and insights also provide a way for analyzing contemporary Philippine society and identifying injustices therein.

When contextualizing this fivefold hermeneutical profile historically and theologically, it can be noted that Ramento, first, continues a style of hermeneutics that, as it was already observed, existed in the earliest expressions of the self-understanding and theology of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*. This is to say that the use of the witness of GomBurZa and Rizal, in particular, to interpret both the faith in the context of the Philippines and to analyze Philippine society itself also occurs there. Ramento, in this way, continues the earliest tradition of his church. This is, likely, more than traditionalism, given that the reason that the founding figures of the IFI took this point of departure, was to find an authentically Filipino vantage point for their theologizing and to avoid a reliance on foreign theological models, which they viewed as submitting to a new kind of colonialism. Second, it is also apparent that Ramento makes theological and hermeneutical moves that are rather reminiscent of the theology of liberation as it was develop in the middle of the 20th century. This includes the this-wordly interpretation of salvation, elements that remind of a Marxist analysis of society and ditto critique of capitalist and imperialist social structures, the underlining of the Exodus narrative, and the stressing of the role of the church in building the Kingdom in the social sense of the expression. While it seems very likely that Ramento did draw on liberation theological insights directly – it must have been difficult to overlook these during his lifetime, especially also in the socially progressive circles that he moved in (cf. the organizations in which he was involved as mentioned above). Yet, some caution is required, as many of the elements present in this kind of theology that can also be found in Ramento's sermons are, in fact, also there in the foundational documents of the IFI. As noted above, this church was clearly influenced by Marxist, even anarchist thought, knew a strongly this-wordly interpretation of salvation (even if not exclusively so), and interpreted Jesus' teaching of the kingdom accordingly. Thus, it would seem plausible that this "liberationist" dimension of Ramento's theology is nurtured both by what he received from his own tradition and by what he received from the broader (ecumenical) tradition of liberation theology.

To these considerations, it can also be added that, with the partial exception of Manaligod's (only modestly received) work,⁵¹ and more contributions of Eleuterio J. Revollido, Marife Revollido and Yonaha,⁵² the tradition of a theology with a liberationist profile in the context of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* has hardly been noticed by scholarship in this field. In any case, it is striking to what extent contemporary surveys and discussions of the particular Philippine brand of liberation theology, i.e., a "theology of struggle," overlook contributions made by theologians and church leaders of this church, whether it be through their writings or through their lives and ministries.⁵³

Conclusions

In sum, this analysis of the hermeneutics at work in selected, yet likely representative sermons of modern Philippine martyr Alberto Ramento, show that it is worth remembering him not only for the manner in which he died, but also for the manner in which he ministered, especially, as far as this essay is concerned, for how he discharged his ministry of the word in his preaching, given that it has a clear and theologically rich content and is expressive of ditto program.

Clearly liberationist in outlook, Ramento underlines the this worldly dimensions of salvation (while he does not forget other dimensions), which he deduces from a view of salvation found when reading the Scriptures as witnessing to a liberating God, the characteristics of whose actions in history can be found in the Exodus, in Jesus' proclamation and performance of the Kingdom, and in emancipatory, even revolutionary developments in Philippine history, including the history of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*. All of this provides Ramento with an

⁵¹ As referred to above, note 12.

⁵² See: Yvan Ysmael Yohana, 'Pro Deo et Patria: Reflexive Spirituality and the Youth of Iglesia Filipina Independiente,' *Philippine Sociological Review* 64 (2016), 139-164, esp. 147: '[I]t is important to look at Aglipayan Spirituality - thought of as a theology that is in union with the struggles of the Filipino people for nationalism and democracy.'

⁵³ Works on the topic that do not mention the IFI include: Anne Harris, *Dare To Struggle, Be Not Afraid: The 'Theology of Struggle' in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2003), cf. idem, 'The Theology of Struggle: Recognizing Its Place in Recent Philippine History,' *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 21 (2006), 83-107; Eleazar Singson Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009); Kathleen Nadeau, *Liberation Theology in the Philippines: Faith in a Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002); Lisa Asedillo Cunningham, *Decolonial Hope as Praxis: Pedagogical Strategies of Freedom in the Philippines* (PhD thesis; Drew University, 2023); Victor Aguilan, 'The Convergence of Marxism and Christianity: Implications for Philippine Democracy,' *Phavisminda Journal* 12.1 (2013), <https://www.ejournals.ph/article.php?id=9526> [unpaginated e-journal].

existential and ethical framework for engaging the context of his country and church – what God’s purpose is, at large, can be found in Scripture, what it means concretely becomes clear through interaction with the Philippine experience, past and present. Philippine history, in particular that of the Philippine revolution (and that of the IFI), is in line with God’s mission of liberation, as the lives of revolutionary heroes and that of Jesus are in line with each other, the lives of these heroes and the like show what the meaning of the Gospel can be in the political context of the Philippines, which also implies an analysis and evaluation of Philippine society through this historical lens. This way of thinking matches that of the founding figures of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* and likely also receives insights from contemporary forms of liberation theology of the theology of struggle, even though theologians working in these traditions have yet to receive the work of Ramento in turn.

Finally, it can also be concluded that the kind of theology that was both embodied by and developed further by Alberto Ramento is part of the history of the Philippine theology of struggle and ought to be taken into account in studies in that field. This would also imply the consideration of the whole tradition of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, of which Ramento’s theology was expressive, as a full and valuable, even pioneering, contribution to the development of indigenous Philippine theology. There is some ecumenical justice still to be done in this respect, both when it comes to the historiography of Philippine Christianity and to contemporary constructive theology that strives for peace with justice.**PS**

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