

Path to Sainthood: Niña Ruiz Abad as the First Child for Beatification in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the compelling life and potential canonization of Niña Ruiz Abad, a young Filipino girl remembered for her extraordinary devotion to the Catholic faith and her reputation for holiness despite her young age. Her devotion to God stands as a symbol of hope, especially for the youth, and a living reminder that Filipino faith, rooted in love and humility, can shape both personal lives and national identity. Indeed, she was an epitome of a young devoted child of God whose level of holiness and piety was seen in her life. This research investigates the various facets of her short yet impactful life, drawing on biographical accounts, testimonies from those who knew her personally, and reflections from members of the Catholic clergy and faithful who have been touched by her presence. Using a multidisciplinary approach that combines historical analysis, theological examination, and qualitative interviews, the study evaluates the strength of her cause for canonization within the context of the official processes of the Roman Catholic Church. It also explores the criteria of heroic virtue, and evidence of intercessory miracles, and how these may apply to Niña's life and legacy. Furthermore, the paper discusses the broader implications of her possible sainthood for the Filipino Catholic identity and the role of youth in the Church's ongoing mission. By highlighting her piety, moral integrity, and the devotion she continues to inspire among believers, the study contributes to the expanding discourse on modern-day sainthood. It seeks to affirm the relevance of sanctity in the contemporary world and provide a meaningful reflection on how the example of a young girl from the Philippines could shape future generations of the faithful.

Keywords: Niña Ruiz Abad, Catholic sainthood, Beatification process, Youth holiness, Roman Catholic Church, Filipino Catholic identity, Ilocano religious devotion

INTRODUCTION

The life of Niña Ruiz Abad is a beacon of modern devotion, youthful faith, and deep reverence. She is currently under consideration for sainthood by the Vatican, having been formally introduced into the beatification process. On March 10, 2024, the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints permitted the opening of Abad's cause.

Niña, born on October 31, 1979, was a 13 -year-old girl who was diagnosed of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and passed away on August 16, 1993. She was from Sarrat, Ilocos Norte, Philippines, and the daughter of both lawyers. Her faith in God under the Sancta Catholica Apostolica Romana Ecclesia (Roman Catholic Church) has earned her admiration and veneration.

Though her life was short-lived, her legacy, preserved through the collective memory of towns people her relatives, and church members continues to inspire. Many regard her as a divine gift, a symbol of the community's Godly-living, as she lived devoutly by the teachings of Christianity.

Kupfer (2017) posited that those who lead a Godly life, or are considered saintly, must exhibit three key virtues: care, generosity, and humility. Gribble (2011) expanded on this by stating that sainthood candidates must demonstrate virtues such as faith, hope, charity, fortitude, justice, prudence, and temperance to an

exemplary degree. Demonstrations of faith and devotion to God—through testimonies or documented acts of holiness and good works, are essential in qualifying for sainthood.

Mališa (2022) argued that faithfulness to God is a form of giftedness—living a life devoted to divine faith. She emphasized that "holiness is not perfection, nor is it a personal achievement realized through obedience to commandments and regulations. Holiness is God's gift, an invitation into relationship with Him, and growth in holiness requires both renunciation and spiritual struggle." This paper also examines the idea that sainthood is not exclusive to men. The emerging forms of sainthood in the late Middle Ages, where women were increasingly recognized as saints in their own right merging it with evangelical freedom with a deep, and sometimes painful, faithfulness to the Church (Vouched, 1999).

Achieving sainthood can further strengthen the faith of local communities, elevating the individual's life as a spiritual model. Woodward (1996) noted that sainthood helps promote local devotion and national pride. Additionally, the qualities that make one worthy of sainthood can be examined through a cross-cultural lens. Cottingham (2017) reflected on modern interpretations of sainthood, including social justice, sacrifice, and moral discipline using Gandhi as an example of a saintly figure. Kupfer (2017) also stressed that virtuous conduct and moral excellence are key factors for sainthood recognition.

Finally, sainthood has a place in shaping moral values and social responsibility within a community. Local religious practices such as the veneration of saints significantly influence Filipino moral perspectives (Macaranas, 2011). While not limited to sainthood, his work highlights how saints contribute to cultural identity and collective memory. Other scholars, like Woodward (1996), argue that local saints enhance national identity and inspire new forms of devotion.

The study aims to discover Niña Ruiz Abad's life, virtues, and the cultural-religious significance of her potential sainthood and hereby seeks to answer the following:

1. What are the qualifications for sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church?
2. How did Niña Ruiz Abad influence religious devotion among Ilocanos in the Roman Catholic faith?
3. What are the contributions of Niña Ruiz Abad to the faithfuls in the Philippines?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design employing a case study approach, wherein researcher analyzed and discovered the life, virtues, and influence of Niña Ruiz Abad in the context of her beatification process and its impact on Filipino Catholic faith. To gain a deeper understanding, the researcher made use of two data collection techniques; interviews and questionnaires, with family members, Church officials or clergy involved in her cause, community members from Sarrat, Ilocos Norte and, devotees and local Catholics who admire or follow her story. Also, the researcher relies on some published literature, scholarly articles, theological writings on sainthood (e.g., works by Kupfer, Gribble, and Vauchez), church documents and public records regarding her life and the beatification process of Vatican and media reports, and biographies. Data collection included conducted through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to allow respondents to share meaningful insights and testimonies about Niña's life and influence. When data was collected, recorded interviews and written responses were transcribed and translated from Ilokano to English for wider dissemination. The researcher also used thematic analysis in interpreting the data, identifying how she exemplified virtues of sainthood, influence on local and national religious identity, and her role in shaping moral and social behavior within a Filipino Catholic context (Bernard, et al; 2016). Snowball sampling was applied in this research where participants recommended other participants who could be interviewed. A total of Six (6) respondents who were from Sarrat, Ilocos Norte and other municipalities in the province thus, who are knowledgeable and committed about the story and the beatification of Niña Ruiz Abad were add the participants of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study based on the responses gathered through interviews and document analysis. The discussion is systematized according to the major research questions and the emerging themes; the life, virtues, and influence of Niña Ruiz Abad. Hence, interpretations are framed within cultural, sociological and theological, perspectives on sainthood.

Niña's Qualifications for Sainthood: Demonstration of Faith and Holiness. Participants consistently described Niña Ruiz Abad as a prayerful, kind-hearted, and spiritually mature young girl. Several testimonies revealed her strong devotion to the Eucharist and her compassion for others. At a very young age, she showed behaviors which were unusual to her age. She always had worn a rosary in her neck and loved to wear white dresses. She was a very virtuous girl manifested by a deep reverence to the Holy Triune God.

One of the respondents has spoken this sentiment in Ilokano:

Managkararag isuna... lalo iti angelus ken panag-rosario, inaldaw dayta. Awisenna pay dagiti miembro ti pamilyana uray dagiti agserserbi iti pagtaenganda, addaan pay isuna ti natibker a pammati kadagiti sasantos babaen kadagiti imahen iti siyam (9) nga altar ti balayda. (She loved to pray the engelus and the rosary daily at home and even encourage all members of her family and house helpers to join her. She had devotions to saints whose images were at the nine (9) altars at home).

A church official as respondent further discussed this revelation:

They say holiness is something that doesn't happen to everyone. It is something like a gift or it is only for special people. But no. Sanctity is for everybody. Her [Niña Ruiz Abad] innocence, I think, is the normal innocence of a child. But what is significant to her though she died at a young age, she had a great consciousness to take God as a priority in life. For ones growing up, this is the moment when you are introduced of the concept of holiness, how to behave well, and that is the moment of value formation to many young people at their young age. In her case, she seemed to be matured already by that time in terms of understanding on good Christian life and sanctity to the extent that her parents would invite her to pray first, putting God first. Also, in any activity that they do, she would always remind her family and friends to remember God first through prayer. So, at the consciousness of that time to take God as a priority, which is a very Christian attitude, indeed make her worthy for sainthood.

Other respondents and her relatives even shared Niña's collective act of holiness when she was still alive. Some of these are:

1. She slept with the images of Sto. Niño and Our Lady of Lourdes;
2. During mass, her hands were always clasped in front of her heart.
3. She could pray for one and a half hours daily, kneeling with lifted hands or hands up and closed eyes without changing position;
4. She always wears headbands, or ponytails then at night, she put one of them at the feet of Jesus Crucified for use the following morning;
5. She is most likely not to eat apple because she believed the fruit is the source of our sins when Adam and Eve ate it; and
6. She did not like black. She only used black shoes or black pants if her school required it.

These testimonies align with Gribble (2011), standards of saintly virtues such as faith, hope, and charity. Her spiritual maturity, despite her age, reflects the attributes identified by Kupfer (2017) as necessary for sainthood.

Niña's Qualifications for Sainthood: Documented Accounts and Local Memory. Respondents mentioned that people in their town still recount her good deeds and frequent the site of her grave to offer prayers. Niña was also a merciful child in various acts of kindness and compassion to others. Her kindness extended to how she treated others since she was very careful not to hurt anyone, at school and at home.

This confirms the notion of a “living memory” within sainthood discourse, as cited by Vauchez (1999) who made mention that sainthood is nurtured through communal recognition.

Niña's Influence on Religious Devotion Among Ilocanos: Inspiring New Devotional Practices. Some Ilocano Catholics have already started praying for her intercession and promoting her story on social media and in social interactions. Respondents also lamented some of their exceptional religious interventions and expectations for her possible sainthood. One youth ministry member responded:

Her story gives us hope. We pray that one day, we can call her Saint Niña.

Another respondent shared his perspective:

And if she will be canonized, you will say, “ah, nakadkaduwa mi deta idi” (we encountered her before) ... I'm not far from her place. If she will be canonized, there will be something special attributed to her, which includes devotions, possible activities or expressions of devotion will arise, especially for the young. And here is a lady, here is a young girl within our era who held the things that we held, the things that we are interested of. Most of our saints are from the ancient days and they belong to the past centuries, most of them coming from a distant. Most of our saints are foreign saints. Now you are seeing a saint in jeans. You can see a saint with a headband in the case of Niña Ruiz Abad.”

Furthermore, in the views of the respondents, sanctity is also for the present generation.

[Her path to sainthood] “will trigger new devotions. It will bring us to devise, if not put into reality, some activities or some forms of devotion related to her holiness.”

Respondents also suggested and made comments on how devotion and effective promotions to Niña's cause for sainthood could be widespread using technology as a platform. With this, Dacuycuy, (2023) examines that social media as a platform addresses promotion of cultural realism and form of cultivating rich heritage not only oral traditions, as in the case of Niña.

One respondent in relation to this has also exemplified:

Like for example in the computer, you can use that as a place, as a locus for devotion. Because as we all know, computer is used for studies, communication, and it's even used as means leading young people to sin. Pornography is also in computers, in the internet. But even sanctity could also be online. Sanctity could be in these portals...We can make devotions out of the computer or out of the cellphones in promoting the devotion. Promoting devotions such as that of Niña, or even online rosary apps and others. These are all new forms of devotion.

Another respondent has expressed modernized promotion that focuses on youth:

The on-going efforts for Niña to become saint is a form of tight devotion. May it could be possible also that a digital comic strip about her story commenced in her

dedication. A material that can be an educational and may be used for religious purposes, most especially dedicated to the young people.

This paper therefore suggests the potential for the sainthood of children who are active devotees, which Woodward (1996) described as a vital part of the canonization process. This localized devotion could grow into national recognition if formally endorsed by the Church.

Contribution to Filipino Catholic Identity: Strengthening National and Cultural Faith Identity. Respondents noted that Niña's potential sainthood brings pride not only to Ilocos but to the entire Filipino Catholic community as seen in the responses from some of the members of the Church:

In the canon of saints, Filipino saints tell us of the kind of faith the Filipinos hold. And if we show this to the world, they will believe that even being a Filipino, it is possible to be holy. (Respondent A, church member)

Most of the saints are from the white race, but if we can have more Filipinos as saints, this could mean that being one is regardless of color or race and this could further boost our self-esteem and our understanding of our national identity as Filipinos. Because we need to boost their self-worth. And this is one among our ways. This would be possible, among the possible effects of canonizing a local. (Respondent B, church clergy and historian).

This finding reflects Macaranas' (2011) position on the role of saints in shaping Filipino values. Her sainthood could represent a milestone in contextualizing holiness within the Filipino and Asian identity, resonating Mališa's (2022) view that holiness transcends regulations and is centered on one's relationship with God. Lastly, in Rabago (2021), studies on integrating cultural values that are manifested in the various localities' ways of life was evidently threshold in the perspectives of the respondents' pride and honor to Ruiz Abad.

CONCLUSIONS

The life and legacy of Niña Ruiz Abad offer a compelling testament to youthful sanctity and the enduring power of faith within Filipino Catholicism. Despite her short life, Niña's spiritual maturity and daily acts of devotion embodied the virtues recognized for sainthood. Her story continues to inspire not only her hometown of Sarrat, Ilocos Norte, but also a broader audience of believers who see in her a modern reflection of holiness. As her beatification process proceeds, her potential sainthood presents both a spiritual and cultural milestone—one that deepens religious identity, encourages contemporary devotional practices, and reinforces the idea that sanctity is attainable for all, regardless of age or era. Niña Ruiz Abad stands as a symbol of hope, especially for the youth, and a living reminder that Filipino faith, rooted in love and humility, can shape both personal lives and national identity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Niña Ruiz Abad's exemplary virtues, deep spiritual maturity, and the growing devotion to her among Filipino, Ilocano Catholics, and especially to the youth, hence, further ecclesiastical and scholarly attention be directed toward supporting and promoting her cause for sainthood. The Church, local government and educational institutions, and religious organizations should collaborate in documenting her life, encouraging devotional practices, and utilizing modern platforms such as social media and or making educational materials to share her story. This not only strengthens the local and national Catholic identity, but also inspires a new generation to pursue holiness in everyday life.

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