

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 9, 2013 at 11:38am

Filipino liturgist, priest Anscar Chupungco dies

by Joshua J. McElwee

Benedictine Fr. Anscar Chupungco, a renowned liturgist who once served as president of the Pontifical Liturgical Institute and was known for integrating local customs and traditions into the Catholic Mass, died Tuesday in the Philippines. He was 73.

Chupungco's death was announced late Tuesday on a Facebook page dedicated to the priest and was confirmed in a release from the Philippines bishops' conference.

A former head of the bishops' conference's liturgy commission, Chupungco had been set to receive the conference's highest award, the Jorge Barlin Golden Cross, on Jan. 26. He was also set to receive the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice medal, a papal honor given for distinguished service to the church.

Ordained a priest in 1965, Chupungco was appointed in 1973 as the first Filipino member of the faculty of the Pontifical Liturgical Institute in Rome, which is run by the Benedictine order. Chupungco would go on to serve as the institute's president for 12 of his 23 years in Rome.

In 1993, Chupungco became the founding director of the Paul VI Liturgical Institute in the Philippines, a center for forming liturgists to serve throughout Asia.

Chupungco had also served as consultant to both the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), a commission originally formed in 1963 to introduce the English language into the Catholic Mass in English-speaking countries as part of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Among other awards, Chupungco received the highest honor of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions of the United States of America in 2011, named for Msgr. Frederick McManus, a Boston archdiocesan priest who assisted in ICEL's formation.

In a speech accepting that award in October 2011, Chupungco criticized the state of liturgical reform following the council.

Liturgical reform, he said, "is being put to task by a movement known as the 'reform of the reform.' It carries an agenda that can have a regrettable impact on the liturgical gains of the council."

"Dark clouds are forming ominously on the western horizon," Chupungco said. "They move hurriedly and decisively toward the direction of the sun that burns radiantly in the sky. They cast upon it their somber shadows to hide it from view. Suddenly it is dusk before the appointed time."

"In reality however the dimness is caused by the passing clouds. I am confident that these cannot put the clock back to yesterday's evening hours."

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Funeral plans for the priest are yet to be announced. According to a posting on the Facebook page, his remains will lie in state at a parish in his native city of Cainta in the Philippines state of Rizal before being moved to the Abbey of Our Lady of Montserrat, a Benedictine monastery in Manila.

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Source URL (retrieved on 03/24/2018 - 4:52pm): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/filipino-liturgist-priest-anscar-chupungco-dies>

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