

Sto. Niño: The Face of Jesus Christ in Cebuano Culture

*Vic Anthonny Villaganas**

Department of Philosophy, University of San Carlos, Cebu, Philippines

Abstract: The image of Jesus Christ is famously known as the Sto. Niño in Cebu. This little Jesus with the title as the Sto. Niño is being worshipped by many Cebuanos and other Filipino Devotees as well. His divine presence in the land of Cebu has dramatically shaped and developed the way of life and religiosity of the Cebuano people. The Sto. Niño seems to be the answer to the many hardships in life; be it mentally, physically, and spiritually. He strengthens one's faith in God. He gratuitously grants people's petitions. He obviously listens to the cry of the people. The growing number of devotees would somehow show that the above realizations are true enough. It seems that the child Jesus for the Cebuano people is the God that they can relate with. They perceive the Sto. Niño as their protector, provider, and healer. The presence of the image of the Sto. Niño in Cebu promotes a deeper friendship with Christ. Thus, one can say that the faith of the Cebuano people to the Sto. Niño is grounded on this filial trust and unconditional love in Him.

Keywords: *Christ-Centered Faith, Adoration, Veneration, Piety, Culture, Devotee*

*Vic Anthonny Villaganas can be contacted at vicboyvill@yahoo.com.

Introduction

The national artist for literature, Resil B. Mojares, stresses that “geography is a basic determinant.”¹ A narrow, elongated island of coastal settlements, he points out that, “Cebu is turned outwards, more oriented to sea and places beyond it than to mountains and the hinterland.”² It is not surprising that Cebu’s name, Sugbo, evokes the image of people arriving from across the sea, “wading in the waters” to get to dry land; that the Cebuano word for “province,” lalawigan, originally meant “anchorage;” that its most famous religious relic, the image of the Holy Child, is regarded by oral tradition to have come out of the sea.³ Mojares also shows that Cebu’s most popular festival, Sinulog, is built around a dance that mimes the motions of water currents, sulog or sug.⁴ The remark of American anthropologist Sally Allen Ness, in her study of sinulog dancing, according to Mojares, is not wholly fanciful: “Life in Cebu City has traditionally arisen from and returned to the water.”⁵

Filipino Catholics, particularly the Cebuano people, often see Jesus as the holy child who is the Sto. Niño. The representation of Jesus portrayed as the Sto. Niño has been a precious part of the Cebuano faith and culture. The social definition of culture is “a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior.”⁶ Culture, therefore, is an expression of a people’s way of life.

It is indeed true when St. John Paul II stresses that, “the synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith. A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.”⁷ This faith is evident in the set of shared values, attitudes, and practices of the Cebuano people. It is clear to them that this faith finds its fullness only in being lived. The Sto. Niño then has a very special place in the hearts of Cebuano people because He has given them this extraordinary gift – the Christ-Centered Faith. The Cebuano people’s appreciation of this gift of faith

¹ Resil B. Mojares, *Ang Sugbuanon: The Cebuano in Cebu: More than an Island*, Resil B. Mojares and Susan F. Quimpo, eds. (Raintree Publishing Inc., Metro Manila, 1997), 269.

² *Ibid.*, 270.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Raymund Williams, “The Analysis of Culture” in *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 57-70.

⁷ *L’Osservatore Romano*, 28 June 1982.

is humbly expressed in the devotion to the miraculous child Jesus, the Sto. Niño. According to Erma M. Cuizon, “the tales of the origin of the Santo Niño - both the firebrand narrative and the accounts of Spanish chroniclers - have been passed on to the present generation. That the tales are so dissimilar has not bothered the Cebuanos much as religious faith seems to take precedence. In the devotion to the Santo Niño, as in other traditions, Cebuanos have sometimes combined indigenous beliefs and Christian practices with little regard for the differences.”⁸

Moreover, the Sto. Niño attracts many devotees, not only in Cebu, and continues to be the center of devotion which played no little role in making the Philippines the only Christian nation in the Far East that it is today.⁹ Thus, the growing piety towards the Sto. Niño offers many insights as to why the Sto. Niño is the face of Jesus Christ in Cebuano Culture.

This exposition will further the vast understanding about the Cebuano people’s devotion, ritual, and worship to the Sto. Niño. What the author has in mind is that he will develop a paper that reflects the Sto. Niño as the face of Jesus Christ for the Cebuano people and their culture.

⁸ Erma M. Cuizon, Pangilin: *Festivals and Religious Rituals* in Cebu: More than an Island, Resil B. Mojares and Susan F. Quimpo, eds. (Raintree Publishing Inc., Metro Manila, 1997), 228. According to the author, the old Cebuano tale about the Santo Niño originating from a firebrand, or *agipo*, is a story that shows how fiercely independent the early Cebuanos were and how protective of what they thought was their own. The story tells of how a strange firebrand fell, probably from the sky, into the fishing net of a good and honest fisherman. He threw the firebrand out of the net but again and again, it found its way back in. Finally, he brought it home with him, put it on top of rice grains spread on a pallet to dry and said, “If you really have power in you, keep the chickens away from the rice.” And no chickens pecked on the grains the whole day. Legend has it that the firebrand later metamorphosed into the figure of a small child which is now the Santo Niño.

Moreover, according to the same author, no one knows when the story of the firebrand originated. Certainly, it was not before 1521 when Ferdinand Magellan and his ships came upon the island of Cebu, for it was Magellan who gave the wife of Cebu’s Humabon, Juana, the image of the Santo Niño during her conversion. When the Spaniards returned in 1565, four decades after Magellan was killed by the warriors of Lapulapu in the battle of Mactan, the natives claimed that the image of the Santo Niño the Spaniards found in their village was their own. But the Spaniards under the command of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi knew that the icon was originally Magellan’s for it was of Flemish workmanship and had a European face.

Historically, the enigmatic image of the Santo Niño was one of the many statues mass-produced in Belgium in the sixteenth century after the devotion to the Holy Child became popular in Europe. It was given by the Spanish king to Magellan for his intrepid trip to the East as the image was believed to watch over the ships and the men. For further discussion, see Erma M. Cuizon, Pangilin: *Festivals and Religious Rituals* in Cebu: More than an Island, Resil B. Mojares and Susan F. Quimpo, eds. (Raintree Publishing Inc., Metro Manila, 1997), 226.

⁹ Rosa C. P. Tenazas, *The Sto. Niño of Cebu* (Manila: Catholic Trade School, 1965), 2.

Image of Jesus Christ as the Sto. Niño

Thomas Rausch remarks that, “the image of Jesus is infinitely adaptable.”¹⁰ Also, in the book of Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, he writes that “the practice of assigning certain titles to specific post-Jesus stages in the geographical and temporal spread of Christianity is now seen to be too simple.”¹¹ Catholics refer to Jesus as Our Lord or simply as Christ. Moreover, according to Fr. Pedro Galende, “The titles are very personal affirmations of faith by the devotees.”¹² He adds that, “You cannot tell a faithful how he should go about in the practice of his devotion to God or a saint, you can only guide him.”¹³

In the Philippines, people call the child Jesus as the Sto. Niño. The child Jesus in Cebu wears the same robes and has a crown of a king since this image originally comes from Spain. Rosa Tenazas writes:

The image of the Sto. Niño of Cebu stands on a high circular base of ornately decorated bronze. It measured barely one foot high from the top of its crowned curly head to its now wobbly legs elaborately adorned with pendant pearls. A scepter and staff of gold are suspended from the two fingers of the Sto. Niño’s right hand which is encased in a golden glove. His left hand, likewise fitted with a golden glove, supports a miniature globe made of gold which is surmounted by a cross, signifying the world-wide kingship of the Holy Child. The image itself is carved of wood and had some time ago turned ebony black. The face of the image does not exhibit the regular classic features typical of many statues of the Holy Child copied from Western models.¹⁴

This image of Jesus Christ as the Sto. Niño is being considered as a wise child and a generous king at least for the Cebuano people. It seems that the child Jesus for the Cebuano people is the God that they can relate with; a God who is close to the very culture of the Cebuano people. The presence of the image of the Sto. Niño in

¹⁰ Thomas P. Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2005), 2.

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 15.

¹² Pedro Galende, OSA. *Apologia Pro Filipinos*, Manila, 1980, *Santo Niño De Cebu* (A Historical Sketch), Manila, 1966., *The Santo Niño Church and Monastery: An Augustinian Legacy to the Filipino People*, Manila, 1966. See also Abe Florendo, ed., *Santo Niño: The Holy Child Devotion in the Philippines*. 2001 (Benjamin Farrales) Congregacion Del Santisimo Nombre Del Niño Jesus, Manila Philippines.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tenazas, *The Sto. Niño of Cebu*, 23.

Cebu promotes a deeper friendship with Christ. The Cebuano people are not like strangers to God anymore since they frequent their visits and prayers to the child Jesus in the image of the Sto. Niño. He is Jesus Christ that understands the way of life of the Cebuano people. Therefore, the Cebuano people do not only focus on the divinity of this child Jesus but also to his humanity as well.

Worship to the Sto. Niño

The Cebuano people who worship the Sto. Niño must bear in mind whom they are worshipping. The word “worship” however, is used to as “worship of adoration” and “worship of veneration,” also worship here is not synonymous with adoration.¹⁵ In order to clarify confusions regarding which is due to God and which is not, theologians of the early Christian centuries began to differentiate between different types of honor.¹⁶ The Catholic teaching states:

The Greek term **latría** came to be used to refer to honor due only to God alone. It is recognition and acceptance of His excellence and perfection and that He was not created and He is the Creator Himself. On the other hand, the Greek term **dulia** came to be used to refer to honor due to created human beings because of the excellence they exhibited. This secondary kind of honor is especially given to the saints as they lived and died in friendship with God.¹⁷

The child Jesus, the Sto. Niño, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity is clearly to be worshipped as a God. The Cebuano people must be aware that the Sto. Niño is to be adored as a God; not as a saint nor a created human being. The Catholic teaching adds:

To help further clarify confusions between honor due to God alone and honor due to human beings, other terms were used. The words adore and adoration were used to refer to full reverence to God or to an interior act of the mind and will to worship God in spirit and truth. The words venerate and veneration were used to refer to the respect given to saintly men and women who reflects God’s goodness because of their participation and association with Him.

¹⁵ “The Difference between Worship and Adoration,” Accessed July 23, 2016, <http://iamacatholicbyheart.blogspot.com/2012/08/what-is-difference-between-worship.html?m=1>. See also Catholic Encyclopedia (Worship: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15710a.htm>)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Worship in Catholic Encyclopedia,” Accessed July 18, 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15710a.htm>)

By honoring them in a proper way, we give tribute to God the Source of their goodness.¹⁸

Perhaps the Cebuano people who worship the Sto. Niño pay a “worship of veneration” as well as the “worship of adoration.” This statement is clearly manifested when people who worship the child Jesus would fall in line to venerate the Sacred Image of the Sto. Niño while being aware that the image in front of them is the child Jesus, the Sto. Niño, the God worthy of full reverence and adoration. Although many non-Catholics think that this practice of venerating and adoring the Sto. Niño contradicts the first commandment, it is good to note what the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches:

The Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first commandment which proscribes idols. Indeed, “the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype,” and “whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it.” The honor paid to sacred images is a “respectful veneration,” not the adoration due to God alone.¹⁹

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, “Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is.”²⁰ When the person encounters the child Jesus, or the Sto. Niño, he is also in the presence of the Divine. So much so, that the one who worships the child Jesus in the image of the Sto. Niño is honoring God. Although one is in the presence of greatness, he does not forget that the child Jesus is close to him especially during those times when there is a loss of hope, felt lack of faith, and feelings of despair as moral failing, as sin.²¹ Devotees are drawn to the Sto. Niño because this image makes sense in revealing who God really is for them, a God who is always with them in times of joy and even in times of hardship.²² The Jesus Christ that the Cebuano people know in the face of the Sto. Niño is truly one with their joys and sufferings.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Manila: Word and Life Publications, 1994), 575.

²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* II-II, 81, 3 ad 3.

²¹ Rea McDonnell, *God is Close to the Broken Hearted* (New York: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996), 4.

²² “Sto. Niño of Cebu,” Accessed July 8, 2016, <http://ourrestlessheart.blogspot.com/2013/05/sto-nino-de-cebu-and-filipino-faith.html>

The Faith of Cebuano People

The Filipino family is basically religious.²³ Religion is an ubiquitous part of Cebuano life.²⁴ All kinds of worship and rituals are done in the homes, grave sites, streams, or on any spot deemed sacred by the community.²⁵ In the midst of serious social and economic difficulties, it is still God-centered, showing a remarkable adaptability and strength anchored on basic faith and trust in God's mercy.²⁶ Moreover, the idea that Jesus had been confronted with the same struggles faced by each of us is for many Cebuanos the reason why the Sto. Niño is very close to their hearts. The Sto. Niño is popular because the Cebuano people believe that he is powerful in answering the petitions of the people.²⁷ The devotees approach and worship the Sto. Niño as a repentant sinner who is truly sorry for their sins. They ask for forgiveness, give thanks, and promise a vow if the petitions will be answered.²⁸ These situations show that the Cebuano people develop this kind of religious rituals because they perceive the Sto. Niño as their protector, provider, and healer. As the scholar Richard Arens puts it, "rituals gave the people a psychological assurance of superiority over the threatening powers of nature."²⁹ Rituals worked as a forum to unify the village against a common adversity brought about by nature and the frailty of their human-ness.³⁰ Rituals of celebration, like thanksgiving, made the villagers happy with feasting, dancing and songs - activities which fostered a communal sense of well-being.³¹

It is believed that rituals preoccupied the early Cebuanos and many have persisted, although, like the Christian rites, their character has come under new influences.³² This is so even as Christian church practices and festivals have themselves adopted old native rituals, like the sinulog, the prayer dance performed before the image of the Santo Niño.³³ Together with this religious ritual is the prayer "Pit Señor!" The expression "Pit Señor!" is the short form of "Sangpit sa Señor," a phrase in Cebuano that means, "to call, ask, and plead to the king." This call for help brings

²³ Congregation for the Clergy, *New National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (January 26, 2004), 33.

²⁴ Erma M. Cuizon, Pangilin: *Festivals and Religious Rituals*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Leonardo N. Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), 143.

²⁸ Ibid., 144.

²⁹ Ibid., 232.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 231.

³³ Ibid.

believers together in the crowded streets of Cebu every third Sunday of January.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Santo Niño is the first person that comes through their senses when help is urgently needed. Cebuanos believe that the child Jesus can always relate with all the supplications being offered. Here is another example of prayer to the Holy Child, a powerful prayer to the Sto. Niño:

O miraculous Santo Niño, we come before Your sacred image, moved by love and by hope, we beseech You to look mercifully into my troubled heart. Let Your tender love, so alleviate our sufferings. Take from us, if it be Your will, all afflictions and never let us surrender to despair. Grant us, Señor Santo Niño the special grace we ask from You today, in all humility and with a loving trust, and for the sake of Your sacred infancy, hear always our prayers, be generous with Your aid and consolation, that we may praise You and the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.³⁵

The faith of the Cebuano people towards the Sto. Niño is so strong that it is being demonstrated by the thousand number of devotees during its annual fiesta. This communion or fellowship with one another under the kingship of the Sto. Niño is a clear sign of the grace of God working in the faith of the Cebuano people. This kind of religious celebration of faith has been at the heart of the Cebuano's way of life. It unfolds the active presence of the Christic mystery in human beings and their religious traditions.³⁶ Moreover, it is an integral component of the Cebuano culture to respect and to honor the face of Jesus in the form of the Sto. Niño because by this religious act, not only in organized religion, but also in the most intimate movement of the soul, *a sense of the divine*³⁷ is culturally formed.³⁸

The Cebuano people have put their trust in the Child Jesus regarding the favors and petitions they frequently ask and wish to receive. Because of this trust, they attain a unique relationship to the Sto. Niño upon which they are dependent. In the act of trusting, a person places himself, at least in a certain respect, at the mercy of that in which he places his trust.³⁹ Thus, one can say that the faith of the Cebuano people to the Sto. Niño is grounded on filial trust and unconditional love in Him. The

³⁴ "The Meaning of Devotion and Adoration." Accessed July 8, 2016, <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/ispeak/20057-the-meaning-of-%80%98pit-seÃ±&orˆ%80%99>

³⁵ "A Powerful Prayer," Accessed July 8, 2016, <http://www.philstar.com/sinulog2014/articles/2014/01/17/1279817/prayers-holy-child-powerful-prayer-se-or-santo-ni-o-de-cebu>

³⁶ See Edgar G. Javier, *Towards a Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, 6.

³⁷ *Italics* are added by the author.

³⁸ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. by Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 42.

³⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What is man?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 29.

Cebuano people cannot but express this love inside them towards the child Jesus like for instance when they visit Him and pray the Novena every week.

The kind of relationship that the Cebuano people exhibit towards the Sto. Niño is reflected on the immense number of devotees who wish to proclaim their faith and confidence and love to the Child Jesus. This is to be seen as a pilgrim people, “a growing community involved in history, one affected by the weaknesses and infidelities of its members, who constantly stand in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness.”⁴⁰ Their love to the Sto Niño is so authentic and so deep that one suddenly realizes that the cause of this love is none other than the Sto. Niño himself. “Such divine love, so good and true, so powerful yet gentle, transforms, and inspires every Christian to dedicate all his feelings, his thoughts, his words, his actions to God and God alone.”⁴¹ This love for the child Jesus is “one effect of one’s intimacy with Him.”⁴² The faith of the Cebuano people towards the Sto. Niño is deeply rooted in their abiding in Jesus Christ. In their abiding in Jesus Christ,⁴³ the Cebuano people proclaims love and friendship towards their fellow Christians. The faith that is gratuitously given through the Spirit of the risen Christ shows that God is truly manifested in a community of loving persons.⁴⁴ This happens because of the willingness of the Cebuano people to be intimate to the Sto. Niño, the face of Jesus Christ in Cebuano culture.

A Journey with Sto. Niño

The Cebuano people would call the Sto. Niño as the face of Jesus Christ in Cebuano culture because the presence of this child Jesus in Cebu has made a huge spiritual impact on the very lives of the Cebuano people. The countless blessings, the answered prayers, and the unending grace that the Sto. Niño bestows upon the devotees are truly remarkable. Each of the Cebuano people has their own personal stories to share about who the Sto. Niño is in their lives.

The untold miracle stories and the secretly granted petitions that many devotees have personally experienced would make them forever grateful to the Sto.

⁴⁰ John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2004), 56.

⁴¹ Roawie L. Quimba, *The Church* (Davao: Blue Patriarch Publishing House, 2011), 200.

⁴² Cirilio R. Almario, Jr., D.D., *Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), 34.

⁴³ Abiding in Christ is explained in Jn. 15: 9-10. “As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love.” See *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁴ George A. Maloney and Barbara J. Rogers-Gardner, *Loving the Christ in You: A Spiritual Path to Self-Esteem* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 31.

Niño. These miracle stories⁴⁵ for instance that are part in the unfolding of history can never contradict the content of faith and must, therefore, have their focus in the core of Christ's proclamation: "the Father's love leads men and women to conversion and bestows the grace required to abandon oneself to him with filial devotion."⁴⁶ The presence of the child Jesus, the Sto. Niño, in Cebu draws the Cebuano people to the very heart of the Gospel. They become witnesses to the Gospel. The Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father, St. John Paul II, titled *Ecclesia in Asia* stresses that "genuine Christian witness is needed especially now, because people today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories."⁴⁷ St. John Paul II continues to say that, "every situation is an opportunity for Christians to show forth the power which the truth of Christ has become in their lives."⁴⁸ This is what the Cebuano people have become. Their lives are transformed to the heart of the child Jesus, the Sto. Niño.

Conclusion

Devotees are drawn to the Sto. Niño because this image makes sense in revealing who God really is for them, a God who is always with them in times of joy and even in times of hardship.⁴⁹ The Jesus Christ that the Cebuano people know in the face of the Sto. Niño is truly one with their joys and sufferings.

The presence of the Sto. Niño in Cebu, together with the Cebuano people is a constant reminder that "indeed the primordial mission of the Church is to proclaim God and to be his witness before the world. This involves making known the true face of God and his loving plan of salvation for man, as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ."⁵⁰ Sto. Niño is the face of Jesus Christ in Cebuano culture because this is the title that best express the Cebuano's faith. The child Jesus accompanies the Cebuano people to become witnesses to the Gospel. The Sto. Niño is the Jesus Christ that the

⁴⁵ There are many myths and miracle stories about the image of Sto. Nino de Cebu. Even before the discovery of Legazpi's soldiers, the image had already been associated with many myths and miracles. These stories revolve around health restored after illness, easy delivery in childbirth, defense against an impending attack by invaders, protection from fire and disease, rain and a good harvest after a long drought. See the full article in <http://ourrestlessheart.blogspot.com/2013/05/sto-nino-de-cebu-and-filipino-faith.html>.

⁴⁶ *The Message of Fatima*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, (June 26, 2000)

⁴⁷ Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (November 6, 1999) , pp. 132.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 14.

⁴⁹ "Our Restless Heart." Accessed July 8, 2016, <http://ourrestlessheart.blogspot.com/2013/05/sto-nino-de-cebu-and-filipino-faith.html>

⁵⁰ *General Directory for Catechesis*, Congregation for the Clergy (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), pp. 25.

Cebuano people can relate with because He is one with their joys and pains in life. The child Jesus is present in the heart of the Cebuano people because of His constant generosity and unending grace. Truly, the faith of the Cebuano people is built on rocky ground because the Sto. Niño is forever present in their way of life.**PS**

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