

Santo Niño—Holy Child

*In every need let us come to you with humble trust:
In all our doubts, perplexities, and temptations,
In disappointments, troubles, and sorrows,
When others fail us, when our heart is cast down
by failure, when we are ill,
and our head and hands cannot work,
when we are lonely, when we feel impatient,
and our cross irritates us,
Always, always, in spite of weakness, falls,
and shortcomings of every kind,
Santo Niño, help us!*
Prayer to the Holy Child Jesus

In the Philippines, devotion to the infant Christ extends beyond the Christmas season, with the celebration of the Santo Niño, the Holy Child, during the month of January. In the Philippines, devotion to the Santo Niño is more than a traditional devotion — it is deeply rooted in the history and culture of the islands.

The story of the Santo Niño in the Philippines begins on the island of Cebu. Queen Juana of Cebu resisted the efforts of Spanish missionaries to convert her. But when they presented her with a gift of a statue of the Child Jesus, her heart was touched. This image of a vulnerable God — a child and yet a king, strength in weakness — did what all their words could not. Moved to tears by their gift, Juana asked for baptism.

But not all the native peoples accepted the rule and religion of the invaders. In 1521, King Lapu-Lapu of Mactan challenged the invaders in battle, and Ferdinand Magellan was killed. Without his leadership, the Spaniards soon lost their grip on the islands. The native peoples proceeded to destroy all signs of the invaders and their faith, including (it was thought) the image of the Child Jesus that had been given to Queen Juana.

More than 40 years later, the Spaniard Legazpi led a new expedition to the Philippines. They found the town of Cebu nearly destroyed by fire. But amid the ruins, they discovered a wooden box. Inside it lay Queen Juana's statue of the Child Jesus, miraculously intact. Spaniards and natives alike took this as a sign. They built the first Catholic Church in the Philippines on the spot where the image was discovered, and dedicated it to the Santo Niño, the Holy Child. From that time on, the finding of the image has been celebrated in the Philippines with a great annual festival in the month of January, including a solemn liturgy, and dancing and feasting as well.



Cathedral servers gather with the image of the Santo Niño—
Holy Child at the celebration in 2008.

It was at one of the first such celebrations, in 1567, that the first mixed-race marriage in the Philippines took place, when a niece of the native king married a Greek carpenter, a member of Legazpi's crew. This marriage — which held profound political significance for the islands, and ushered in a new era of friendship between the races — is reenacted each year as part of the Santo Niño celebration in Cebu City. The celebration of the Santo Niño thus becomes an ongoing prayer for tolerance and understanding among peoples.

While the Santo Niño de Cebu — characteristically garbed in red and gold — is the most popular image of the Child Jesus in the Philippines, there are many others, including Santo Niño de Tondo, Santo Niño de Padacan, as well as the Infant of Prague. In fact, about 150 different images of the Child Jesus, each with its own history and associated traditions, are venerated in the Philippines. Though the images are many, there is one Christ, who came among us to bring the light and love of God to people of race, nation, and tongue. May our celebration of the Santo Niño bring us to greater oneness in the Christ, who calls all of us to become as little children, and so enter the kingdom of God.

*Based on materials prepared by Noemi Castillo,
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