

Devotees' Testimonies of Faith of Señor Santo Niño De Cebu

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Abstract - This study unveiled the life experiences of the Catholic devotees with the miraculous Señor Santo Niño de Cebu. This aimed to: describe the key informant's narratives of faith; extrapolate themes on their narratives; and intrapolate scriptural texts with the extrapolated themes on faith. Key informants narrated their beliefs and themes of faith were extrapolated. Interview and thematic analysis were used in an exploratory narrative inquiry. To protect the integrity of the generated data from interview, bracketing was used to separate the researchers' personal biases. Verbatim accounts of key informants were held confidentially using the required ethics protocol. Cebu, being the root of Catholicism in the Philippines created the devotees' religious landscape of faith. The undying faith of the Cebuano devotees to Señor Santo Niño, though marked with criticisms and issues based on scriptural interpretations by other religious denominations; but faith was tested and strengthened by their direct or indirect experiences. Using prayers, miracles of healing surpassed human tribulations and communed with the ambit of a mystical God. As the devotees danced the Sinulog, a unifying force bound the faithful to be solidified in the spirit of grace and abundant blessings that without the Señor Santo Niño, everything in Cebu is permissible. Despite Biblical and religious interpretations and contradictions, the worship of the Señor Santo Niño would not fade unceasingly. Its faith catapulted the devotees to become better individuals and strengthened their relationship to God. After all, it is not about religion, it is about faith.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism, Señor Santo Niño, Sinulog Festival, faith and devotion

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is known to be the only biggest Christian nation in Asia. A part of Christianity, the Roman Catholics dominate the most number of populations than other religious denominations such as Jehovah's Witness, Protestantism, "Iglesia ni Cristo" or Church of Christ and others. Roman Catholicism is the fruit of Ferdinand Magellan's expedition in search of gold and spices in the Far East. The Portuguese navigator also known as Fernando Magallanes arrives in the Philippines citing the island of Samar on March 16, 1521 under the command of King Philip of Spain [1]. He reaches Cebu in April 27 of the same year; shows a friendly relation with Rajah Humabon; and introduces Christianity to the natives. The rajah, his

wife, and other subjects are baptized to Christianity. Magellan also gives the statue of Señor Santo Niño as a gift to Hara Amihan, Humabon's wife [2], after her baptism as Queen Juana, in honor to King Philip's wife. Both the Magellan's cross and the image of Señor Santo Niño are treasured legacies to the Cebuanos, a symbol of Christendom in Asia.

The devotion of Señor Santo Niño becomes an important part of Filipinos' Christian faith and culture, more especially with the Cebuanos in Central Visayas, who exhibit the trait of being "espirituhanon," a believer of a transcendent being [3]. In addition, before Magellan spread Christianity in Cebu—the colonial Sugbu, the Sugbuanons, natives of Sugbu are animists who perform the "Sinug" or "Sinulog," a dance

depicting the river current of a flowing water known as “sug” (native lexical Sugbuanon) or “sulog” (a Visayan variant of a syllabic “lo”), while honoring their wooden idols known as the *anitos*. This animistic act is a manifestation of being “*espirituhanon*,” prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores. Sinulog, as a native dance, characterizes with a forward backward movement of steps, with the body turning and swaying like a spinning flow of water current of the estuaries connecting the Pahina Central and the Guadalupe Rivers from the tributaries of Cebu’s watersheds of Mananga, Cotcot, and Lusaran, at the heart of the island’s Great Divide—the Cordillera Central.

These water tributaries and coastlines provide the ideal center of trade in the region, which reflect the Cebuano trait of “*garbo*” or pride of place. “*Garbo*,” as the second trait of the Cebuanos, mirrors a sense of pride [3]. As a sign of “*espirituhanon*,” they worship nature and object that surround them the: wind, trees, river and sun; they believe these as life’s source—for good fishing and bountiful harvests. This animist connection of paganism and the devotion of the image of Señor Santo Niño lead to the existence of the Sinulog Festival to be celebrated annually since then and now, as a manifestation of Cebuano religiosity.

As part of the country’s dark history, the Filipinos experience unfair treatment from the Spaniards when they introduce Christianity. The worst thing is the friars’ evil deeds that contradict the good intention of Christianity. Despite the many challenges of Christianity, these have not affected the minds and faith of the Filipinos all throughout the centuries; but, they continue to adapt Christianity despite indifferences and conflicts. The name Sugbu has been changed to a colonially sounding Zebu, a grease of a roasted pork which the Spanish colonizers have named it more comfortably than in pronouncing Sugbu. As time passes by, it transitions to a generally accepted name Cebu, as the home of the Cebuanos. Aside from the vibrant cultural traditions, Cebu is widely known with Sinulog Dance Festival as part of her people’s cultural life. This celebration of faith and century’s old tradition is held every third Sunday of January, in honor to the Señor Santo Niño [4], as a joyful celebration that binds family members together—a “*lumadnon*” trait of being collective in one’s place [3].

According to Lourdes S. Mercado, “All over the world, in the course of human history, the dance has been performed by human beings to express joy, petition, penance, and thanksgiving [5].” This supports that Sinulog Festival is an ultimate way of showing

devotion and faith to Señor Santo Niño among the Catholics [6]. In 1980, David Odilao who serves as the Regional Director of Sports and Youth Development organizes the first Sinulog parade. The parade has been joined by several students wearing colorful Moro attires dancing with the beat of the drums, which catches attention of many in a joyful celebration [7 & 8]. With the direction of Florentino Solon, the Mayor of Cebu City at that time, with some influential Cebuanos, the Sinulog becomes a project of the Cebu City Historical Committee. From then on, the Sinulog Festival has become an annual fiesta celebration highlight that blossoms into one of the great celebrated Mardi Grass in the world, dynamic to adopt modifications to fit the changing time, technology, and other factors [9].

Along with the growing faith and culture, the devotion of Señor Santo Niño becomes an issue to other Christian denomination as they claim that Roman Catholicism is a form of fake religion worshipping a tinged belief with idolatries. According to the Exodus 20:4-5, ⁴“*You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.*”⁵*You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me*” [10]. This passage clearly explains that it is against in the Bible to worship on images like the image of Señor Santo Niño. This is used as a philosophical argument among non-Catholic defenders. To wit, they also cite Psalm 115:4-8, that says “...⁴ *But their idols are silver and gold made by human hands.*”⁵*They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see.*”⁶*They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell.*”⁷*They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk nor can they utter a sound with their throats. And*”⁸*those who make them will be like them and so will all who trust in them*” [11]. Indicative of these passages is a strong disagreement on the Catholic practice in worshipping statues and relics of saints.

This is rejoined by Isaiah 42:8, which says “*I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to anyone else, nor share my praise with carved idols*” [12] and in Deuteronomy 27:15, “*Cursed is anyone who makes an idol--a thing detestable to the LORD, the work of skilled hands--and sets it up in secret. Then all the people shall say, Amen!*” [13]... These Biblical verses may throw a dilemma among Señor Santo Niño devotees who possess a despicable faith of the Holy

Child since the times of their forebears. This research aims to investigate a deeper understanding on the different life experiences of the Santo Niño devotees that make them a steadfast believer; despite these scriptural truths which other religious denominations keep on throwing as a religious issue.

The devotion of Señor Santo Niño does not only center in Cebu; but also to some parts of the Philippines. It becomes a national and regional celebration of faith as well. Other provinces have different versions on showing devotion to the Santo Niño. In Luzon, the devotional celebration is centered on the "*Santo Nino de Tondo Parish*" in Metro Manila. The *Buling-Buling* festival in Pandacan, Manila is also a form of devotion in honor of Santo Niño [14]. Many images of Señor Santo Niño are processioned and highlighted with street dancing in the Festival of *Pajotan de Santo Niño* in the city of Caloocan. This activity is derived from *pajo*, a mango variety that grows typically in the place; hence, the place is locally named *Maypajo*. It is somewhat similar with Pasig City's Bambino Festival, a procession and a mass are celebrated in honor of the Señor Santo Niño.

Catholic Faith believes in the value and dignity of each individual person, including the weakest. It is the love of God, i.e. unconditional. It gives hope to everyone including those who have committed grave mistakes in the past. It preaches the profound love and forgiveness of God, which we may better experience when we also forgive other people. It is not a religion that only preaches justice and the need to do good deeds. Justice is already known to many people without the Catholic faith. The profound love and forgiveness of God surpasses even the justice of God. The coming of Jesus is not to bring justice; but to reveal the unconditional love of God. This unconditional love believes in the gifts of different talents to each individual in order to serve others in the community. This love believes the healing power and love of God especially when one has been deeply hurt by injustice, catastrophes, and wars. The use of God's gift of sex within the bounds of marriage blossoms in order to experience the love of God and build families with love. The lack of love makes a hindrance to have a strong faith to believe and to rediscover God's love [15].

To Koenig (2012), several literatures point out the effects of faith to medical, psychological, and health conditions of an individual since time immemorial; and to date research studies related to these are increasing very rapidly [16]. Asomugha, Derosé & Lurie (2011)

emphasize a network of faith-based organizations like the church and communities to plan and create activities that enhance the individual's health condition and a positive outlook in life [17]. Faith communities can strengthen the bonds of families, neighbors, and friends in nurturing faith. While, religion, as an institution, provides a social support in responding to life's adversities; but faith makes people live a normal life based on their spirituality [18]. Lynn, Naughton & VanderVeen (2010) uphold that religion has a significant impact to human behavior [19].

This study is significant to both the Señor Santo Niño devotees who represent the majority of the Roman Catholics and the non Señor Santo Niño devotees who represent the majority of non-Catholics. Using the principles of peace, tolerance and diversity, both these groups may continue to nurture their faith, cultivate significance on their religious missions without discrimination and other forms of ethnocentric attitudes and actions. By doing this, religious institutions and faith-based organizations can make a difference to create a wellspring of peace in the global community.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study unveiled the life experiences of the Catholic devotees with the miraculous Señor Santo Niño. This sought to answer the following objectives: describe the narratives of faith of the key informants; extrapolate themes from their narratives; and intrapolate scriptural texts with the extrapolated themes on faith.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a narrative inquiry design using interview and thematic analysis in a qualitative method of research. Interview was used to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and motivation of individuals on specific matters [20]. Qualitative methods such as interviews provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena [21]. To protect the integrity of the generated data from interview, bracketing was used to separate the researchers' personal biases.

Research Key Informants

The researchers used written and oral interviews in gathering data which focused on ten pro-Catholic key informants and devotees of Señor Santo Niño, who

were elderly women, aged 60 and above who had been attending Santo Niño novenas every Friday at the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño. They were approached right after every novena mass at the moment when they were not in a hurry to go home. Based on the informed consent, the written interviews lasted for ten minutes and another 20 minutes for the follow up oral interviews. Their verbatim accounts were categorized with the use of thematic analysis. As Boyatzis wrote in transforming qualitative information, thematic analysis—a process of encoding qualitative information, codes were developed to cluster words or phrases that served as labels for specific sections of data [22].

Research Instruments

The study utilized interview guides to generate the narratives of the devotees. Their responses were tape-recorded; field notes were also used to jot down the salient features of the interview including information observed in the actual interview.

Research Locale

The study was conducted inside the Minore Basilica del Santo Niño church during the celebration of the nine day novena masses of Señor Santo Niño de Cebu. This was the church where selected devotees were interviewed, as the main key informants of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The key informants were made to sign a letter of informed consent on the conduct of the interview to ensure the confidentiality of their names; their responses were coded. After the interview, the key informants were given a simple token for their precious time shared during the interviews. After the data were processed, interview transcripts were destroyed; names of the key informants were withheld.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Every individual has his or her own way of showing, displaying or professing faith. One way of the Cebuanos' expression of faith is the devotion to Señor Santo Niño. The Señor Santo Niño stands as a tangible representation of a Filipino Catholic identity [23]. The expression of faith is shown in different rituals like the Sinulog: a kind of a ritual dance characterized with the lighting of candles, the procession, and the *hubo* or divestment of the holy image, the weekly novena, and the *pamisa* or the mass offerings. Through these rituals, the devotees express their prayers, gratitude and faith beyond words and propositions. These rituals become

another form of expression of praise and thanksgiving for the favors granted by God. The Filipinos still show these expressions of prayer since these define their Hispanic cultural identity. Since then, this faith has flourished and becomes a vital role of a unique Filipino religious identity.

Faith on Answered Prayers

The narratives of the key informants reveal that faith is strengthened because Señor Santo Niño answers their supplications. Koenig (2012) emphasizes it with positive emotions of self-esteem and sense of self-regulation [16]. Strong belief and trust in God provides a great sense of satisfaction [24]. These narratives are a gratuitous response on their answered prayers:

"I am a devotee of Señor Santo Niño for He always answers my prayers. He is good and merciful Child Jesus," KI-10. "He always answers my prayers especially in my studies," KI-4. "We are married for fifteen years. The Señor Santo Niño has blessed our marriage and grants our prayers," KI-8. "I am a devotee. He helps me in everything I do and answers me every time I perform a 'sinug,'" KI-9.

This narrative is supported with ¹John 5:14-15, which says "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, he hears us: and if we know that He hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that desired of Him" [25]. This implies that as believers of the Holy Child, they put all their trust in Him without any element of doubt. This has been rejoined by Mary's response to Saint Gabriel, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word" [26]. This gospel symbolizes the key informants' gratuitousness to thank Señor Santo Niño for His great goodness. Lagahid & Puyo (2016) consider this as Cebuanos' reward of hope and effort for being prayerful [3].

Faith on Miracles

The Señor Santo Niño performs numerous miracles for a devotee. The devotees believe that He is a powerful and miraculous one. This trait on faith is dependent on the self-report of the faithful [16] as reflected on these narratives:

"He is miraculous that He always hears my prayers," KI-10. "He is very important to me.

He always makes miracles to the people who believe in Him," KI-5. "He is the most powerful Jesus that helps us in times of calamities and problems," KI- 6.

In addition to this, "A certain "Bert" (not his real name) got sick about ten years ago. He was advised by his doctor in City X for an urgent cranial brain operation. "Bert," being someone who lacked finances was grateful when a foundation helped him for his operation. He did not have an assurance that he could go back to his normal life after surgery. He prayed everything to Señor Santo Niño that the surgery would have no risk of complications as he knew that it might lead to comatose, paralysis or blindness. After a 21-hour inside the intensive care unit, he was transferred to a private room and was told that he was cured. "Thanks Señor Santo Niño," these were the words he uttered in adulation to the Holy Child." Scientifically, what happens to "Bert" sounds like a placebo effect; but spiritually, Gaudia (2007) believes that the healing of "Bert" creates a positive feeling of being optimistic and confident [27]. "Bert" and his wife promise for the devotion and prayers by offering flowers, especially red roses, and by dancing to worship him every year for the healing and graces they receive [28]. This testimony reflects what the Bible says that "by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of the Holy Child Jesus" (Acts 40:30) [29]. This implies that by calling the name of Jesus, He gives us the miracles we deserve if we keep faithful in Him.

Faith as an Intimate Personal Obligation

According to Langlais & Schwanz (2017), frequent and quality prayer results to high level of marital relationship [30]. This means that intertwining relationship of religiosity and faith creates a more positive impact to personal regard. Prayerful couples produce bonded and happy families. For the Catholics, it is their obligation to pray and believe in God as a personal relationship. This narrative proves that faith is an obligation.

"As Catholics, it is important for us to believe in Him," KI-7. "There is no need to do some sacrifices because as Catholics it is our responsibility to pray and worship Him with all our hearts," KI-2. "My faith is very strong. We, as Catholics, it is our obligation to visit and pray

to Señor Santo Niño, as the Holy Child Jesus, the Son of God," KI-4.

These narratives are rejoined by the Book of Jeremiah, Chapter 29:11 that says "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end" [31]. This calls the Santo Niño devotees to remain faithful and steadfast with Him because He will do the rest to grant peace.

Faith through Sacrifices

Larsen [32] expresses that the religious can hardly receive salvation without sacrifices. To test faith, sacrifices can be manifested in sacrificing a favorite animal for burnt offerings to the Lord or the most beloved son to be offered in order to please God during the times of Moses. Catholics express themselves that they have to do some sacrifices as a sign of faith and devotion to Señor Santo Niño who answers their prayers.

"I have to do some sacrifices so that in return, he will grant my prayers," KI-1. "In doing sacrifice, there is something in return, as Señor Santo Niño always grants my wish," KI-3. "To show my thanks and gratitude, I use to visit Him in the Basilica. It is my payback to Him with all the blessings and mercy I received," KI-10.

Heard and granted prayers by God strengthen the faith of the faithful. The sacrifices they made are replaced with adulations and thanksgiving in praising for God's great goodness and benevolence. This bilateral relationship between God and the faithful is strengthened and becomes enigmatic and spiritually ecstatic.

Faith through Adversities

As pro-Catholics, we are not excused in trials. We cannot expect for perfect lives, free from all worries and problems that may test our faith and devotion. According to Basilica Minore del Santo Niño Rector Fr. John Mejares, "Hardships in life make us fully experience the goodness of God [33]." Orio in Lagahid & Puyo (2016) affirms this manifestation of hardship in the Cebuanos' resilient trait of being optimistic [3]. Koenig (2012) rejoins that aside from being optimistic, faith and religiosity can make the faithful becomes hopeful and grateful [16].

"I have encountered a lot of trials especially when I was accidentally electrocuted while in work, 27 years ago. I believed that my faith to the Señor Santo Niño saved me from death," KI-1. "Yes, so many times. Some religions are making fun of the Catholics. They encouraged me to transfer in their church. According to them, we are worshipping to a wrong God which is a form of idolatry," KI-2. "Yes, there are lot of trials that test my faith in Him like having illnesses in the family," KI-3. "Yes, when my husband and I broke up. It was a difficult moment for me since we have children. But I thanked to Señor Santo Niño for giving me strength to face all the odds," KI-6.

In difficult times, the Christian believers put all their trust in God. James 1:2-4 says that "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let this have its full effect that may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" [34].

Faith as a Tradition

O'Callaghan (2017) mentions that culture without faith may result to individualism and ingratitude—a certain form of social pathology [35]. To make faith vibrant, there is a complementation of an observance of cultural traditions. In Cebu, some perform the traditional petition prayer called "*sinug*" usually done by the "mansinug," the candle vendors in Basilica. It is a way of asking favor and petition to Señor Santo Niño by means of dancing for petitions.

"Every time I light candles and perform the sinug, He answers my payers. Many prayers have been granted for my children. My daughter is already a teacher and some of my children are now successful," KI- 9.

There was a popular tale about *sinug*. The *sinug* originated when a sick man named *Nuog* suddenly got well. There was an epidemic which fell in the natives of Zebu so Hara Humamai had to gather all the sick in a big house where the image of Señor Santo Niño was placed. While the sick man lying very weak, he heard a call. He opened his eyes and saw the Child Jesus near him. This Child beckoned him with his finger to come to him. *Nuog* moved and he was very much surprised upon what he witnessed. It was dark and he could no longer see the Holy Child so he picked up a stick which

was stuck into seeds of "*tangan-tangan*" with its scientific name *Ricinus communis* Linn, and dipped it into nearby oil lamped and lighted. He could see the child now. He was still very weak until he talked. He was very happy upon the miracle happened to him. When he looked around, he discovered that all the sick were already standing. All of them bewildered, *Si Noug! Si Noug!* All they exclaimed. And they all joined in his invocation. This was the beginning of what is called *sinug*. Now, the *sinug* used lighted candles in replacement of the "*tangan-tangan*" stick [36]. These are the different verbatim accounts of one key informant whose answer supports the faith and Catholic devotion of the Señor Santo Niño.

Though the worship of the Señor Santo Niño is considered by other religious groups as fanatical and idolatrous, Romans 14:1 says that "as for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions" [37]. This implies that God is a fair and peaceful God; He has no discrimination over us. He wants everyone to be faithful and stand with the religious traditions because no one has the authority to condemn. Isaiah 5:20 says "Woe those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter" [37]! This shows that with religious and cultural diversities, no religion can bring one to salvation except his or her faith with his or her recognized God.

CONCLUSION

Cebu, being the root of Catholicism in the Philippines created the devotees' religious landscape of faith. The undying faith of the Cebuano devotees to Señor Santo Niño, though marked with criticisms and issues based on scriptural interpretations by other religious denominations; but faith was tested and strengthened by their direct or indirect experiences as rejoined by the findings of Orío in Lagahid & Puyo, that Cebuanos had strong faith and trust in God [3]. Using prayers, miracles of healing surpassed human tribulations and communed with the ambit of mystical God. As the devotees danced the *Sinulog*, a unifying force bound the faithful to be solidified in the spirit of grace and abundant blessings that without the Señor Santo Niño, everything in Cebu is permissible. Despite Biblical and religious interpretations and contradictions, the worship of the Señor Santo Niño would not fade unceasingly. Its faith catapulted the devotees to become better individuals and strengthened their relationship to God. After all, it is not about religion, it is about faith.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the multiple perspectives of faith in: answered prayers; miracles; intimate personal obligation; sacrifices; adversities; and traditions in life, the study may recommend that Faith-Based Organizations or FBO that comprised religious followers in different religious denominations and sects will continue to flourish their faith and observe cordial relationship, peace and tolerance, healthy lifestyles, and shun religious prejudice that will lead to violence, despotism, and other acts of ethnocentrism. Various religious faiths shall observe and live to promote the essence of religious ecumenism across different social institutions and remain open to religious expressions and freedom as provided in the fundamental law of the land, the Philippine Constitution. Religious sensitivity and respect to one's religion shall reign in order to live in harmony with one another across different countries around the world.

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