

Señor Santo Niño celebrates Filipino Catholic heritage

written by Sarah Morris |



JONESBORO — As a child in the Philippines, Dixie Caballero grew up participating in the Sinulog, a ritual prayer-dance honoring Señor Santo Niño or the Child Jesus. It is a tradition she is now passing on to her 6-year-old daughter Gayle.

They performed Gayle's first Sinulog Sunday, Jan. 15, as part of Blessed Sacrament Church's celebration of Santo Niño de Cebu, which is the biggest feast day for the Philippines.

"It means a whole lot to me," Caballero, of Jonesboro, said. "I really wanted her to join because I wanted her to experience what I experienced when I was younger and get to know the Santo Niño de Cebu because I grew up celebrating it every third week of January."

"I am really impressed with how the people really pulled together and have done everything as an expression of their faith," Bishop Taylor said. He said the celebration was important because "this is a great devotion from their homeland and a way to show devotion to the Lord that is culturally appropriate to them."

This year marked the first time Blessed Sacrament has hosted a Santo Niño de Cebu Mass and celebration. Grace Bacsa and Rose McGlaughlin, who helped organize it, said it was a way to introduce their children to their traditions back home in the Philippines. Most of their children were born in the United States and know of the celebration through videos taken in the Philippines and watching TV.

The parish has around 300 Filipino parishioners and a Filipino Mass is held every third Sunday

of the month in Tagalog. Pastor Msgr. Scott Friend said it was important to him and his parish to help his Filipino parishioners feel a part of the diocese and the Church in Arkansas.

“It is a way of helping them come together as a community to not lose the culture they come from, the language they come from and they speak, and to also feel at home here,” Msgr. Friend said. “We want everyone to feel like that when they come here.”

The history of Santo Niño de Cebu is traced back to 1519 when Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan introduced Christianity to the Philippines. On the day King Humabon and Queen Juana of Cebu were baptized, Father Pedro Valderama, chaplain of Magellan’s expedition, presented the queen with an image of Santo Niño.

Magellan was then killed in battle while fighting for King Humabon, and his men returned to Spain. When Spanish soldiers returned in 1565, they were met with distrust by natives who thought they had returned for retribution of Magellan’s death. A fight broke out, destroying villages. Spanish soldiers going through village ruins would later discover that same image of the Child Jesus unscathed inside a wooden box despite being under a pile of ashes.

That image is now at the Basilica del Santo Niño, and millions of pilgrims visit the basilica each year. The third Sunday of January each year, in Cebu, is now set aside for festivity to honor the Santo Niño and for the Philippines being under his patronage. Bacsa said this is typically a monthlong celebration in Cebu and is always a joy to celebrate because it is a celebration of their values, beliefs and is a way of strengthening their faith in God as they face many challenges ahead.

Bobbie Gamble of Memphis described Santo Niño de Cebu as a series of fiestas held by different families.

“We would go from one town to another to celebrate each other’s fiestas,” she said, adding these fiestas would vary slightly as each family put their own touch to the celebration.

The Jonesboro parish’s celebration included a procession to and from Mass. Bishop Anthony B. Taylor presided over the Mass and a celebration followed that included a brief history on Santo Niño de Cebu, the Sinulog and a meal.

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While people can be afraid of different cultures, Msgr. Friend said “this is about the Pentecost. It is how the Holy Spirit moves the Apostles so that everyone hears the gospel in their native language and native culture.

“Each culture has something to bring to the table to help us have a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to be Catholic, how we look at God, how we look at his son, and how our Catholic faith is lived out in different places,” he added. “... I am thankful for my Catholic faith that gives me a way to dialogue with people from all over the world because we share the same Lord, same faith and same baptism. So even though our languages may be different, the language of our faith is the same and that draws us into the deepest part of what it means to be human in Christ and it gives us a way to be one together in our faith.

And that is also what is being celebrated here.”

Gamble is thankful she was able to join in the celebration. She was among Catholics from Brinkley, Little Rock and Memphis who traveled to attend. Gamble and Rosalie Lechner of Memphis said their church hosts a similar celebration each year that several Jonesboro parishioners attend. They came to support the parishioners who have always supported them.

Caballero said she is happy that Blessed Sacrament Church has given her community this opportunity to celebrate.

“I am excited for the years to come,” Caballero said.