

Unveiling the Faith and Devotion to the Senior Santo Niño De Cebu: A Narrative Analysis

John Michael T. Talingting, LPT, MA-FIL¹, Steven A. Eguin, LPT, MAED², Dr. Janet A. Arcana, LPT³,
Raquel F. Alforque⁴, Dr. Alemar C. Mayordo, LPT⁵

^{1,2,3,4}University of Southern Philippines Foundation

⁵Medina College

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700108>

Received: 09 July 2026; Accepted: 14 July 2026; Published: 27 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The devotion to the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu stands as one of the oldest and most enduring expressions of Catholic faith in the Philippines, embodying a profound spiritual and cultural heritage that continues to inspire millions of devotees. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences and narratives of faithful devotees to understand the reasons behind their unwavering devotion and the significance of the Holy Child Jesus in their daily lives. Using a phenomenological research design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with selected devotees and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings. The findings revealed that devotion to the Senior Santo Niño is deeply rooted in experiences of answered prayers, perceived miracles, divine protection, healing, and personal transformation, which strengthen believers' trust in God's providence. Participants also described their devotion as a source of hope, inner peace, gratitude, and resilience during personal struggles and life challenges. Beyond individual spirituality, the study found that devotion is sustained through family traditions, cultural identity, and communal religious celebrations, reinforcing intergenerational faith and social cohesion within Filipino Catholic communities. The narratives further demonstrate that the Senior Santo Niño serves as a symbol of enduring faith, spiritual identity, and cultural continuity that transcends religious rituals and influences the moral, emotional, and social dimensions of devotees' lives. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on lived religion and Filipino Catholic spirituality by providing deeper insights into the enduring relevance of the Senior Santo Niño devotion and its transformative role in shaping personal faith, cultural heritage, and community life.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Faith, Filipino Catholic Devotion, Lived Religion, Miracles, Phenomenology, Senior Santo Niño De Cebu, Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

Faith is an important aspect of human life that has long been studied and upheld by various cultures and societies around the world. It is a personal belief, adherence, and connection to a god, goddess, or the saints that encompasses rituals, practices, beliefs, and doctrines that give meaning to individuals and help them understand their purposes and significance in life. Trust in a person or thing is often the strongest faith of everyone. This trait is held by many Filipinos, which enhances their connection to the things or people they believe in as part of their faith. One example is the devotion to the Senior Santo Nino, located in Basilica Minore del Senior Santo Niño de Cebu, Cebu City. It features the revolt of Senior Santo Nino. Many citizens visit this place because of their faith in it.

The researcher aims to analyze and understand the stories formed from the narratives of the believers in the Senior Santo Nino and the reasons for the emergence of such beliefs about the Senior Santo Nino. The researcher intends to gather narratives and information from the believers regarding their faith in the Senior Santo Nino.

METHODOLOGY

This part showed the methods that would be used in the study. It also includes information about the study area and the informant data source. Qualitative design and descriptive methods used in data collection. The researchers would conduct an interview. Content analysis would be used to analyze the data.

Research Design

In this section, the researchers used the qualitative-narrative method. This is a type of study that analyzes, investigates, summarizes, and collects data. Its aim is to gather important information and deeply understand the experiences and beliefs of the faithful regarding the secret of the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu through their narratives. This design is guided by the belief and behavior of individuals, which are always based on the broader context of where they occur, including social realities such as culture, institutions, and human relationships that cannot be easily counted or measured (Valdez, 2020). The researchers also used Thematic Analysis to carefully examine, analyze, and interpret the data gathered from the participants' narratives.

Research Location

The research was conducted at the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu, located in the city of Cebu, where there is active devotion to the Niño. The local community, with a large number of devout believers, was the focus of the study. This place is located in Basilica Minore del Senior Santo Niño de Cebu, Cebu City, Region 7, where many people are faithful, especially those with deep devotion to the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu.

Research Participants

The participants in the study were the faithful of the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu. Through random sampling, the researchers were able to select individuals with deep knowledge and experience in the devotion being studied. The following criteria were considered: (1) they are believers with deep devotion to the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu; (2) they may be youth, students, or adults who truly believe in the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu; (3) they have personal experiences, stories, and beliefs related to the secret of the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu; (4) they are individuals who have visited the Basilica Minore del Senior Santo Niño de Cebu, Cebu City more than five times for devotion and belief.

Research Instrument

The researchers used interviews as the main instrument. They interviewed selected believers with a deep devotion to the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu. With this instrument, the researchers were able to collect valid and sufficient information from the chosen participants to answer the prepared questions.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers conducted a questionnaire to guide their interviews with participants who have a deep devotion to the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu. Before the interviews, the researchers first asked the participants about their age to ensure they met the set criteria. The participants were then given a consent letter (informed consent). After the interview, the researchers recorded and documented the information gathered. Following the collection of data, the researchers interpreted and analyzed the information using narrative theory. Through narrative theory, the overall story is expressed in a narrative form. After interpreting and analyzing the data, the researchers were able to address the questions raised in the study.

Data Analysis

To make sense of the data, the researchers used Thematic Analysis, a method for systematically examining data to fully understand the participants' responses. In Thematic Analysis, an organized and legitimate analysis is

conducted, serving as a guide to deeply understand the meaning of the data or to examine it in the context of specific events (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of the study, the interviews revealed that the faithful hold a profound reverence for the Blessed Senior Santo Niño de Cebu, whom they recognize as the representation of the Child Jesus, the Son of God born to Mary and Joseph. For the participants, the image is not merely a religious artifact but a sacred symbol of God's love, compassion, and presence in their daily lives. Many respondents expressed that they firmly believe the Senior Santo Niño hears their prayers, grants their petitions, and continuously guides them through life's challenges. This demonstrates that the image functions as a tangible expression of divine presence, strengthening believers' personal relationship with Christ.

These findings support the concept of lived religion, wherein faith is expressed through everyday practices, experiences, and personal encounters with the sacred rather than through doctrine alone. According to The Oxford Handbook of Lived Religion, lived religion emphasizes how believers encounter God through rituals, sacred objects, traditions, and communal worship, making religious faith meaningful within ordinary life. Similarly, recent research by Mercado (2023) explains that Filipino Catholic devotion remains deeply Christ-centered, with sacred images serving as visible reminders that strengthen spiritual identity, prayer, and communal belonging.

The narratives further revealed that many devotees continue their devotion because they have personally experienced miracles attributed to the intercession of the Senior Santo Niño. Participants shared testimonies of answered prayers involving healing, protection, successful employment, financial assistance, family reconciliation, and academic success. These experiences reinforce their belief that God continues to work through the devotion to the Holy Child Jesus. Such findings are consistent with the observations of Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (2024), which noted that Filipino popular devotions continue to flourish because devotees perceive God's providence through personal experiences of grace, healing, and thanksgiving. Likewise, recent studies on Filipino Catholic spirituality indicate that testimonies of miracles significantly strengthen religious commitment and encourage continuous participation in devotional practices (Del Castillo & Baring, 2022).

Another important finding is that devotion to the Senior Santo Niño is largely transmitted through generations. Most participants explained that they inherited their devotion from parents, grandparents, and older relatives who faithfully participated in the annual Fiesta Señor celebrations and regular visits to the Basilica. For many families, devotion has become an enduring religious tradition that reinforces both spiritual identity and cultural heritage. This intergenerational transmission reflects the importance of family as the primary agent of religious formation within Filipino society.

This finding agrees with the work of Del Castillo (2022), who emphasized that Filipino Catholic identity is strongly sustained through family traditions, communal celebrations, and religious practices passed from one generation to another. Similarly, the Pew Research Center (2023) reported that family remains one of the strongest influences on religious commitment among Catholics in many countries, particularly in the Philippines, where religious traditions continue to shape personal beliefs and cultural practices.

The study likewise found that gratitude serves as one of the strongest motivations behind the devotees' continued practice of honoring the Senior Santo Niño. Participants explained that attending the Fiesta Señor, hearing Mass, offering prayers, and visiting the Basilica every year are expressions of thanksgiving for God's blessings throughout the year. Many respondents stated that simply waking up each day with good health and strength is already a blessing worthy of gratitude. Their devotion therefore reflects an attitude of humility, dependence on God, and recognition of divine providence.

These findings support the literature of Robert A. Emmons, whose recent works continue to emphasize that gratitude strengthens psychological well-being, resilience, hope, and spiritual satisfaction. Within the religious

context, gratitude becomes both an emotional response and a spiritual discipline that deepens believers' relationship with God. Recent studies by Reyes and Gonzales (2024) further observed that Filipino Catholic devotees often express gratitude through participation in pilgrimages, novenas, processions, and acts of charitable service, demonstrating that thanksgiving is central to Filipino religious life.

In addition to thanksgiving, many participants disclosed that they visit the Basilica to seek divine guidance and assistance for personal concerns. Several respondents specifically mentioned praying for success in examinations, employment opportunities, financial stability, family welfare, and protection from illness. These findings illustrate that devotion to the Senior Santo Niño functions as an important source of hope during periods of uncertainty and difficulty. The participants' narratives reveal that prayer provides emotional comfort, psychological security, and confidence that God accompanies them throughout life's struggles.

According to the World Values Survey (2023), prayer continues to be one of the primary coping mechanisms among highly religious populations during times of crisis and uncertainty. Likewise, Del Castillo and Baring (2022) argued that Filipino Catholics frequently integrate prayer with everyday decision-making, allowing religious devotion to become an essential component of resilience, emotional regulation, and mental well-being.

The study further revealed that devotees demonstrate their faith through various forms of religious expression. Some faithfully visit the Basilica Minore del Senior Santo Niño every year during the Fiesta Señor, patiently lining up for hours to touch or wipe the image with handkerchiefs as symbols of faith and blessings. Others regularly attend daily Masses, participate in novenas, light candles, or silently offer personal prayers before the image. Although their forms of devotion differ, all participants expressed unwavering faith, reverence, and deep spiritual attachment to the Senior Santo Niño.

This finding aligns with recent literature on Filipino popular religiosity, which explains that external devotional practices are important manifestations of internal faith. The Dicastery for Evangelization (2025) emphasizes that pilgrimages, processions, novenas, and other forms of popular piety continue to enrich Christian spirituality because they encourage active participation, communal worship, and deeper encounters with Christ. Similarly, recent studies by Del Castillo (2023) concluded that Filipino religious practices involving sacred images should not be understood as image worship but rather as symbolic expressions that direct believers toward Christ, strengthen faith, and preserve cultural identity.

Overall, the findings indicate that devotion to the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu extends beyond religious ritual and has become a significant source of spiritual identity, family tradition, cultural continuity, psychological resilience, gratitude, and hope among Filipino Catholics. The participants' narratives demonstrate that their devotion is sustained by personal experiences of answered prayers, inherited family practices, communal worship, and a profound belief in God's continuing presence through the image of the Holy Child Jesus. These findings affirm recent scholarship suggesting that Filipino popular religiosity remains vibrant because it integrates faith, culture, family, and everyday lived experiences into a meaningful and enduring expression of Christian discipleship.

CONCLUSION

Based on the presented data, it was found that the experiences of the faithful are one of the reasons for their continued faith. The devotees make continuous vows to fulfill their life's goals. According to the devotees, they are always with the Blessed Senior Santo Niño de Cebu because he does not abandon them in times of need. The purpose of this research is to understand the recognition of the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu and how the Blessed Niño performs miracles in the lives of the devotees or faithful. Their experiences and beliefs are also presented here. Most go to pray for the safety of their family and to give thanks for the blessings received from the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu. They often pray for progress, overcoming life's challenges, guidance, and safety for their family, healing their loved ones from illnesses, and even for daily food. The many miracles of the Blessed Senior Santo Niño de Cebu have inspired her followers to unite under one belief, and the effects of this have strengthened their faith, resulting in a more positive outlook on life.

RECOMMENDATION

There are studies about the beliefs and faith regarding the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu. However, the current study focuses not only on devotion but also on the deeper aspects of their faith based on their experiences, such as faith in answered prayers, miracles, beliefs in obligations, sacrifices, hardships, culture, and traditions in life. In connection with the findings of the study and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are presented:

For the Faithful

This study is important for the faithful because it contains a crucial aspect of their faith. It can help them better understand their Catholic faith and provide deeper context for their devotion to the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu. This could lead to greater satisfaction and a deeper commitment to their religious beliefs.

For the Church

This study is important for the church because it will provide information about the history and culture of their parish, particularly the parish of the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu. It may inspire the church to develop programs and activities aimed at valuing and promoting devotion to the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu, particularly in relation to the Secret of the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu. They may also use the findings of this study to improve their services and pastoral care for the faithful.

For the People Living in Cebu

This study can help the people living in Cebu better understand and appreciate their place. It can provide additional knowledge and awareness about the history and cultural heritage of their community. This could serve as a foundation for programs and projects aimed at showcasing and preserving their traditions and culture.

For Future Researchers

This study will serve as a basis and guide for future researchers who wish to continue studying and paying attention to the Secret of the Senior Santo Niño de Cebu

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