

# “Hubo” Ritual at the end of the Sinulog Festival

[24 Sunday Aug 2014](#)

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A few days after the feast of the Sto. Niño de Cebu every Third Sunday of January, the so-called “Hubo” (a Cebuano term meaning “naked”) ritual takes place during the early morning celebration of the Holy Mass, marking the end of the Sinulog Festival in Cebu. Seen from the outside, it appears as a simple rite of undressing, bathing and redressing the image of the Holy Child. The icon is stripped of its elaborate festive garments, washed, and dressed with a simpler garb.

Perhaps for many devotees flocking to the city of Cebu for the Sinulog Festival, Hubo is only a symbolic re-enactment of something which takes place in their home every single day: a mother or a father or some adult bathing a child either at the start of the day so as to prepare him/her for the day’s activities or at the end of it to wash away all the dirt that the child’s body has accumulated throughout the day. And we surmise and muse on thinking that the Sto. Niño image must have accumulated a similar amount of dirt during the almost two-week long celebration in his honor and, thus, needs such a washing up!

Some would give theological interpretations to the Hubo ritual. For example., the stripping of the festive garment and putting on of an ordinary one would represent the Son of God’s kenosis or “self-emptying” in accord with what St. Paul says: “His (sc. Jesus Christ’s) state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave” (Phil 2:6-7). His immersion in water, on the other hand, would indicate his entering into the world and full assumption of the human nature. Hence God became man, first becoming a small child, which is what the Sto. Niño really represent.

The idea of having the child Jesus’ body immersed in water, however, is not a new one. In fact, it has ancient roots. The water used in washing the body of Sto. Niño, in this case, is believed to possess healing power. The most elaborate text we have regarding this is the Arabic Syriac “infancy Gospel” – a apocryphal text which narrates the birth and childhood of Jesus Christ, and which some experts would date to as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century. We read a series of miraculous healings there all attributed to the perfumed water used in washing the body of the boy Jesus (like cases of healing from leprosy in Chapters 17, 18, 21, 31, and 32; healing from illnesses affecting the eyes in Chapters 27-28; healing from demonic possession in Chapter 33; and so forth).

The ritual of the “Hubo” is said to have Spanish origins. The Augustinian priest-writer Gaspar de San Agustin speaks about it in his book “Conquistas de las Islas Filipinas” (1975), which the local historian Manuel de la Calzada, in his book “Legends of Sto. Niño de Cebu” (1965), provides us with stories told about how Queen Juana herself initiated the ritual of bathing the image of the Child Jesus in a river to bring about the much desired rain at that time. The possibility that it was the early Spanish Augustinian missionaries who introduced

this typically Cebuano ritual of the “Hubo” into the Philippines, of course, is not to be excluded. Perhaps the question that the millions of devotees to the Sto. Niño de Cebu should be raising is this: What does the “hubo” ritual mean to me, personally?

The present article is not the proper place for us to list down the many possible answers people can give as to why, rain or shine, they faithfully attend the “Hubo” morning Mass every year. For others, it could simply mark the official closing of the Sinulog Festival; for some, it may be a projection of human sentiments with domestic or family background; for others still, it could have profound theological implications or could even be associated with some graces they have received personally from Señor Sto. Niño. Whatever their motivation may be, let faith be ever present in their hearts. In this way, the washing to the religious image of the Child Jesus would re-echo the devout sentiments each one of them has in his or her heart and would strengthen one’s faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, who once deigned to become an infant to show us the way of humility, trust, love, hope, faith, simplicity, and other virtues we need in order to enter the Kingdom of heaven in the end (cf. Mt 18:3).

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This article appeared in the “Fiesta Senor 2013 Souvenir Program”, pp. 86-87.

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