

SANTO NINO FESTIVAL
MANOR PARK CLYDACH
SUNDAY 19 JANUARY 2020
ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

One of the many gifts the people of the Philippines bring to whatever country in which you live is your example of family life. You love your children and they love you. It is an inspiration to see so many of you gathered together, not just for this Santo Nino festival today, but at Mass on Sundays, at your famous parties and in your homes. One of my favourite quotations is: "Our children are the messages we send to tomorrow". Through your children, you send messages of love, joy, the importance of a united family, care for each other, care for other people not least in the professionalism and compassion you show in our hospitals. You send the message that faith in God, and love for Jesus, lie at the centre of your lives and that of the Philippine nation. You teach us that faith is fun as well as being solemn.

People often say that Christmas is for children. And so it is. But it is for adults too. When God reveals himself in a helpless child, it brings even the most hardened adult to his or her knees. A child is vulnerable and innocent, and loving, and trusting. A baby draws from us the wonder of new life and the rediscovery of lost innocence and hope. On 2 February we will celebrate the feast of the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple. I love the words in the Gospel passage for that day. "The child's father and mother stood there wondering at the things that were being said about him". As parents you will continually 'wonder' about your children in so many different ways – their personalities and their gifts and talents. You will know better than I, the responsibility and worry of guiding children through adolescence and adulthood 'wondering' if they are travelling in the tight direction. Mary and Joseph knew what that was like, too. They had to deal with an adolescent son, deliberately staying behind in the Temple. An adolescent bid for independence? "Lost" in the Temple in the minds of worried parents. Mary's words on the finding of the Child Jesus come down the ages to every parent. "My son, why did you do this to us? Did you not know that your father and I would be looking for you?".

When, as a grown man, Jesus says to his disciples, and to us, "Unless you become like little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" he is teaching us something very profound. He says like little children. Not childish but childlike. Open. Trusting. Innocent. Spontaneous. Hopeful. Full of potential. Friendly. Bringing people together. Each person here today can all add to that list. This great feast of Santo Nino touches on all of those very deep truths. The little holy one. The holy baby. The child Jesus. God not coming in power and control but inviting us to take him to our hearts, to care for him, to nurture him, to cherish him. We in turn receiving His love and care and nurturing and forgiveness for ourselves and through us to others – if we are open to it. That is the unity and charity which are at the heart of our Catholic faith. This is what so many of you put into practice by the service and dedication you give to the sick in our hospitals and your care for people in the community. And I don't forget that in addition to your professional expertise, it is your smiles and your gentleness which also heal the patients, because those smiles of yours speak louder than a thousand words.

What better national image and focus of devotion can there be for the people of the Philippines than this statue of the Holy Child which first brought the Catholic faith to your country 455 years ago? That was in 1665 when the Great Plague was sweeping London. (What a pity there weren't Filipino doctors and nurses and technicians then!) Here in Swansea you have brought that devotion alive for the last ten years. The presence of so many of you here today is a sign that this feast will still be celebrated in 455 years time!

But remember, before the followers of Jesus could believe and write about the child Jesus in the wood of the crib, they had to believe in him as the innocent victim dying on the wood of the cross. Our faith in the love of God for all his children was recognised by his followers first of all on the cross. When he was dying on the cross, Jesus did not withdraw God's love from sinful humanity. He did not say

“Look what they have done to me. These people are unforgiveable”. On the cross, Jesus goes on revealing, goes on loving, goes on forgiving. And that is the key to his rising from the dead and allowing us to share in his life through our Faith, our Baptism and our holy Communion. The most common question people ask is “Where is God in the midst of human suffering”. “Here” says Jesus with his arms outstretched on the cross. The people of the Philippines have to re-live that mystery all too often, not least with the natural tragedies which cause so much suffering. And surely today we will remember in a special way those affected by the Taal volcanic eruption.

All these truths are brought together in this beautiful celebration of Santo Nino today. Even the glorious weather is helping us to celebrate. Today we are having festivity and worship. Faith and fun, family, friend and food. What more could we ask?