

*“ . . . A child is born to us, a son is given us ” (Is 9:5). It is a special joy for me to celebrate Santo Niño Sunday with you. The image of the Holy Child Jesus accompanied the spread of the Gospel in this country from the beginning. Dressed in the robes of a king, crowned and holding the sceptre, the globe and the cross, he continues to remind us of the link between God’s Kingdom and the mystery of spiritual childhood. He tells us this in today’s Gospel: “Whoever does not accept the Kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (Mk 10:15). The Santo Niño continues to proclaim to us that the light of God’s grace has shone upon a world dwelling in darkness, bringing the Good News of our freedom from slavery, and guiding us in the paths of peace, right and justice. The Santo Niño also reminds us of our call to spread the reign of Christ throughout the world.*

*In these days, throughout my visit, I have listened to you sing the song: “We are all God’s children”. That is what the Santo Niño tells us. He reminds us of our deepest identity. All of us are God’s children, members of God’s family. Today Saint Paul has told us that in Christ we have become God’s adopted children, brothers and sisters in Christ. This is who we are. This is our identity. We saw a beautiful expression of this when Filipinos rallied around our brothers and sisters affected by the typhoon.*

*The Apostle tells us that because God chose us, we have been richly blessed! God “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens” (Eph 1:3). These words have a special resonance in the Philippines, for it is the foremost Catholic country in Asia; this is itself a special gift of God, a special blessing. But it is also a vocation. Filipinos are called to be outstanding missionaries of the faith in Asia.*

*God chose and blessed us for a purpose: to be holy and blameless in his sight (Eph 1:4). He chose us, each of us to be witnesses of his truth and his justice in this world. He created the world as a beautiful garden and asked us to care for it. But through sin, man has disfigured that natural beauty; through sin, man has also destroyed the unity and beauty of our human family, creating social structures which perpetuate poverty, ignorance and corruption.*

*Sometimes, when we see the troubles, difficulties and wrongs all around us, we are tempted to give up. It seems that the promises of the Gospel do not apply; they are unreal. But the Bible tells us that the great threat to God’s plan for us is, and always has been, the lie. The devil is the father of lies. Often he hides his snares behind the appearance of sophistication, the allure of being “modern”, “like everyone else”. He distracts us with the promise of ephemeral pleasures, superficial pastimes. And so we squander our God-given gifts by tinkering with gadgets; we squander our money on gambling and drink; we turn in on ourselves. We forget to remain focused on the things that really matter. We forget to remain, at heart, children of God. That is sin: [to] forget at heart that we are children of God. For children, as the Lord tells us, have their own wisdom, which is not the wisdom of the world. That is why the message of the Santo Niño is so important. He speaks powerfully to all of us. He reminds us of our deepest identity, of what we are called to be as God’s family.*

*The Santo Niño also reminds us that this identity must be protected. The Christ Child is the protector of this great country. When he came into the world, his very life was threatened by a corrupt king. Jesus himself needed to be protected. He had an earthly protector: Saint Joseph. He*

*had an earthly family, the Holy Family of Nazareth. So he reminds us of the importance of protecting our families, and those larger families which are the Church, God's family, and the world, our human family. Sadly, in our day, the family all too often needs to be protected against insidious attacks and programs contrary to all that we hold true and sacred, all that is most beautiful and noble in our culture.*

*In the Gospel, Jesus welcomes children; he embraces them and blesses them (Mk 10:16). We too need to protect, guide and encourage our young people, helping them to build a society worthy of their great spiritual and cultural heritage. Specifically, we need to see each child as a gift to be welcomed, cherished and protected. And we need to care for our young people, not allowing them to be robbed of hope and condemned to life on the streets.*

*It was a frail child, in need of protection, who brought God's goodness, mercy and justice into the world. He resisted the dishonesty and corruption, which are the legacy of sin, and he triumphed over them by the power of his cross. Now, at the end of my visit to the Philippines, I commend you to him, to Jesus who came among us as a child. May he enable all the beloved people of this country to work together, protecting one another, beginning with your families and communities, in building a world of justice, integrity and peace. May the Santo Niño continue to bless the Philippines and may he sustain the Christians of this great nation in their vocation to be witnesses and missionaries of the joy of the Gospel, in Asia and in the whole world.*