

Filipinos usher in Christmas with predawn Masses

Misa de gallo tradition begins on Dec 16 despite devastation brought by Typhoon Melor. Misa de gallo (Mass of the rooster), a predawn Mass that ushers in the Christmas season is onw of the most joyous and crowded celebrations in the Philippines.

Heavy rains and floods brought about by Typhoon Melor failed to dampen the spirits of Filipinos who flocked to churches around the country to attend the traditional Misa de gallo, (Mass of the rooster), or predawn Masses, that usher in Christmas in the Philippines.

"Nothing can stop us from attending Mass," said Arturo Manalang, a 55-year old farmer from the town of Porac in Pampanga province. He believes that if one completes all nine days of the Misa de Gallo and makes a wish as part of the prayers, it will come true.

At least nine people were killed and hundreds of thousands evacuated when floods from Typhoon Melor inundated villages and cities in the central and northern parts of the country, according to disaster officials.

Floods also brought Manila to a standstill Dec. 15, prompting schools to shut in the capital and nearby cities the following day.

"Many people will spend Christmas in evacuation centers without power and potable water," said Jonathan Baldo, a disaster official in Northern Samar province. He said it might take up to four months to restore electricity in some parts of the province.



Filipino tradition

The Misa de Gallo, which became a Filipino tradition after the arrival of Spanish colonizers 400 years ago, is a novena of Masses from Dec. 16 to Christmas Eve.

The celebration is held as early as 3 a.m. in several provinces. Pope Sixtus V ordered that the Mass be heard before sunrise because it used to be the harvest season in the Philippines, and farmers needed to be in the fields immediately after the celebration.

During the nine-day celebration Filipinos adorn their homes with star-shaped lanterns called "parol," which were believed to help parishioners before electricity was invented make their way to church in the early morning.

After Mass, Filipino families share rice cakes, pastries, and other delicacies and drink hot chocolate.

The Misa de gallo is "a tradition of Filipino Catholicism to thank God that the Philippines is a Catholic country," Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan, president of the bishops' conference, said.

The prelate said the practice is a cherished tradition that will "outlive all commercialism and secularism."

"Not even martial law curfew hours or World War II could stop it," Villegas said.

The Philippines has the longest Christmas celebration in the world.

The Christmas season officially begins in the Philippines with the start of the Misa de gallo and ends on the first Sunday of January on the feast of the Three Kings.

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