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Religious orders in Philippines rush to help typhoon victims

N.J. Viehland | Nov. 15, 2013
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Groups of religious women and men have mobilized their networks in the Philippines to help communities affected by the Super Typhoon Haiyan that hit the region Nov. 8.

The Vatican announced earlier this week it will donate $150,000 in emergency aid to the Philippines to be distributed through the local churches in regions most severely hit, helping people displaced or otherwise affected by flooding, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines said.

Caritas Manila, the church's lead social service agency in the country, also announced Monday it gave a total of 35 million pesos (approximately $803,000) in cash and goods to aid Haiyan survivors in nine dioceses and three archdioceses in the Visayas region.

A storm surge from the Philippine Sea that reached almost 20 feet, slammed parts of the Palo archdiocese on the region's Leyte Island, inundating villages and leaving them scattered with rubble, felled trees and posts, and scores of corpses.

Much of the relief efforts have been focused on Tacloban City, eastern Leyte, and neighboring Samar Island, where many of the deaths have been reported.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council on Thursday reported that 2,357 people died and 3,853 were injured, with 77 people missing. About 1.7 million families were reportedly affected in 43 provinces. President Benigno Aquino III has declared a state of national calamity.

By the end of this week, the slow delivery of aid was causing frustration for groups trying to help. Government officials, police and military troops are victims themselves, so local systems do not exist. Roads and bridges remained impassable, buildings that are being used are damaged and filthy from the flooding. Until Friday, airlines carrying supplies could not use the Tacloban airport at night.

On the western side of Leyte, far from the center of national and international attention, Haiyan damaged the buildings of various apostolates and novitiates that groups of religious men and women run.

Carmelite Fr. Ernesto Ombrog III, prior of Cebu and Ormoc Carmel Communities, told *NCR* the wind peeled roofs off his community's Spirituality Center and chapel on a hill in Milagro, Ormoc City. It left the interior soaking in water.

Even so, the community is saving repairs for later so it can pack relief packages for 150 families living around the retreat center. Most of the families rely on coconut and rice farming, and "even coconut trees have been knocked down, so they are helpless right now," he said.

Ombrog appealed to Lite Shipping Company, which agreed to transport containers of gasoline and packets of

canned goods, rice, dried fish, cooking oil, laundry and bath soap, medicine, vinegar and drinking water to the families.

"There is water there, but we are thinking of preventing diarrhea among babies," Ombrog said.

On Friday, he plans to go with members of his community and convent maintenance workers to areas where electricity has been cut off and cell phone signals do not reach.

"We want to respond right away to the need for food in remote areas because government and other agencies are focused on the Tacloban area. Some of the people had not eaten for days," Ombrog said.

Eventually, he said, the religious community may offer activities at its Spirituality Center to help local people relieve stress.

?Many people are depressed and fearful and we are thinking of how we can help them with that," he said

The Claretian novitiate compound, also in Ormoc, houses 12 novices and three priests. The novices include three from Myanmar, two from Sri Lanka, and one Vietnamese. One of the priests is also Vietnamese.

"We are royal squatters now," novice master Fr. Paulino Manila told *NCR*. Royal, because they still have the first floor, and squatters because they each sleep in whatever room is available, he explained.

At the peak of the typhoon, he said he made sure the men in his charge stayed clear of glass windows and doors, and stayed in the main building. After it was over, neighbors came by looking for roofing material the wind had scattered in the yard, and he help divide it up among them. He also opened up the building to young men who came at night to sleep because their houses were destroyed.

Claretians distributed dried fish to the neighboring communities and lent their vehicle to distribute 10 sacks of government rice among 600 families living around the novitiate.

Religious and diocesan clergy of Palo had not had the chance to contact each other about the situation of the archdiocese, he said.

In the same city, Religious of the Sacred Heart sisters live among former sugar hacienda worker families in Ormoc Workers Foundation almost 8 kilometers from the city center. People rushed to the community's chapel at the height of the storm because the parish church was destroyed by then.

The sister in charge of the center was on sabbatical leave and the one who was left is sick, so Sr. Sandra Clemente sailed to Ormoc from her base on Cebu island on Nov. 10 once ferry service resumed.

"There was no public transportation in Ormoc. Vehicles had to wait in long queues at gas stations, so tricycles (motorcycle cabs) wouldn't drive out to our center," Clemente told *NCR*.

There were still some "Good Samaritans,? she added, telling the story of a family who allowed her to use its tricycle for the day.

"Though their home was also destroyed and the roads were scattered with posts, he drove me as far as he could, and then we walked the rest of the way around one-third of a kilometer carrying vegetables and other food I could carry to the workers' center," Clemente said.

Along the way, she saw houses were torn down. "In our community, there were houses standing, but roofs had all been blown away, including the roof of our center, day care center and chapel," Clemente said.

"It was a pitiful sight, I wanted to cry, but the people were so happy to see that I made it there. So I told them I was going to get there by hook or by crook," she said.

"I was impressed with the people's (community spirit) and their creativity and resourcefulness,? she said. ?Because they had no water, I saw people had taken the fire hydrant seal apart and managed to get the water running so they could wash, bathe and drink there."

Now back in Cebu, Clemente plans to assess the needs of the workers' community and start work on rehabilitation. Meanwhile, the community needs food and supplies. "There's still no light, there's scarce goods in the stores," Clemente said.

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila has invited Filipino Catholics to a day of prayer and fasting on Saturday to express solidarity with people suffering because of this and other disasters that have affected the country.

He wants priests to take up a special collection at Masses for Haiyian survivors, directing them to "be prompt in remitting the special collections to the Treasury Department.? He asked them to review parish and school celebrations "in light of enormous suffering and needs of the victims and make necessary adjustments."

Meanwhile, Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo of Manila, chairman of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines national secretariat for social action, on has called for transparency in handling Haiyan aid funds donated through local and international church networks.

"We are calling on social action centers to follow our standard for reporting what we receive for the people" Pabillo said at the bishops' regular forum.

He urged the faithful to demand proper accounting from their parish and church leaders to achieve this transparency, adding that this should also apply to government and other donations through private groups and non-governmental organizations.

[N.J. Viehland is *NCR*?s correspondent in Asia.]

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