

## Filipinos cope with suffering, look for hope in wake of double disasters

N.J. Viehland | Nov. 19, 2013

Manila, Philippines

Those killed in and missing after an October earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan in November were remembered Saturday during a prayer service "to express communion and solidarity" with survivors of recent calamities in the country. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle led the service, which capped a "Day of Lament and Hope."

The service at Manila's Paco Church began with the procession of the crucifix. When he reached the front of the altar, Tagle dropped to his knees and lay face-down on the floor with his servers for some minutes of silence in the church.

"People are now suffering, grieving and confused," Tagle said in one reflection. People are even questioning God's plans after they endured successive calamities, he added.

The death toll in Typhoon Haiyan, which ravaged the central Philippines islands Nov. 8, has climbed to 3,976. The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council reported Monday that 18,175 were injured and 1,602 are still reported missing.

Just weeks earlier, on Oct. 15, a 7.2-magnitude quake rocked Bohol, southwest of Leyte, killing more than 200 people and demolishing buildings, including historic churches. Aftershocks continue.

Tagle urged people to "be the face of God and hope of others" who cannot see God's face in their deep and seemingly unending suffering.

"Be the voice of God," he said, and when people get exhausted and weak, "help them to stand again."

He reminded those grieving that though it seems God has forsaken them, Jesus, God's beloved, felt the same while dying on the cross.

"I believe that in Jesus' question to God and in his cry, he gives voice to all who are searching for God in history ... he gives voice to the whole body, the whole history, the whole creation," Tagle said.

He stressed that hope lies in Jesus: "In his heart was borne all of our suffering. Because he is Jesus, God listens. On the third day, he rose from the dead. There is an answer to prayer, to searching."

He reminded people that the church is Christ's body, and like a person's body, it cannot be well when one part of it is sick.

Collection baskets were passed to all, including nuns and religious.

"Please be generous," Tagle said, adding that the money will go to people who have lost everything they owned.

## **Tacloban's missionaries**

Among those in the pews were women from the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing and Missionaries of Charity, who lost property when Haiyan swept through Tacloban City, Leyte. Eleven people they were serving were also killed in the flood the typhoon triggered, members of the orders told *NCR*.

The Missionary Benedictine Sisters were managing Divine Word Hospital in the city and the Missionaries of Charity were running homes for children, elderly and sick. Tsunami-like waves that engulfed the city spared their buildings, but floodwaters and a power blackout did their share of ruin.

Several Benedictines were working in the 160-bed hospital when it ran out of supplies days after the flood, Mother Prioress Adelaida Ygrubai told *NCR*. Ten other sisters had joined them the day before the typhoon from the school community.

Ygrubai said she was in Tacloban over the weekend, where she watched doctors and nurses from emergency medical teams from Tagum in southern Philippines and from South Korea treat patients. She said they now do surgery as workers tidy up the mess left by the flood, and supplies come in more easily with the opening of Tacloban airport Friday.

A pregnant woman who had been to four hospitals impressed Ygrubai. "They turned her away because it was a breech, and she needed a caesarian section. They didn't want to touch it because they didn't have the resources, not even electricity, so she came to Divine Word Hospital and the surgeon from Tagum operated on her. I saw the baby -- so cute -- a girl."

However, the flood ruined lab equipment, so Ygrubai is looking to bring back a portable X-ray machine for safer surgeries.

The Missionary sisters, meanwhile, ran a home for the aged; a home for the sick, malnourished, abandoned and handicapped children; and a receiving and child care home in Tacloban and Palo. There are also contemplative Missionary sisters in the archdiocese.

The nine children and 22 adults in their care who survived the flood have been moved to the Immaculate Heart of Mary Home in neighboring Calbayog diocese in the Samar province, one of the sisters told *NCR*. The rest of the more than 30 children in the center went home to their relatives on the eve of the typhoon.

Women religious from Africa, France, India, Kenya and the Philippines will stay in the Samar home to help care for the displaced and the more than 50 residents for all Samar, including 34 children.

## **Dark moments**

"When the flood water suddenly rose, the sisters lifted the sick onto the tables," said Sr. Salma from Bangladesh. "Two adult patients drowned. The nuns saved toddlers by tying them to the grills of the windows."

Salma said when the flood receded, the sisters in Samar had no ride to Tacloban.

"We walked for about two hours to reach the center, carrying whatever we could bring. The houses were destroyed," Salma said.

At Divine Word Hospital, nine of the 159 patients confined when the typhoon struck died after a blackout cut off life-saving machines.

St. Scholastica's College and sisters' convent, meanwhile, were wrecked, and the convent dining room sink and table were stolen, along with school equipment. Nuns' personal belongings were also taken.

"All the looters left were the nuns' habits," Ygrubai said.

She recalled the chaos of the first week after Haiyan struck: "We were sending from Manila a lot of relief goods to Tacloban, but they couldn't pick them up from the airport. The only way to send then was to Ormoc [in west Leyte] through Cebu. In Cebu, we tried to send through C130 [Air Force] planes, but when it got to Tacloban airport, they got stolen or mislaid or whatever. So we decided to just keep [the supplies] in our sisters' community in Ormoc until we could pick them up."

Until Saturday, when the sisters received the goods from Ormoc, they lived on a diet of rice soup -- when they could get rice.

"They were laughing because the first shipment that we had from Cebu through the C130, the only things they got were the two boxes of injectables and two boxes of peanuts," Ygrubai said.

When Ygrubai went to Ormoc to get their supplies, "the two vehicles we got were without headlights. Coming back, by the time we reached Carigara [in north Leyte], it got so dark. The two drivers only had flashlights, so I offered to hold their flashlight. The sister in the back seat told me later she was quiet because she was praying very hard that we don't hit anybody."

## Hope

Ygrubai expressed gratitude that patients were returning, even though they weren't being admitted because the place was dirty.

"I'm a little bit overwhelmed," she said. "But we divided the work among ourselves."

Ygrubai will eventually have to rebuild the ruined convents and buildings, and the Benedictine community will meet to decide what to do with the school. She said they will also have to rebuild their community-based health program and feeding program for children.

Ygrubai said she is grateful for the generosity of others, including those who do not have much money to spare.

"One of our sisters came home one evening and handed me 200 pesos [\$4.60] her classmate gave her as donation. That touched me a lot. It might have been his lunch money or something. It means a lot," she said.

On Tuesday, Msgr. Rolando de la Cruz, parish priest of San Fernando de Dilao Parish in Paco, said the weekend's prayer service, holy hour collections, and contributions from parish finance council members raised approximately 100,000 pesos (\$2,300).

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