

Leyte – A Walk of Hope!



December 16-21, 2013 will always be the memorable time in my life and Leyte is another place on earth where I have encountered a real Jesus who incarnated in a suffering world.

I am so grateful to be part of this group of volunteers of the archdiocese of Cagayan de Oro to give a hand to the people in the hit areas by the typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in Leyte last November. We were a mixed group of around 120 volunteers, including lay and religious, youth and adults, men and women, students and professionals (doctors, nurses, engineers, etc.). We visited Archbishop John Du as soon as we arrived after a long trip. His house was heavily damaged. The Palo Cathedral was destroyed. Seeing around the whole areas, I realized that the government and especially the church in Leyte have a heavy task to do at this time, to build the churches and the lives of the people. In three days of being there, I had the privileged with the group to go to the isolated areas reached only by few organizations. As a team, we were divided into four specialty groups: psycho-social, medical, nutrition and relief goods. There was a separate group of WASH who took charge of sanitation.

Entering Leyte and especially the areas badly hit by the typhoon, I was amazed at the destruction. Passing through the highway and seeing the damage of the houses, the mountain of garbage everywhere, the fallen trees, etc., it seemed hopeless and lifeless.

However, it was not a totally death scene. In the midst of all these, I also saw new leaves flourish on the trees as a sign of hope and of the continuation of life, of the rising up again to rebuild their lives. And this belief was confirmed by the three days of encountering the people in different affected areas. Their amazing smiling faces assured me that life will continue and that they will rise again to rebuild, not only their houses, but a stronger community of faith in the Lord. And this is also the belief of the archbishop of Palo who told us that our presence there give hope to a brighter future because of what we, as Kagay-anons, had gone through and raised up after typhoon Sendong. It would be the same. They will rise up sometime in the future. And this belief give them strength and courage to carry on with their lives.



On the first day, our team stayed whole day in a big parish which has 17 barangays. There were so many people who came from afar to meet us. Since I was with the children for debriefing, I was aware of the number of children, around 200. On the second and the third day, we went to two areas, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The last day, we went to two poor areas in Dulag. In all of these parishes and barangays, I was amazed and deeply moved by the hospitality and the thirst of the people. I have received the great gift in this season of Christmas which is the joy of being with the people, of sharing with them tear and laughter, admit the difficulties and struggles they are facing. I felt that our presence there was just like a drop of water in the dried desert, but somehow it eased the pain and struggles that they are facing. Looking at and encountering faces of young and old, men and women with the smile in their faces who are mostly poor, even extremely poor, I felt a deep love for them, even though I had met them once and maybe only once in the lifetime. I thought my presence there would be the little gift of consolation for them. But I even realized that their presence was the greatest gift for me in this Christmas season. They did not give me anything, but a deep experience of a suffering Christ who enters and shares our sufferings. It was here that the faces of Jesus became so clear for me. It was here when I understood what does it mean when Jesus looks at his people and is moved with compassion for them (Matthew 14:14).



Being with the children, I enjoyed a lot. All the worries and concern about the lack of language and skill in accompaniment did not seem important to me anymore. Being with them was the most important. I felt so blessed to have them closely to me and talked to them simple things about their drawing. That was why Jesus loves children so much. In the midst of sufferings, they still trust. In the midst of poverty and lack of many things, they are happy and still enjoy simple things. And in the midst of all the devastation, they are the hope and life. And I think that maybe the way the parents look at them also.

However, I was able to have time not only to be with the children but adults as well. I noticed the faces of many old men and women who came to us. I encountered my mother and father in them and my heart ached when I looked at them. I saw the poverty, the hardship in each wrinkle in their faces, in the color of their skin, in the feet that had no slippers to wear, in the slowly steps they took. As I looked at them, I felt from within me a strong whisper, "Give them some food yourself!" I felt the desire to embrace, to hold tightly in my heart, to give my whole self to them only to take care of and to ease the hardship and struggle they are carrying. But I felt at the same time the helplessness in me. I found myself asking the Lord, what can I do to your people, Lord, with my littleness. It was not required of me to do great things for them. I can only offer my presence, smiling face to each one I encountered. And that was how the Lord came to me in this Christmas. Indeed it was the greatest gift of all. (Giang Thi Phuong Anh, ODN)

- See more at: <http://odnphilippines.org/archives/2292#sthash.qmOJ6s0o.m3DM2aSj.dpuf>