



NEWSLETTER- TACLOBAN MISSION

BANGON TACLOBAN! Tacloban Arise! From destruction.... to reconstruction after typhoon Yolanda

It is the hour for New Years greetings... and we offer you ours - the warmest and most sincere. Even if our Christmas and New Year celebrations were a wonderful time for the mission, we have focused this newsletter on what we experienced earlier in December during our mission trip to Tacloban. Having spent two weeks listening to people traumatised by this typhoon our team listened to over 600 people of all ages. This trip took us as far geographically as it took us into the deep, a dive into the human heart faced with the situation of a natural catastrophe.

November 8, 2013, one of the most powerful typhoons ever recorded ravaged many of the islands in the south west of the Philippines. Nearly 10 million inhabitants were affected many of whom were relocated as their homes were totally destroyed. Faced with the images of horror widely diffused by the media, national and international response was massive and immediate. The first job was to respond to the urgent basic needs: sanitation, food, potable water. Philippine and international forces are still providing these necessities to date. But another urgent problem arises for the weeks and months to come while the media will be focusing elsewhere: the reconstruction of the walls and the people: alive but in turmoil.

In the light of this drama, ACAY moved into action to reach out to the survivors. The youth have spent several weekends helping with the repacking of food and medicines for the associations who send the goods down to affected areas. Every traumatic experience has two faces: one visible and the other invisible, interior.... ACAY chose to go down in order to mend the inner wounds of the survivors by listening to the post traumatic symptoms as an official partner of the Department of Social Work and Development of the Philippines (DSWD). Even though many other NGO's focused on rebuilding houses, ACAY, who for the past 17 years has been helping youth and their parents to recover from their inner Yolanda's, chose to offer their help through listening. It is time to rebuild the houses but parallel to this the people themselves must not be forgotten. This is the field of expertise, so necessary in times of suffering, that we wanted to share.

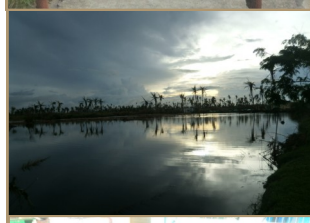
"One, two, three....House! One, two, three....Typhoon!" shouted out the staff in charge of training and formation from the DSWD during the day of formation the ACAY staff underwent before leaving for Tacloban about "Stress Debriefing", handling stress and the post traumatic symptoms associated with natural calamities . Using a very Filipino method – starting with a game, she wants to us to have an experience of the panic reflex: not having time to think, the switch to survival mode into which we are all propelled in emergency situations.

The reality of the situation on the ground proved her right. Based on what we have heard from the 400 or so we have already listened to, the last minute decisions of a person will either save them their lives or lose them.

ACAY arrived in Tacloban on the 5th of December after a 22 hour trip with two vans full of all sorts of things for our stay and that we brought for the people of Tacloban.

The sight of such desolation and total devastation was gripping as we arrived a month after the typhoon: the horizon was lined with innumerable tents situated between enormous piles of waste; there were clouds of smoke of burning rubbish ... The violence of these scenes was omnipresent: cars piled up on one another or upside down in back yards on or on top of the mountains of rubbish that lined the streets, sign boards written "SOS, we need your help". Bodies were still being found every day. If the cry of the exterior devastation is so loud in all the villages and streets, what about that of their hearts?





THE MISSION OF ACAY IN TACLOBAN

People have begun to rebuild. Day by day the streets are being cleaned, the piles of waste being burnt. Little by little life is taking its place once again. The statue of the Virgin of Cambodia accidentally fell into my suitcase before we left Manila, so she came with us attached to the backpack of Jack – the coordinator of this mission to Tacloban.



ACAY had three areas of intervention over the two weeks of mission:

- **In a public school - Rizal** (in partnership with the Ministry of Education), that had been transformed into an evacuation centre. We had sessions with children and parents.
- **In an evacuation centre run by the DSWD - Astrodome** – a centre situated on the water's edge where a fishing village had been reduced to ruins
- **In a village which carries the name of Sta Cruz** (Holy Cross) Gravely devastated due to its water front location. Very few organisations had been to help them when we started there. We worked in coordination with the worker from the local government of this village that normally lives from fishing and coconut products. The customary 'flexibility' – a trade mark of the ACAY team was present more than ever: up to us to adapt to the terrain. A terrain sometimes without buildings, without chairs, without electricity, empty....

IS LISTENING TO THE VICTIMS REALLY A NECESSITY?

First day, first encounter, first dialogue with a child "Sister, there were bodies everywhere here – the sea was sweeping them in..." one of them said, "Sister, Lisa has been getting money from the dead." another said to me pointing to one of the girls who was holding a handful of money, "Sister, I was so scared, I thought I was going to die...". The habit worn by the sisters immediately creates a feeling of security for the children. They naturally open up their experiences. **Death had become omnipresent in their lives. It is time to allow life to take its full place again.**

We listened to children, youth and adults. An appropriate methodology was used for each age group. For the teenagers and adults it was important for them to verbalise what they had experienced but for the children drawing and then telling a story based on their drawing was best.

The stories were dramatic. Many had preferred to play down the evacuation warnings of the government and stay at home – this being 'just another typhoon'. Entire families were wiped out by the tsunami that hadn't really been spoken of. A tsunami of three successive waves whose power wiped out everything along their passageway. Tears streamed down their faces, sobs which had been repressed surfaced carrying an array of feelings ranging from anger to guilt passing through sadness. The symptoms of trauma were apparent: with the least bit of rain, the least gust of strong wind, anguish surfaced. The children blocked their ears so as not to hear the wind or the thunder. **It is the first time after a whole month that they are able to speak about their suffering, about how troubled they were. They had had to be strong up to now. Some of them could not overcome the loss of a spouse or of one or several of their children or grandchildren. To be able to give words to their feelings and recognise them enables them to take some distance with the pain and find new strength.**

We prayed individually for those who wanted prayer asking for pacification of these symptoms. They all said that "they felt better, more peaceful". God consoles His people. Hearts were pacified; the outer reconstruction (rebuilding of houses) would go faster henceforth. Over the next few days we saw many new initiatives taken for rebuilding. For the children, drawing preceded the spoken word. As a conclusion to their process, they took their drawing and screwed it up into a ball to signify that Yolanda was over once and for all. The paper ball was then placed at the base of the icon of Mary. Some of the children cried in making this gesture, some sighed with relief, others crushed their paper angrily and pushing it down into the table.

THE MISSION IN STA CRUZ

As soon as we arrived, the person in-charge of the village indicated a place where we could build a shelter as a base for our activities in the village of Sta Cruz. Every day, the children ran to greet us with shouts of joy as soon as they saw our car coming along the road.

*The youth more discreet but just much in need of our attention recounted with great sadness that they all used to gather to play volleyball. Half of their group died in the typhoon. There was no more volley ball. The following day we went back with a volleyball net, two volleyballs that we had brought with us from Manila as well as some badminton sets, a basket ball and a hoop. From that day resounding laughter could be heard again throughout the village. The parents, consoled and surprised **"Sister, you have brought joy back to our village."***

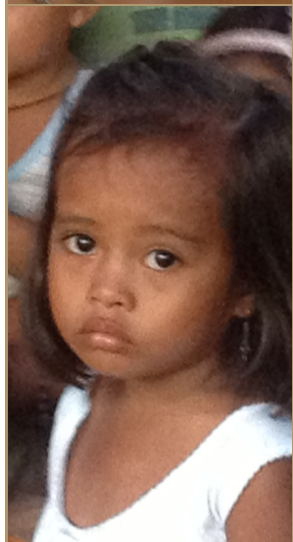
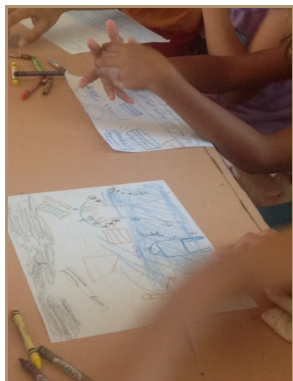
Having become aware of the various difficulties experienced by the people of the village, we diversified our services: parallel to the service of listening:

Sr Rachel went around the hospitals with several families for various different medical conditions, two heavily pregnant women for ultrasound, aware that they will give birth in the precarious conditions of their homes (tents at present!) to be sure that their babies were in a favourable position and to find medication for an epileptic child, infected wounds etc. Our connections helped. We contacted friends of ours who are Dr's from Manila who also helped us; Arthur together with the children cleaned the surroundings removing the glass and sharp plastic scattered all around, plastic bags scattered here and there...the area cleaned up, the ambiance lighter, hearts pacified, progressively the village came back to life and regained the strength to start from scratch. And everyone would need a lot of strength.

*We kept the gifts we brought on your behalf for the last day (food, toys, baby clothes etc) to ensure that the relationship between us and them would not be affected - **our primary objective being to build a relationship with them.** We want to build a long term relationship with these people. One of the children said to Sr Laetitia: "Sister, even if you don't have anything, come back...it is you we want." We concluded our stay in Sta Cruz with a Christmas party on the evening of the 16th Verna, one of the Social Workers of the MVP Second Chance Program had brought one of her friends along, a magician in his spare time, to give a magic show. Everyone loved it! This was followed with the favourite party food - pancit!*

Just then, I personally got a feel for the inner change that had taken place in the secret of their hearts. Suddenly the sky was over cast, it began to rain, and the thunder groaned, lightening flashed across the sky, and then it poured down and soaked everyone but everyone's laughter was louder still. I looked at the children who no longer blocked their ears, ignoring the rain for the laughter that united us all under the ACAY tent, squashed up together, laughing, and celebrating a little bit of Christmas in our Philippine crèche.

Sr Sophie of Jesus



TYPHOON YOLANDA RETOLD

This is from a sixteen year old youth from Sta Cruz who survived the typhoon.

"Typhoons have always been a part of lives.. .. On the evening of November 7th, we prepared ourselves for the coming of mega typhoon Yolanda. The local authorities went from house to house to warn everyone that the water would rise and that we need to evacuate. They wanted us to move to the big buildings situated further away. My parents decided that we would stay at home with our grandparents. Some sent their wives and children but because the men were afraid that people would come and steal from them, they stayed behind to watch over their houses, pigs, cocks, and fishponds.

On the 8th of November we woke at about 4 am with the strong winds. Our mother had made breakfast: rice, hot water for the coffee, and bread rolls, unfortunately we didn't have time to eat any of it. In an instant our roof flew away and the heavy rain was coming in – the drops so hard that they hurt our skin.

Then we heard someone screaming out, 'Water! The sea water is coming.'" Right then the water entered the house which was already without a roof and was up to our knees. Immediately I picked up my little sister, my little princess 5 years old and asked our parents if we could take refuge in the only 2 storied building in our village. But they wouldn't let us go saying that we needed to stay together. A lot of the people from the village were there – that is how they were saved – it was like Noah's ark for them.

When the water was up to my chest I asked my parents again if I could go with my little sister to the hall.. Again they asked me to obey..... then the first wave came, the water was as high as the coconut trees and flung us all into emptiness. Everyone was scattered and tried to save themselves however they could.

Swimming in the muddy water that had covered the whole village I couldn't see anyone. I prayed to God, calling out the names of Jesus and Mary not hoping for any other help than from Him... twice I thought the end had come, as the tree I was clinging to started to break but then I felt two hands push me upward and I was able to take a breath. When I cried out the name of Jesus, he saved me and gave me a second chance at life.

The water completely went back to the sea and us the survivors went to search for others still alive. Along the way we saw many dead bodies, our neighbours, our classmates and our teachers. We picked them up when the army arrived. We buried them in a common grave because the authorities were afraid that we would get sick if they were not buried quickly.

I only found my father and my older brother alive. My mother, my 5 year old sister, my grandparents and younger siblings were all swept away by the sea and died. Since that day, my father is always crying. he regrets not having saved his family. My little 5 year old sister had taken refuge in my arms but slipped away with the third wave. He can't stop thinking about this little life taken by the water never to be seen again. We didn't find anyone. We would have liked to have been able to give them a worthy burial.



My missionary work in Tacloban is inexpressible. It is really very difficult for me to express what I lived there. But I know that it has moulded within the depths of my being someone more loving, more compassionate, the ACAY charism has touched a multitude of people directly affected by this catastrophe. I am happy that as a social worker I was able to be part of this mission and to see the fruit of our work in the lives of so many people. Verna

*For me, I was with the children during the whole stay in Tacloban. I was very touched. After having lead session after session of debriefing about the trauma of the typhoon the children felt close to me. It was very enriching and touching to see how the village of Sta Cruz became attached to us as the days went by. **The joy they had lost had come back.** Within just a few days we were able to create a deep friendship with them. And this will go on... Jane*

*After spending a week with the "survivors" of typhoon Yolanda their courage to overcome this event also made us want to go beyond – **to live fully and to offer ourselves.** Once you have lost everything, like that 20 year old youth – his home, his parents, his two sisters and his nephew, you clutch on to what is essential and there you can see the presence of God in our lives.... presence that he saw in the birth of his son four days after the typhoon. Laurent*

I was very apprehensive as I took my flight down to Tacloban. I was afraid to be confronted with extreme suffering, apprehensive about the stories we were going to hear; to see with my own eyes the destruction that Yolanda had brought about the noises and odours that would be part of our daily life over the next few days. The professionalism of ACAY, the dynamism of each one, the team spirit that united us made the mission magnificent. The devastated landscape, the families that had been destroyed, the stories of children traumatised by what they had been through were slowly counterbalanced with shouts of joy during games with the children of Sta Cruz, with their smiling faces there to welcome us day after day, with the decoration of the Christmas Tree made with bits and pieces during our last evening. **Little by little life is taking its rightful place once again.** Hortense.

I have been extremely touched by this experience. The obvious devastation of what we were confronted with shocked us all. The violence of what happened must have been exceptional. I was equally touched by the human adventure that we lived in such a short time and the eternal capacity man has to get back up – if he wants and if he is helped to do so. ACAY gives a second chance to our young prisoners, to our girls who have been wounded by life and today to these victims of an incredibly powerful natural disaster. Man can get back up, we in ACAY believe this as we have seen it and having been two years with ACAY I also believe it and have made it my motto. Arthur.



SHORT STORIES...

***Jomar** was awaiting the typhoon at home with his family like many others who did not evacuate. About 5 am the wind picked up and was increasing in strength. Suddenly the huge wave burst into the house and they were stuck. Jomar quickly escaped thru an open window and clung to the coconut tree just beside their house, but it rapidly gave way and he was flung here and there by the waves. Slowly but surely he was losing strength and just when he thought he would die he saw his dog, Whiffy, swimming towards him against the current. Miraculously, Whiffy led him to where his mother had taken refuge (he bit the tee shirt of Jomar). Today Jomar is alive despite the cuts and bruises from the debris in the water.*

***Loisa**, a young woman from Tanauan lost her husband in the typhoon. They had stayed at home and he was swept away by the waves and died. His body hadn't yet been found. One night, her husband appeared to her in a dream and told her : You will find my body in this place. When she woke up, her dream was still fresh in her mind. She quickly got up and went to the place: a white duck was sitting there! She said to herself that it must have been only a dream. Then as she leant over she suddenly saw her husband's face. She was able to bury him and grieve more peacefully.*



Tacloban, the historical village to where the American General Mac Arthur returned towards the end of the Japanese invasion coining this famous phrase, "We shall return" which has been adopted by the ACAY team. We will go back and continue this mission with those who have henceforth become part of our lives.

We received a text message from the reference person from the village of Sta Cruz with whom we have kept in contact: "Jack, when I see the youth playing, singing and preparing to go and sing Christmas Carols to others, I ask myself if the typhoon actually happened. Your presence here transformed our village." Death, where is your victory? St Paul would say. Our dear Pope Francis resumes what we experienced:

"We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us...Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love." Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium

Yes, thanks to your help we will go back to Sta Cruz for as long as we can to continue our journey with them. For our next trip we plan to make a multi-faceted develop plan with our contacts there:

1. **Replanting of coconut trees:** the trees that survived lost all their branches and fruit. The local handicraft is based on coconuts which are now nonexistent. We will undertake this job of replanting.
2. **A sponsorship program:** with the help of a partner organization
3. **Envisage building a multipurpose hall:** with a partner organization we would like to look at the possibility of building a good quality structure where people could take refuge in time of storm and which could also serve as a place of formation and conference.

ACAY will help over a long term period.

AND ALSO..... RECONSTRUCTION! RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HOUSE OF AILYN AND ANALYN

ACAY also chose to help rebuild the house of the family of one of our staff completely destroyed during the typhoon. Immediately after Tacloban, Jack and Sr Sophie went to Kalibo to evaluate the damage. The house was destroyed and the family was living in the remains that were being held together with bits of this and that. Since her youth Analyn had been working to help her family to have a proper house. We were able to help finish the house so that the family could live in safety. All the necessary materials were purchased. Anayln and Ailyn covered the cost of labour.



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I will make a single donation of: _____

I would like to sponsor :

- ◇ A girl from the School of Life
- ◇ The School of Life Program
- ◇ The MVP Second Chance Program

To the amount of : \$..... Per month

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NEW ZEALAND

BANK: Westpac, Shirley Branch
ACC NAME: ACAY
ACC NUMBER: 03 1700 0283720 025

PHILIPPINES

BANK: BPI (Bank of the Philippine Islands)
ACC NAME: ACAY
ACC NUMBER: 8081-0000-78
Type: Checking account
Branch: BPI-JP Rizal Branch
Address: JP Rizal Street, Balanga City, 2100 Bataan
SWIFT CODE: BOPI PHMM
ROUTING NUMBER: BOPI US 33

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