



Franciscan Br. Christopher Villanueva of the Philippines in front of one of his artworks (Courtesy of Order of Friars Minor)



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August 13, 2024

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On May 23, 2017, what would be known as the [Siege of Marawi](#) erupted between the Philippine government forces, and the Maute and Abu Sayyaf groups affiliated with the Islamic State group.

Br. Christopher Villanueva, a Franciscan friar, joined other volunteers in a relief mission trip to Lanao del Norte, where evacuees sought refuge.

Marawi is a Islamic city in Lanao del Sur more than 1,200 kilometers southeast of Manila. Lanao del Norte is a neighboring province.

The battle was not completely over yet, but most of the city was already under the control of the government again, and volunteers were arriving.

"We visited areas affected by the fighting," Villanueva said. "We could still hear the bombings in the distance while doing the art therapy workshops for the children."

The children articulated in their drawings what the war brought into their lives, quelling out the terror on a piece of paper, and sharing their hopes for a peaceful and brighter future.

Most of the children drew their houses in Marawi, reflecting their yearning for home and a chance to rebuild their lives in their city.



Franciscan Br. Christopher Villanueva at an evacuation site with children displaced by the Siege of Marawi in the Philippines (Courtesy of Order of Friars Minor)

Villanueva and his team of volunteers encouraged the participants in the art therapy workshops to share their war experiences so they could be relieved of their fear and despair.

The children also sang and danced as part of the art therapy workshops.

The activities saw smiles on the faces of the children again at the evacuation site, while their city was reduced to rubble. The government [employed air strikes](#) to deal with the heavily armed Islamic secessionists.

Villanueva also trained Muslim mothers at the evacuation site on how to conduct art therapy workshops for children. He hoped the therapy would continue as recovery might be a long process.

"There were many areas affected by the war," he said. "Many people were traumatized, children especially."

Aside from art therapy workshops, Villanueva and fellow Franciscan friars brought relief goods for the evacuees.

The battle [displaced](#) more than 300,000 people. Some 87 civilians died — of the total, [40 died due to illness](#) during the five months of fighting. Some [160 soldiers](#) and 802 Islamic militants [were killed](#).

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The fighting ended with the Philippine government's victory, preventing an attempt of the Islamic State group to establish a provincial territory in Marawi. But the Islamic State insurgency still [continues](#) in the southern Philippines.

"I was about to leave for Rome for a mission at that time," Villanueva said. "But before I did, I decided to volunteer to give art therapy workshops and train other volunteers on how to conduct the same for children."

Before the Marawi conflict, Villanueva had also conducted art therapy workshops for children whose fathers were Abu Sayyaf members and died in the [fighting in Basilan](#), an island province in southern Philippines.

"We went there in 2016," he said. "We were invited by a doctor in Basilan who is a peace advocate. The children were living with their surviving mothers, some with relatives."

The conflict in Basilan included a series of clashes between the government forces, and mainly the Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah militant groups.



Franciscan Br. Christopher Villanueva leads an art therapy workshop with Muslim children whose fathers were members of Abu Sayyaf and died in the fighting in Basilan, the Philippines. (Courtesy of Order of Friars Minor)

Villanueva also shared his talent in arts when he conducted art therapy workshops for children who survived Typhoon Yolanda (internationally known as [Typhoon Haiyan](#)).

The super typhoon claimed the lives of more than [6,300 people](#) and left more than 1,000 missing in central Philippines in 2013.

Villanueva witnessed how traumatic the experience was for the children who survived the typhoon. They were painfully broken and still terrified even days after the calamity.

"Every time it rained, or just drizzled, the kids got scared and cried that it could be another destructive and deadly typhoon," he said.

The super typhoon left the biggest damage in the history of the country, with an estimated [cost of nearly \\$3 billion](#).

Due to a shortage of food and water after the typhoon, the survivors were forced to loot shopping centers, convenience stores and fast-food chain outlets in Tacloban, a highly urbanized city in central Philippines and itself devastated by the typhoon.

Aside from art therapy workshops in war-torn and disaster-stricken areas, Villanueva also joins art exhibits to help raise funds for calamity survivors in rebuilding their lives and homes.



Franciscan Br. Christopher Villanueva works on a large painting. (Courtesy of Order of Friars Minor)

He was part of an art show in January 2022 to generate funds for the victims of Typhoon Odette (internationally known as [Typhoon Rai](#)) in Surigao, a city on the

northeastern island of Mindanao that sustained massive damage in December 2021.

Also in 2022, Villanueva joined an exhibit in Davao, a city in Mindanao, to raise funds for building a nursing home for retired Franciscan friars.

Villanueva honors ordinary people of different vocations for their hard work for their family.

In August 2022, he joined the "Everyday Heroes" physical exhibit in Manila. The entries from different artists included paintings of a tailor, a fisherman, a shoe repairman, a security guard, a farmer, and other vocations of ordinary people.

Villanueva said these people help build the society with their respective vocations in life, and that they are also heroes in that sense.

The friar also views art as not only about celebration of beauty, but also a medium to communicate the issues confronting members of society, especially the many living on its margins.

During the pandemic, he got infected with COVID-19 and had to isolate himself in the Franciscan community in Kidapawan, a component city in the province of Cotabato.

Villanueva used his time inside the community to harness his talent in coping with the depressing situation.



"Pista sa Sugbo, Bai!" ("Fiesta in Sugbo, Friend!"), 20"x24" acrylic on canvas by Franciscan Br. Christopher Villanueva, 2022 (Courtesy of Order of Friars Minor)



"Birhen ng Barangay Franciscano" ("Virgin of Franciscan Village"), 40"x55"
acrylic on canvas by Franciscan Br. Christopher Villanueva, 2022 (Courtesy of
Order of Friars Minor)



"Pasko ng Pamilyang Pilipino" ("Christmas of Filipino Family") 8"x 11.5" ink on paper by Franciscan Br. Christopher Villanueva, 2021 (Courtesy of Order of Friars Minor)



"Family Blessing" 20"x28" acrylic on canvas by Franciscan Br. Christopher Villanueva, 2022 (Courtesy of Order of Friars Minor)

When [Art Show Philippines](#), a group of Filipino artists with a platform for online exhibits, called for submissions, he painted and sent his entries.

He had been painting, but it was the first time he joined an art exhibit, and it was an online show.

His artworks were sold online. He continued joining the group's online art shows, until the government allowed physical exhibits at the end of the pandemic. He sold more pieces at the exhibits.

Villanueva was one of Art Show Philippines' best-selling artists for three consecutive years from 2021 to 2024.

Aside from art exhibits, art aficionados commission him to paint. The proceeds from his commissioned pieces are used in his ministry in war- and calamity-stricken

areas, especially in the conduct of art workshops as part of debriefing children from the stressful experience.

Outside armed conflict and disaster areas, he wishes to inspire people with his artworks at exhibits. He hopes his paintings somehow bring relief to people who struggle in life.

Villanueva even shares his artworks on social media to invite people to appreciate beauty and renew and strengthen their faith.

"I use my God-given talent in evangelization and in bringing people closer to faith," he said. "I hope through my artworks I can touch people's lives and inspire them to keep the faith despite the challenges they face."