Columns
Religious Life



Verbum Dei Missionary Sr. Luisa Mesina, second from left, with the people of Guiuan, Eastern Samar, in the Philippines, after the devastation of the super typhoon of November 2013. (Courtesy of Luisa Mesina)



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It was in November 2013 when a super typhoon completely devastated Guiuan, a town in the province of Eastern Samar in the Philippines. I remember the experience as if it happened yesterday. I traveled there a week after the storm, together with two fellow Verbum Dei missionaries. It took a lot of courage and love for God's people to go to a place that had been destroyed!

We went to distribute goods and financial assistance we had raised. The storm had wiped out houses and buildings. Coconut trees were knocked down, plants uprooted, fishing farms swept away, fishing boats reduced to pieces. Churches were shattered. House furniture had become rubbish piled up in the streets. The supply of water was very scarce. It was like an apocalyptic scene.

People were staying in evacuation centers. We listened to the painful stories of our brothers and sisters, many of whom wept as they shared about losing beloved family members, as well as houses, vehicles, clothing and other possessions they had worked for over many years. I can still clearly recall the sadness, shock and suffering etched in the faces of the people in Guiuan.

Despite all these heartbreaking losses and destruction, a unique experience was given to us: Mass was celebrated beneath a canopy tent. Many people participated, sitting on the ground. It struck me deeply to see them praying so earnestly — certainly groaning to the God of hope and strength. They needed him to sustain them in their poverty and in their mourning for their losses.

I was filled with compassion for them. I groaned to God with them. I cried out: "Help them, Lord! Sustain their hope. Provide for them!"

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Then the celebrant raised the bread and the chalice and said:

> Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my body, which will be given up for you.
>
> Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for

you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

The celebrant raised Christ himself. Christ, our Savior, was raised! And with him came hope, light, strength, faith, consolation and love — blessings poured out on the Earth and us.

I knew then that God's presence there wasn't only a theological assurance — it was personal and real.

During the Eucharistic Prayer we were asked to lift up your hearts. We responded, "We lift them up to the Lord." But at that moment I felt how heavy my heart was. It was overwhelmed by the cries, sadness, pains and sufferings of the people.

I realized, then, that God was inviting me to carry those pains and sufferings with him. Alone, I would have been overwhelmed. But we are not meant to carry our crosses alone — we carry them together. That dialogue with Jesus sustained my heavy heart and drew me into a deeper communion with him.

The experience of starting from nothing — of being surrounded by devastation — could only be sustained by God who gives himself to his people. But I felt accompanied by Jesus in the Eucharist. His presence sustained me in my missionary self-giving to the people. I had been feeling helpless because of the devastation that I was witnessing. But Jesus in the Eucharist became a visible and tangible expression of his promise: "I am with you always till the end of time." He was there. He was with us in our suffering.



A woman sits in the shade alongside a broken angel statue near the destroyed cathedral in the typhoon-devastated waterfront town of Guiuan, Philippines, Nov. 19, 2013. (CNS/Reuters/Wolfgang Rattay)

The sense of helplessness and poverty led us to treasure even more the presence of God-who-is-with-us. Deep within me, I felt an inner strength that was not mine. It came from him. That strength sustained me — and others — to bear with patience and hope the effects of the super typhoon. He gave me courage to accompany the people in their suffering.

I knew, deep within, that God is ever present and committed to sustaining not only the people of Guiuan, but all creation, through his abundant self-giving in the Eucharist, across the world. This filled me with hope and strength. I knew that no matter how crushing or sorrowful our human circumstances, no matter the heartbreak, injustice, war, corruption, violence, human trafficking, poverty or abuse

— we are not alone.

Serving people who lost everything to a typhoon, I learned that Christ never abandons us. He is with us as he promised in Matthew 28:20: "I am with you always to the very end of the age." His self-giving sustains us through every situation we face. We are never alone. He strengthens us and accompanies us.

That moment became a light for my path as I live the mission. Now, I continue to share the word of God and accompany others as they grow in their faith. I live the mission because Jesus sustains me.