



Antonio J. Ledesma, S.J.
Archbishop of Cagayan de Oro

Christmas is a time of rejoicing. But this year in Cagayan de Oro we mourn and express our condolence for all those who have perished in the wake of Typhoon Sendong on Dec. 16-17. In some places entire families have been washed away by the rampaging waters of Cagayan de Oro River. Others died in their sleep trapped inside their homes by the sudden rise of flood waters that reached unprecedented levels past midnight.

There are accounts of how a mother clutching the hands of two children was able to escape from the floods, only to lose another child whose pleas for help could be heard receding in the darkness of the night. Another family was able to hold on to an uprooted balete tree that floated out into Macajalar Bay and reached the shores of Camiguin Island. Floating bodies have been retrieved from the waters of nearby towns. The low-lying communities of Cala-Cala and Isla de Oro have been leveled by a tsunami-like river surge.

Practically everyone in the city has lost some relatives or personal friends in this calamity. Schools have lost some students and staff; officemates have not reported because of the condition of their homes; and a number of unidentified bodies still await a dignified burial in a common resting place.

In some of our churches, the Misa de Gallo could not be celebrated because the church became a refuge for families seeking higher ground. In one chapel, even pigs and other animals were brought in and tied at the foot of the altar. Lay ministers were scandalized until the parish priest reminded them that this must have been the same situation in the stable of that first Christmas night. We have also started to celebrate the Misa de Gallo in the evacuation centers.

Even as we grieve with those directly affected by this tragedy, the challenge for us now is to help re-build the lives and broken homes of the survivors. The evacuation centers are slowly being organized in the distribution of relief goods – in particular, water, food, medicine, mats, blankets, etc.

We are heartened to see many volunteers and organizations coming forward to share their time, energy and resources. Our affected parishes and social action workers have collaborated with government agencies in running these centers in the City Central School, West City Central School, Macasandig, Bulua, Kauswagan, Iponan, etc. The 14 centers have been providing shelter and basic needs to more than 7,000 families and 43,000 individuals. Meanwhile, the listed number of dead and missing has reached nearly 700 persons.

The longer-term challenge is to help these families re-build their present homes or re-locate to safer grounds. We are heartened by the visit of President Aquino and other public officials. His declaration of a state of national calamity and observation that families should not be allowed to return to extremely dangerous areas are welcome statements. Last January 2009, the city had already experienced severe flooding. Some old-time residents recalled that this phenomenon happens every forty years. But barely three years after that, Typhoon Sendong came with greater vengeance.

We have to cast a broader look at the entire river basin area of Cagayan de Oro River. This extends to the northwestern part of Bukidnon and surrounding areas. Illegal logging and irresponsible mining activities have contributed to the degradation of the environment and the siltation of the river bed. The erection of man-made structures may have also impeded the natural flow of the waters. (The continued hydraulic flush mining along Iponan River has likewise caused widespread flooding of the Canitoan-Iponan areas of the city.) It is for these reasons that we have to strengthen the Cagayan de Oro River Basin Management Council, a multi-sectoral effort to protect and conserve our most precious natural resource after our human resources – the river system.

As we approach Christmas week and the coming of the new year, may I propose a Family-Adopt-a-Family program. Families unaffected by the flood can invite to their homes an evacuee family, especially those that have lost their homes or loved ones, for a few days or for a Christmas meal to share the spirit of the season. May the new-born child in the manger fill us with the spirit of solidarity in moments of adversity and hope in the sharing of love and life with one another. "Make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart" (Ps. 90).

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