

Missions amid Natural Calamities

Good afternoon, Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am privileged to share stories from the Asian context that hopefully bring hope and strengthen our faith as religious missionaries. We work in areas where frequent natural disasters have become almost a daily occurrence. When Fr. John Paul Hermann, SVD, the Director of SEDOS, asked me to share stories, I felt



overwhelmed considering the varied realities of the 48 Asian countries with their blessings and challenges.

While on the

Congregational Leadership Team, I visited Sisters living in disaster-prone countries such as Japan, the Philippines, and Indonesia and heard their heart-touching stories.

I want to share with you the experience of Sr. Ursula Bura Bukan from Flores, Indonesia, and Sr. Leoncia Pregunta from Cebu, Philippines. They both faced natural disasters and were involved in helping the affected people. They understood well how these realities influenced their faith and life as missionaries.

The Philippines and Indonesia are two archipelagos located in the restless seas, and they are both familiar with the devastation caused by typhoons and earthquakes. The Philippines experiences around 20 typhoons yearly, making it a typhoon-prone country. On the other hand, Indonesia is home to approximately 400 volcanoes, with around 127 active - a third of all the world's active volcanoes. As a result, Indonesia is one of the most geologically active regions globally.

An eruption occurred recently in Lewotobi in Flores, Indonesia, forcing people to leave their places, houses, rice paddies fields, other cash crops, and livestock, and helplessly witnessed them gradually being engulfed by hot lava.

During this eruption of Lewotobi, Sr. Ursula reported that various groups in society, including the government and NGOs, set up camps to accommodate victims and facilitate aid distribution. The SSpS sisters collaborate primarily with the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) in such disaster situations because of our shared spirituality and charism. We must establish a sense of connection and belonging with each other while helping the victims. This togetherness strengthens, relieves, uplifts our hearts and fosters a spirit of bond needed to continue the services. Similarly, we work with other like-minded lay groups. Together, we search for those primarily affected by disasters and those who cannot be reached by vehicles due to damaged roads. We often walk for hours, braving the sun, rain, and wind, and sometimes even the fear of being caught in a disaster. The sense of togetherness, belonging and social responsibility grows in us as we uplift those in need.

In the aftermath of the Eruption, generosity flows.

In the face of our inconvenience and limited funds, such as during Typhoon Odette in Cebu and the Lewotobi eruption in January 2024, people showed generosity and care towards their suffering neighbours. They didn't just feel pity and pray for the victims but took meaningful action by providing financial and in-kind donations.

Sr. Leoncia Pregunta, SSpS, who experienced the strongest typhoon, witnessed the immediate contributions of various groups of people and colleagues from Cebu and Manila. Similarly, Sr. Ursula received aid from generous people who could not reach the victims entrusted the sisters to distribute the donations to the sufferers. The

Sisters and volunteers directly gave the aid to the victims.

The solidarity and humanity of the people both in the Philippines and Indonesia are high. The sisters were not alone in their struggles but were joined and assisted by many who generously shared their time, energy, and goods with their fellow brothers and sisters in times of difficulty.

Being first, then doing

Both Sisters said their first call is to "be" before "do". Our Missionary presence resonates with love, solidarity, and compassion.

In times of natural calamities, our hearts beat for those who suffer. We stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, feeling their pain as if it were our own. Our empathy binds us together, transcending boundaries of distance and difference.

In these moments of crisis, our mission takes on a sacred urgency. We are called to offer aid and assistance and to be a source of comfort, hope, and strength. Our presence serves as a beacon of light amidst the darkness of despair.

We walk alongside those who have lost their homes, loved ones, and livelihoods. We offer material support, the solace of companionship, and the assurance of God's unwavering love. We listen to their stories, share their grief, and stand by their side.

Experience of God's presence

Sr. Ursula Bura, SSpS, experienced that God was with her and her group, guiding them and giving them the strength to persevere. They were convinced God was there with those scared, traumatized, and alone in the darkness. Electricity and telecommunications facilities were down for almost a month.

Amidst the chaos and despair, Sr. Ursula felt a profound sense of God's presence. It wasn't in the raging lava or the smoky skies but rather in the resilience and strength of the survivors. As she and the sisters worked alongside local relief efforts, providing aid and comfort to those affected, they witnessed countless acts of courage and kindness.

In the eyes of the victims, Sr. Ursula saw the reflection of God's grace. Despite losing their homes, livelihoods, and sometimes even loved ones, they clung to hope and faith. The warm welcome of the disaster victims touched Sr.

Ursula. In their sharing, they expressed having been comforted and strengthened by the presence of Sr. Ursula and her group. They said, "When we saw the missionaries arrive in our village, we felt like God was visiting us." The Sisters saw inner joy radiating from the faces of the victims. They were still able to laugh and make fun of their limited situations. The happiness they felt was not because they were given goods or money but because of their experience of feeling equal as human beings, all loved by God, both in good and harmful situations.

In 2009, I, myself was at the eruption of another volcano called Rokatenda in Palue, Flores. I assisted the victims of this natural disaster and was amazed by the resilience of the human spirit and the power of faith that helped them through the darkest times. The selfless acts of service and the outpouring of compassion demonstrated by those around me made me feel God's presence more profoundly than ever. These remarkable individuals taught me the importance of faith, hope, and love in difficult times. As I continue to serve on my mission, I always remember these lessons and am reminded that God's presence is not limited to the walls of a church but is present in the hearts of those who suffer and those who serve.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we continue our mission of bringing hope and assistance to those affected by calamities, let us do so with hearts full of faith. Let us be instruments of God's love and mercy, offering solace to the suffering and bringing light to the world's darkest corners.

May our gathering today serve as a source of encouragement and renewal for all of us as we recommit ourselves to the service of others and the proclamation of the Gospel message. May our mission always reflect the heart of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve and who calls us to do likewise with humility, generosity, and boundless love.