

Canadian aid gives new life to Philippines typhoon survivors

Six years after the devastation of Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda), the people of Tacloban, Philippines, are starting a new life thanks to Development and Peace – Caritas Canada.

A small Canadian delegation visited the city Feb. 10 to celebrate the inauguration of Pope Francis Village, a new housing compound for 566 survivor-families who lost their livelihood from the typhoon. The village also includes a small business area, a school and a chapel at the centre of the property.

Development and Peace (D&P), in partnership with Caritas Philippines and other local partners, formally presented 263 land titles to victims and their families. Bishop Noël Simard from Valleyfield, Que., also led a ceremonial blessing of the homes.

“For us, it was amazing and an eyeopener to see the result of close to six years of work,” said Evelyne Beaudoin, president of the Development and Peace National Council.

One of the new residents of Pope Francis Village is a fisherman who lived in a makeshift home on the shore with 22 other family members prior to the storm. Days before Typhoon Haiyan, he heard minimal reports about the storm that was coming. Typhoons are a regular occurrence during that time of the year. He only had time to grab two of his younger children when the water hit, one child under each arm. They were the only family members who survived.

The Category 5 super typhoon hit on Nov. 8, 2013, claiming more than 6,200 lives and destroying much of the city of Tacloban. When it struck, D&P sprung into action. In addition to supporting humanitarian aid after the disaster, the organization quickly dispatched the organization’s Asian program officer, Jess Agustin, to set up a temporary office in the city. D&P was going to be there for both the short and the long haul, said Beaudoin.

D&P raised more than \$12.8 million through a joint emergency appeal with the Canadian bishops, most of it eligible for matching by the Canadian government. The organization also received a \$2.3-million federal grant for a joint project with its United States’ counterpart, Catholic Relief Services.

“We pulled together resources that we already had in the Philippines, because we’ve been working in the Philippines for many, many years,” said Beaudoin.

D&P program officer Agustin co-ordinated with Caritas Philippines, Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service to distribute aid and build 1,500 temporary homes. But with more than 900,000 families displaced by the storm,

Beaudoin said they knew they had to look at a more long-term solution.

“We asked our long-time partner Urban Poor Associates to come and help communities defend their land rights against government evictions and remain near the city where they make their livelihoods,” said Beaudoin.

After two years working with the Philippines government, D&P and its partners purchased a 12-hectare property in January 2015, just five kilometres away from the city. The property would be called Pope Francis Village in commemoration of his papal visit to the city, where he held a Mass for 30,000 people in front of the airport.

Before construction began in August, Agustin facilitated the formation of Pope Francis Village Home Owners Association, which became involved in every step of the development. Residents were trained in construction, housing management, first aid, finance and advocacy.

“They also set up a new cinderblock factory and these cinderblocks are now renowned in the Philippines as the most solid, high-quality cinderblocks,” said Beaudoin.

Providing help to the typhoon victims is not enough to make lasting change in their lives, she said. It is important that the community becomes the protagonists of their own change, and the success of Pope Francis Village is a model of that.

During inauguration day, Beaudoin and five other delegates visited various homes in the village. In one home, a grandmother was sitting on the floor with her three small grandchildren while the mother was cooking in the kitchen and the father was chatting with some neighbours outside.

“To see the peaceful and loving atmosphere in this home, that was very touching for us,” said Beaudoin. “It was a sign of the success of Pope Francis Village, because that was one of the very dear hopes of Canadians and Development and Peace, to bring peace to these people who suffered so much.”

Sister Georgette Gregory, congregational leader of the Sisters of St. Joseph – Toronto, was also part of the delegation that visited Pope Francis Village. She met a young woman who was eight months pregnant with her seventh child when the storm hit. She had her two-year-old son in her arms when the tsunami swept their small home. She thought she and her two children were the only ones to survive until she was reunited with her husband and five other children a year and a half later.

“It was their second chance at life and they’re grabbing it and working with it. I was very impressed and very moved by the whole day,” Sister Georgette said.

Construction at Pope Francis Village continues as business areas and a chapel

at the centre of the compound are being finished. About 40 houses are set to be finished by June.

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