

Filipino nun brings hope to disaster-scarred communities

Sister Betsy Espana and her team are providing much-needed psychological help to people displaced by Marawi crisis

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Young Muslim girls, heads covered with scarves, run toward a lady in a brown habit who has just arrived in a refugee camp outside the besieged city of Marawi in the southern Philippines.

For two months now, Sister Betsy Espana has brought food aid to displaced families, some of the almost 400,000 people affected by armed clashes between government troops and terrorist gunmen.

The nun from Our Lady of Triumph of the Cross congregation said she wants to perform her mission "out of the spotlight," saying that she is there with the people "to serve them."

Sister Betsy heads a team of food aid providers from Iligan Diocese, but she says her team does not just provide something to eat.

"We aim to give them back their dignity and make them feel that they are not alone in this problem," she told ucanews.com.

For the Muslims, Sister Betsy's presence is "too difficult not to notice."

One of the nurses at the evacuation center said the nun "makes us forget that we have problems."

Arracmah Lumabao, a 23-year-old Muslim nurse whose four siblings are still missing in Marawi, said she finds hope "whenever Sister Betsy plays with the children."

"She treats them as her younger siblings. I see myself and my siblings in her and those children," said Arracmah.

The nun gives Arracmah hope "that there are good people like Sister Betsy who may be taking care of my siblings despite our differences in faith."

Sister Betsy is not new to working with communities and providing a humanitarian response to disaster-scarred communities in Mindanao.

She entered the convent in 1999 and took her perpetual vows as a religious in 2008.

The nun was assigned to the city of Iligan in 2015 to organize a community that was displaced by a strong typhoon in 2011 that left at least 2,000 people dead.

"The congregation saw the need to establish a venue for values formation in relocation sites," said the nun who worked in a relocation site that accommodates close to 300 families.

She said, "the church is there to build a community" out of the different cultures and people at the site.

James Degumbes, a resident of the relocation site the nun is assigned to, described Sister Betsy as "a mediator" in disputes among residents.

"People come to her for advise or if someone needs help," said James.

The nun said, "that's how mercy works ... by paying it forward."

"If we show mercy to people, they will give the same mercy that they received to others," she said.

She said James and the other people like him were once in need. They are now working with the nun to help displaced Muslims from Marawi.

Father Albert Mendez, social action director of Iligan Diocese, said the help of nuns like Sister Betsy and her volunteers address the "great challenge" of a lack of manpower at evacuation sites.

The priest said the nuns are "key players" in the church's humanitarian work.

"They are the first responders," said Father Albert.

"Our nuns and the people from their communities are the veins that let mercy and compassion flow and live," said the priest.

Sister Betsy admits that there is still "a long way to go" before the displaced communities of Marawi can recover.

"We are actually preparing for the worst when aid from organizations starts to diminish," she said.

The nun says her duty is "to keep their spirit alive" and to "act as source of joy and optimism" to the thousands of families who are "in pain but still manage to laugh."

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