

**Fr Ivo's story**

***"Everybody has their own story about the day Typhoon Yolanda hit the Philippines."***  
**Fr Ivo**

**Note: Typhoon Yolanda is also called Typhoon Haiyan**



***"I prayed at the top of my voice, shouting the Lord's Prayer until I couldn't hear my own voice over the wind."***  
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**Film:** [cafod.org.uk/confirmation](http://cafod.org.uk/confirmation)



Everybody has his own story about the day Typhoon Yolanda hit the Philippines. I am in charge of the high school at Sacred Heart seminary in Palo – one of the worst hit towns – and I woke up very early, so I could check the school building.

By 5 o'clock in the morning things were already getting ugly. But the worst was at 7 o'clock, when the power went off. The wind was coming full force. By then I was hiding in a small cupboard we use for sports equipment, on the second floor of the school. I was leaning against the walls, and I could feel them shaking as if there was an earthquake.

Occasionally I would go out of the cupboard, but there was not much to see. Everything was white because of the sea water. I was debating whether it would be a good idea to run towards another building, but then a piece of roofing flew upstairs. It blocked my path, so I ran back to the cupboard and closed the door.

I started to pray, holding onto a beam with one hand and holding my rosary in the other. From where I was hiding, I could see a small image of the Virgin on the wall. I prayed at the top of my voice, shouting the Lord's Prayer until I couldn't hear my own voice over the wind. I prayed until the sound was unbearable, and then I just shouted, "Stop it! Stop it!"

Then the third floor was blown away, so torrents of water came falling on me. There was no roof above my head, only the stairs. Water rose fast, up to my knees, within 30 seconds.

All of us in Leyte are quite accustomed to storms, but this was something new. I thought that I might not get out of this alive. I think for me that was the bravest moment of my life, accepting the possibility that I might actually die.

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was happening?  
God was by my  
side."**

**Fr Ivo**

I found a picture of John Paul II floating in the water. I started praying also to John Paul II. I was thinking of many people at that time, and it suddenly dawned on me – I have the obligation to survive. I need to survive.

I lost track of time. The wind wasn't just whistling, it was screaming at my ears. It was like having more than 20 trains passing above you. It lasted the whole morning. Now I know what eternity feels like. It was terrible. When I came out, I realised that Palo was utterly destroyed. My first impression was that it was like a scene out of a movie. It was surreal. We didn't even recognise familiar landmarks. All of us were walking around in shock.

It's really strange to realise that you're a survivor. It's terrible, but it's an experience, something I thank God for. We had survived the biggest storm in the world. We knew we must not get into another big storm – despair.

What we did was make ourselves busy. The government could not do much. The Church was the one to really move. People came streaming to our churches and to our centres, for food, for water, for shelter.

This was an experience not only of disaster, but also of faith. Of how close God was to each of us. Perhaps many people would say, "Where was God when this was happening?" There was no question of where God was. God was by my side. He was with each of us during that time.

Some people might ask, "Why did God permit this catastrophe to strike this particular region, this place?" Only God knows, in his wisdom. It was perhaps because we were the ones who could most buffer the shock. Of course we were weakened, we were pained, but perhaps God permitted it to happen because we are a strong people. Our faith makes us strong. Our hope makes us strong.

My message to people in Britain, and particularly those who have supported UK charity CAFOD, is that we are thankful. We are thankful for the material help you have been sending us. We needed food, we needed water, we needed the basic necessities. But just as importantly, we needed your prayers.

We are only victims up to a certain point. We are survivors first and foremost, and we need to stand up as soon as possible. We are doing that thanks to our faith and because of the faith of our brothers and sisters around the world. Thank you.

*Father Ivo Velasquez lives in the Sacred Heart seminary in Palo, Leyte Island.*

*With support from CAFOD and other agencies in the Caritas International network, local churches have provided food, water and shelter to hundreds of thousands of people across the Philippines.*

*Photo credit: CAFOD*

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