

Lifeline for a family in Cebu hit by a supertyphoon

Mags Amamag narrates her trials and consolations in the aftermath of the supertyphoon that struck the Philippines in December of 2021.

02/22/2022

Talisay (Cebu) - I am "Ms. Amamag" (as my students fondly call me) an English teacher in PAREF Southcrest School for Grades 4-6. Although still adjusting to the

culture, right from the start, when I got employed in June 2021, I felt very much at home and part of the Southcrest family. I felt this support in a tangible way throughout my family's experience of loss and recovery following the recent supertyphoon.

I will never forget December 16, 2021, the day when the Category 5 Typhoon Odette (International name: RAI) struck Cebu. I was looking forward to celebrating Christmas with family and friends and having the scheduled Christmas break to rest and unwind. But Typhoon Odette disrupted our plans and our lives!

As the strong winds raged, my parents and I were together inside my room and praying. My room is the one with the strongest foundation in the house, so we were safe from the onslaught. We could

hear the havoc that was being wreaked just outside my door.

Odette destroyed our house. Our 50-year-old mango tree fell and temporarily trapped us inside. The roof was ripped off. Despite our situation, I took comfort and thanked God that none of us was harmed. The damage was heavy but we knew that somehow God would provide for our recovery.

Cebu and the places where Odette made landfall were like “ground zero.” People had to wait in line many hours to avail themselves of basic services like electricity, water, internet connectivity, and ATM in banks. It took three weeks before these were restored. Everyone in Cebu was a victim in some way or other. Typhoon Odette, however, had more in store for my family and me.

On December 21 at 7:00 pm, two strangers came to inform me that my

dad had an accident while waiting in line for gasoline. They had to come personally since the cellular phone networks were not working. It was too late. If only we had connectivity that day, we could have gone and spoken with my father one last time. I fell on my knees when I heard that he died.

Indeed, grief felt so much like fear, as C.S.Lewis wrote. I was too afraid to face the fact that my father was no longer with us; that no one would protect us in the dark; that it would just be my mom and I in that house. It felt like our home suddenly lost its foundation: with no father to share his wisdom; with no father to provide for our needs; with no father to go home to and enjoy life with; with no father to encourage me to pursue my dreams; with no father to walk me down the aisle one day.

We couldn't even grieve properly because we needed to bury him within 24 hours. Everything was happening too fast, and yet, it seemed that time stood still.

In the midst of the chaos wrought by the supertyphoon, the uncertainty of the pandemic, and the grief brought about by my father's death, I discovered the truth about God's omnipresence, his providence and his being a Father!

We were worrying about where to get money for a coffin, when suddenly a complete stranger approached us, called my brother's attention and offered to give us his late father's coffin which was worth twice as much! Then, my father's friend, the late mayor of Talisay, gave a free tomb in the Talisay Cemetery. Majority of the banking and ATM services were not in operation so we had to make do with the cash on

hand that we had. And the amount on hand happened to be just enough to pay for the rest of the burial expenses.

I found God in different people. My friends, my colleagues at school, and my students showered me with words of accompaniment and with their prayers for my dad and my family.

When Ms. Quesada, Ms. Tan, and Ms. Policios of Southcrest* visited us, I felt so embarrassed for the messy state of our house. We held my dad's 9-day wake there. I was surprised and moved that despite meeting them face-to-face for the first time due to our online working set-up, Ms. Quesada, hugged me tightly to comfort me. Another colleague at school, Ms. Evardo, came on the day of my father's burial. She lived far from our place and was pregnant at that time.

My family is deeply grateful for the financial help they gave for my father's funeral and for the calamity aid for our house. No company in my whole career has given me this kind of comfort and support, which I would normally get only from home. I'm a new employee of the school, but I relish the warm welcome and support I have received as part of the PAREF Southcrest Family.

I received a letter from our Executive Director that shed a ray of light on my faith. In her letter she said:

“You are always accompanied and I offer the Mass for your dad during this season. God’s loving ways are mysterious but his logic is different from ours. But His wisdom is always true and good and I hope you see in the midst of your grief His love and mercy... Be strong, Mags, know you are loved.”

After my father's death, I kept asking God for reasons, to the point of questioning my faith. It shattered me, and I did not know where to start picking up the pieces. When I read that letter, it made me reflect on trusting in God's wisdom. His logic indeed is different from ours. I felt that I was like Job from the Bible when he lost his home and family.

Looking past the sadness and grief, I counted one by one the graces and blessings God showered on my family before and after the calamity. Indeed God was, has been, and is always with us.

At present, I am still grieving but my faith is strengthened. When sadness comes, I write my thoughts in my journal. There are times when I feel blank; I feel empty. But I also feel joy when I reflect that I am loved and have friends who care for me.

My family has not completely recovered from the calamity and the loss, but I'm grateful for the love that we continue to receive. Good people take time to check up on me and to help me get through this situation.

Most of all, I rely on God's fatherly love for me. His wisdom allowed these things to happen, even if I still do not completely understand it now. I know God knows best what is good for me and my family.

**PAREF Southcrest School is a grade school and high school for girls in Cebu City, inspired by St. Josemaria's teachings on education and family. With the help of generous donors, they were able to extend assistance to many students and employees severely affected by Typhoon Odette.*

Mags Amamag

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(02/22/2026)