

Healing and Forgiveness in Manila

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It is with profound gratitude that I remember my visit to Manila in February/March 2026. I was ostensibly there to give some talks and retreats, but I received a lot more. I was met with overwhelming kindness, generosity, faith and great humanity. I loved being there, meeting people, having conversations and seeing the place. It was so vibrantly alive, and faith was so visible and tangible there in the heart of Asia. Despite the problems facing the country, they have stayed resilient, open, welcoming and generous.

The language of the Philippines is Tagalog, but fortunately most Filipinos speak English, which they learn in school, and almost all signs and instructions are in English too. The Philippines was under American rule for almost half a century. Initially I found it strange to be in Asia and be able to work entirely in English, but it helped a lot and meant I could give my talks and retreats without translation. It also meant I had some very meaningful conversations, sharings and Q&A sessions that I appreciated. I found the people unfailingly warm



and friendly and loved being there on the other side of the world.

What really stayed with me though was a personal faith testament I heard from a local woman named Cory Villafania. She gave me permission to use her notes and told me to circulate her story. She and I co-presented a retreat on grief for CLC Philippines, and very quickly I realised I was in the presence of someone special. Her testimony reflected a deeply personal journey through grief, loss and healing, grounded in faith in a compassionate God who consoles and accompanies. Initially she quoted 2 Corinthians 1:3–5: 'God comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those



in any affliction.’ She described suffering as a shared human experience through which God offers comfort. Experiencing suffering and receiving comfort means that you can, in turn, comfort others.

In a very composed and calm way, she told the story of the deaths of her two sons. The first, JB, lived with an intellectual disability and later suffered from acute renal failure. His illness, which featured violent episodes, brought immense physical and emotional strain to the family, particularly to his father, Nelson, who devoted years to caring for him with patience and tenderness. Despite JB’s suffering and moments of distress, the family also witnessed

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profound love, particularly in Nelson’s ability to hold his son even during violent outbursts. JB’s eventual death in 2004 plunged the family into grief, with Nelson experiencing deep depression. Yet a simple line JB had on his favourite T-shirt – ‘God is good all the time’ – became a refrain and inspiration for acceptance and healing.

Some years later, tragedy struck again when their other son NJ died in a road accident caused by a negligent bus driver distracted by his phone. The shock, anger and desire for justice were intense, particularly as the system allows for a personal confrontation with the accused. Nelson initially struggled but chose forgiveness, even confronting the driver with a call to change his life rather than seeking revenge. Cory herself found forgiveness more difficult, but, in a moment of grace during a mediation meeting, she unexpectedly found herself extending forgiveness to the driver. This marked a profound shift in her, leading even to compassionate gestures toward him, even buying breakfast for him, while still upholding justice through the legal process.