



Testimony by Ma. Georgia Cogtas

This phone when I lose it, break it or destroy it. I can still replace it with a new one even if it is not good as before or I can still pick it up and repair it. You see when material things are broken, lost and destroyed it can still be replaced and repaired but imagine if it is a life that it is a life lost, broken and destroyed can it still be restored and healed?

Good morning to all of you and (Maayong pag-abot sa Sugbo.) Welcome to Cebu! I'm very happy to be here and to share my story with you but I must confess it is a great struggle for me to finish my testimony. One time when I was on the verge of revising it, a conclusion suddenly hit me; my testimony can't be completed because I was too focused on material poverty. Born to a poor family, I soon concluded that the deepest expression of poverty is material deprivation but I was proven wrong.

Material deprivation is only a quantitative measurement of being poor. My eyes cannot measure the hidden immaterial brokenness that I suffered. These are rejection, incapability to express oneself, emotional numbness, a broken home, unreachable dreams and disconnection with society and with God. I am the youngest of seven children and I have a twin brother. Back then my family could only eat once or twice a day of non-nutritious food, my mother had to work far away from us to help my father support our needs. During the absence of my mother, my father irresponsibly left us too. At an early age, I had to sacrifice the joy of playing in order to survive on a daily basis. We had no choice but to feed ourselves. When I was 8 yrs old. I learn to scavenge in the streets, dump sites, and construction areas. The money I collected from selling scraps and plastics helped me finished high school. But my twin brother seemed to lose hope, without parental guidance and support he stopped studying after my mother left us. I got disconnected with my other siblings too, two of my older sisters got pregnant at a young age and the other three had to look for their future somewhere else. That time my childhood is broken, my dream is lost and my life became uncertain. Though scavenging helped me survive, it did not spare me from physical pain. While scavenging I got wounded by broken bottles and sharp objects mixed in the garbage. I usually rushed back home hoping that there will be somebody there to help me wash and aid my wounds, but I'm always welcomed with the cold space inside our house. I learned to suppress any emotional pain, I learned not to cry. Scavenging and lack of support and encouragement affected my personality, Back then, I became boyish since I can't escape the pathetic cold-stares of the pedestrians and sometimes, the mocking stares of other children. I

learned to be tough and act strong in front of them. Back then, whenever I'm with people, I had a stoop posture, my face is always facing down.

Two weeks ago, we in Cebu celebrated the feast of the Child Jesus, Senyor Santo Nino, the elegant costumes and presentations of the Sinulog dancers, and the colorful fireworks display left us in awe. But while our attention is caught by the very festive in the celebration of the Child Jesus on our peripheries, were children busy scavenging, begging and selling cold waters, food and candles in the streets and in the perimeters of the churches. As we happily celebrated the Child Jesus, other children needed our attention. What have we done for them? Or are they also receiving the pathetic and emotionless look I got from people back when I was a street child. Since I was very focused on my own life, I often forget to pray still God so compassionate to me, that he was redirecting my brokenness to something better and hopeful. There is no hurt, pain and struggle bigger than my God. I found healing.

It was in 2010, that I was given a scholarship grant by a "*felt impelled*" group which have been reaching out to public servants, voters and the youth. For a year, I volunteered with them and was exposed to different trainings and values formation. Since 2001, they had been reaching out with the street children. As a scholarship beneficiary, we are required to be with these children every Saturday afternoon. My involvement helped me of something I used to be ashamed of. You see my hands are supposed to be soaking wet right now, whenever I meet new people, it is so wet, and I could already imagine your reactions whenever I touch you faces full of disgust while exclaiming "*eww*" or "*yuck*". It's okay, I'm already used to it. These hands of mine, cost my first, but not the last taste of rejection and humiliation. It's hard for me to belong in a circle of friends because of a physical dysfunctionality. My hands symbolize my brokenness, like Jesus in the cross, but then came the street children especially Edison. Edison is a child with a shrunken left hand, yet Edison looks really genuinely happy. He can still hold his head high and laugh and play with other kids. He also has a lot of talents, he could dance, do stunts especially tumbling. He is an excellent basketball player too, One time, Edison, asked me to gaze at my hand for a long moment. I initially feel uncomfortable, before I really hated my hands but seeing him accept his physical disability, made me realize that despite the sweatiness of my hands, are hidden treasures of creativity. My hands made many people happy. Every time I make caricatures for them as a gift for their birthdays, the praises I received from my classmates whenever I helped them with projects is priceless. And here with me is Edison, together with him is Aldy and Daniel. I wish I could also bring with me the other 54 kids that we have been reaching out to. Like me, some kids, such as Aldy and Nelly have sweaty hands. I suspected that hunger and maybe similar emotional trauma caused our hands to sweat but we are courageous to face life because we are well accepted by the other kids.

When we hold each other's hands, particularly in prayer, the feeling of disgust is gone and the water that flows out from our hands radiates warmth that brings us to self-acceptance. Every Saturday we continue our regular outreach to the street children, we call this event the "Saturday Street Children Encounter". This is a half day event composed of holistic activities, jogging or Zumba exercise, hygiene, tutorials, catechism,

recreation and dinner. Sometimes we celebrate anticipated masses together. As we are reaching our fifth year anniversary of a joined journey, we have seen and continue to see big changes among the kids. Our journey with them starts with a simple calling of each other's name. I have witnessed, how a simple calling of their names could draw a very big dignified smile on their faces. They are now learning to love themselves, they are starting to dream and dream again. 90 percent of our street kids have now gone back to school, two of our kids even excelled in their studies a hope that began with a spark has now become a flame and is getting bigger.

Their dignity and value are also restored, they are not afraid of showing their talents in arts, singing and dancing. They learned to take a bath and maintain cleanliness, from being dirty and barefooted but right now they come with neat clothes and wears slippers and shoes, they say they are ashamed if they come in dirty. Now they remember their birthdays since we have gifts for them. I have seen kids developed their sense of responsibility and is starting to be their brother's keeper. If someone is hurt and beaten, they quickly inform us. They are also learning to be good citizens by doing simple acts of citizenship by being on time and managing their garbage well. Last April 12 and December 7, 2014 after receiving eight catechetical sessions for two months about 32 of them received the body and blood of Christ. Whereas before, the kids just wanted to receive the Holy Eucharist out of curiosity but now, they greatly understood that the bread and wine is Jesus. No material thing could replace my broken self, but with communion, coming together with the poor, my life that is broken, lost and destroyed is restored and healed. I am proud to say that I am one of the street children, I came from a broken family, I had no more hope of going to school, but thanks to these street children they became a gift for me. I encountered God and was able to heal myself from some bad experiences from the past. My hands still sweat but the self-acceptance that they had taught me can never be taken away from me.

Someday, I want them to reach their dreams. I dream that some of them will be dignified public servants or policemen to whom our teachings of common good will not be forgotten or great and inspiring teachers who use their stories as a great example of compassion or nurturing nurses and doctors who are not picky of who they will aide to or engineers like Aldy who will build homes for the poor or a priest who will successfully evangelize others. How I wish that they will have proper homes they could live in with their families away from the dangers of the streets in the riverside and to be rescued from the influence of the dark side of their environment. How I wish their parents will have work and have enough income.

How many of our children will not attend to class with empty stomachs and wear decent and neat school uniforms and that they can pay school fees. Every time it rains, how many have money for transportation and an umbrella. How many can wear two pairs of shoes, one for rainy days and one for regular days? How many have electricity to study or somebody to help them answer difficult lessons or sleep soundly with a full stomach? What can we do so they may not lose hope in God in times when nobody can support them? There are a lot of street children living outside our parishes, can we turn our parishes into child-friendly parishes with walk-in facilities where they could possibly take

a bath, eat and study? Our churches are the closest place where they could see God, but they can also be the closest place where the children can reach their dreams.

For now I could only offer my time, moral support and prayers, but slowly many are responding the call to reach out to them because of the International Eucharistic Congress, there are now 23 groups from church, government, civil society and the academe who have been doing regular outreach programs for the street children. Some businesses have given material support, as a fruit of coming together, January 30, 2016, 4 p.m., at least 400 street kids and even young adults will receive for the first time the body and blood of Christ. This is organized by a special committee of IEC that the poor will have a place in the Congress.

It is only when the bread is broken that it can be shared and offered to others. God let us experience brokenness so that in our brokenness we can compassionately be in union with our suffering brothers and sisters, to serve a greater purpose. After all, I now realize that by the grace of God, it is not only material things that can be replaced and repaired, for all that is broken can be restored, all that is lost can be found and replaced with something better and all that is destroyed can be fixed. I hope that you could also see that there is joy in every brokenness and sacrifice. As bread that is broken, we believe that Christ is in us, our hope of glory. Let me end my sharing with a quote by Pope Benedict XVI; he wrote that *God is so great that he became small, God is so powerful that he can make himself vulnerable and come to us as a defenseless child so that we can love him.*

Thank you for coming and breaking bread with us!