News



Father Flavie Villanueva embraces Melinda Lafuente, as she holds an urn with the remains of her son, Angelo Lafuente, at the Shrine of Healing in Manila, Philippines, March 12, 2025, the day after the arrest of former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. The shrine held an interment ceremony for the victims of extrajudicial killings carried out during their country's deadly anti-drug campaign when Duterte was president 2016-2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Lisa Marie David)



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Two Philippine priests who work with those affected by their country's deadly anti-drug campaign under then-President Rodrigo Duterte are closely monitoring developments in the former president's March 11 arrest and detention at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. They are following the news with elation and cautious hope he will be brought to justice.

Duterte was arrested in Manila and flown to the Netherlands on March 12.

"It's more than victory," exclaimed Fr. Flavie Villanueva. "In Catholic parlance, it would be allowing us to sing 'Alleluia' during the Lenten season. It was a feeling of jubilee, especially when I was with the widows."

The Divine Word priest told OSV News he celebrated a thanksgiving Mass in Quezon City just outside Manila, the capital, upon receiving news of the arrest. Around 30 widows — whose husbands were slain in the "war on drugs" that raged throughout Duterte's 2016-2022 term — attended the Mass.

According to Human Rights Watch, government records list more than 6,000 deaths, but rights advocates now estimate more than 30,000 dead.

Villanueva's work started in 2015 as an apostolate for the homeless to provide basic life necessities and livelihood training. But within the year he started the Arnold

Janssen Kalinga Foundation, just when Duterte's plan to scrub the country clean of "drug addicts and pushers" took effect.

Mostly overnight operations in and around the nation's capital netted dozens of overwhelmingly impoverished men, teenage boys and a handful of women. They were found shot dead on slum neighborhood streets, their sprawled bodies trailing blood on the sidewalks, some with mummy-like heads wrapped in packing tape.

Many deaths were reported as results of police shootout operations with purported dealers or drug runners, but even more deaths resulted from unexplained circumstances.

The high-profile 2017 case of 17-year old Kian DeLos Santos, who was shot dead by three police officers in Caloocan City, bordering northern Manila, brought Villanueva's work to the forefront.

The officers said Kian engaged them in a gun battle but evidence showed he was unarmed and shot from behind while on his knees. Security cameras captured him being dragged off at night to a dark, filthy corner by a river where witnesses heard multiple bullets fired. The officers in 2018 were each convicted and sentenced to 40 years in prison.

Villanueva, along with now-Cardinal Pablo Virgilio David of Kalookan attended Kian's funeral and brought national attention to the case, sparking public outrage. They were part of a small group of clergy who were most vocal critics of the drug war, facing a barrage of harsh words in Duterte's regular rants against the church and also death threats.

Villanueva, 54 and a former drug addict himself, began bringing bereaved widows and family members of the victims into the foundation, where he developed a seven-phase program over nine consecutive Saturdays giving "psycho-spiritual" support to them through counseling and the sacraments.

He explained, "We provide them with sessions beginning with life skills, but particularly and more importantly how to address their grief and their trauma. In between … we provide them with legal assistance. … That would eventually allow them to verbalize how they witnessed, and how they were told of, the story that took place. This is a great contrast against the police affidavit that was just simply slapped (in) their faces."

Villanueva said his center has helped close to 350 widows directly. A handful of parishes and nongovernmental social service agencies in the dioceses of Kalookan and Novaliches, north of Manila, use his psycho-spiritual model and have reached 5,000 people affected by the "war on drugs."

Now, two and a half years after Duterte's term ended, he said, people who complete his donor-funded program spread the word to others who have lost loved ones in the anti-drug campaign, creating a steady demand for the stretched apostolate.

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Fr. Roberto dela Cruz started helping drug addicts and dealers through the Sanlakbay (One Journey) program of the Archdiocese of Manila, since the start of Duterte's administration in June 2016.

He said the archdiocese, anticipating waves of drug-related surrenders and arrests, wanted a plan in place to help facilitate rehabilitation for the offenders. Dela Cruz designed the community-based rehab program in cooperation with the government, in which participants come weekly, supported by their families, while working or finding work, rather than just checking into rehab.

The priest, also a former drug addict and small-time pusher, called Duterte's international case hopeful, but also said he should be brought "closer to the heart of God."

"At least this is a sign of change and we're hoping that at least he will be held accountable. But let us see," dela Cruz told OSV News. "As I told you, we're kind of resigned to this, because … the rule of law is very evasive here."

He lamented the deep-seated "culture of impunity" in the Philippines, pointing to politicians who have been impeached and convicted for plunder, accused of fraud and other corruption and were again elected into office.

Dela Cruz emphasized his focus was not so much on criticizing the deadly campaign, knowing the backlash he would receive for this, but on rehabilitation.

"For me, it's a tactical silence because what is important for me is to save lives during that time. And I have to collaborate with the government in order for me to

take the surrenderers (off the streets) and give them a safe place in the program," said dela Cruz.

Duterte's operation called "Tok-hang" targeted people whose names were on a watchlist comprised of suspected drug users and/or dealers. Community policing members would knock on the listed person's door and give them the option to turn themselves in or be pursued by police. But Human Rights Watch said some who said they would surrender were hunted down.

Dela Cruz said Sanlakbay netted hundreds of actual addicts and dealers through the operation, and to date, he said, it has served more than 1,350. But he cautioned about one third were "sliders" who returned to drugs.

He said the point of Sanlakbay is to accompany participants and "listen to them and meet them where they are."

Dela Cruz said Duterte's anti-drug campaign had a "chilling effect" and he noted that since the end of the watchlist program, drug use has been on the rise in impoverished neighborhoods of Manila and the metro area.

While a very few addicts approach Sanlakbay on their own, its main focus is now on plea-bargain rehabilitation and youth education, said dela Cruz. Convicted drug offenders serve their sentences by participating in rehab, and it reaches out to high school students.

"This is not so much ... moralism but just being with them. It's a shared journey of grace with them without telling them what to do. But just to dialogue with them too. In my experience, in the last few weeks, during the dialogue with the students, they opened up to us... and we discovered many things that they are experiencing," he said.