



## CEMETERY CHILDREN: LOVING THEM UNCONDITIONALLY

*By Sister Juliette Choi*

*Columban Sister Juliette Choi  
lives and works in the Philippines.*

Before coming to the Philippines in January of 2012 on my first assignment as a missionary sister, I heard that some of our Sisters had started a ministry for people who live in a cemetery in Manila. They shared with me that many children live among the graves. Prior to joining the Columban Sisters I taught children, so I have a heart for them and I could not imagine the little ones among the dead.

When I arrived in the Philippines, I headed for the cemetery. I was immediately struck by the shape of the tombs -- rectangle or square blocks of cement set on mounds of earth. People who have no other place to live, eat and sleep on top of the graves and many earn their living by cleaning them.

Then I saw the children. They were very dirty, some with no clothes and most without shoes. In my fear,



*Sister Juliette Choi teaching the children in the cemetery.*

I thought, is it dangerous to stay here? Will it be possible for me to love them? I was not comfortable holding the children's dirty hands; no way could I hug them. I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could. It was a dreadful moment for me, questioning my calling as a missionary. All the theology that I had studied did not fit with the reality that I had just experienced. It was an hour of shocking self-revelation.

The next morning, Sister Venus, the Sister I live with said "I must show you the "classroom". I followed her with a sense of shock still lingering from the day before. The room

was a plain tomb, just an open area with no roof on it. No chairs, no desks, no shelter. After a while, the children began to come. It was bedlam. Class started but some of the children were jumping and flying like Tarzan from tomb to tomb. To make matters worse, it started to rain, but I was the only one who ran for shelter and not just from the downpour.

However, even in my disbelief to have an uncovered grave for a classroom, I saw in the eyes of the children a hunger for learning and a plea for help. Jesus asked me to see them through His eyes, to see



*Teaching in the open air classroom.*

them as His little ones. I knew I could not reject what their eyes were telling me. So I went back.

The first thing I did was to find another classroom – a lovely spot away from the tombs. At first only five to ten children came, but as time went by the number increased. Every time I go to the cemetery for my class, I bring a small white board, colored pencils, a keyboard and snacks for my students. There are now 40 to 50 children, waiting to love and to be loved, and as days go by I love them more and more. I try to speak their language, and somehow the children understand what I'm saying to them. We correct and finish each other's sentences both in Filipino and Korean. Whenever I make a mistake they burst out laughing while vigorously clapping their hands.

In early November one boy said to me, "I want to have a Christmas party". He was right; surely these

cemetery children should enjoy Christmas despite their dreadful poverty. They divided themselves into working groups, and started practicing dances every day. I gave them paper and crayons and they made beautiful decorations. Late in the evening one of the boys said, "Group hug! Group hug!" and they all surrounded and hugged me.



*Sister Juliette tending to an injured student.*

The Sisters gave me a big box that came from our kind and generous benefactors -- people like you. It contained toys, clothes, books and gifts of all sorts. On the day of the party, the cemetery was full of laughter and joy. When all the children were given their gifts,

there was still one big bundle left, reminding me how faithful our God is when we put our trust in Him.

That night my reflection was that I'd had met a loving and kind Jesus in the cemetery through the children. He had been there all the time, patiently waiting to meet me and I am thankful for His patience and for showing me what unconditional love looks like through the eyes of a child.

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