

Timor story in full

In 2006 I went to East Timor as part of our Province's Courage to Move project. Our mission was to work in Baucau with the Marist Brothers at the Primary Teachers College they had set up in 2000, at the invitation of the Bishop of Baucau.

Early Times

In the beginning Brother Mark Paul organized a period of inculturation for Sr Diaan and I and we both went to Dili to two different Dominican convents where we participated in their apostolates and worked at improving our language skills. I went to the Novitiate house to help the novices with their music and Diaan went to an orphanage. It was quite a challenging time, fitting in with their timetable and eating typical Timorese food. An old blackboard and chalk were my only teaching aids. I enjoyed teaching these young women and they taught me a lot in return. (Later, in Baucau, I was also to help some other religious women during their training course).

During this time the Dominican sisters invited Diaan and I to visit Oecusse to visit their sisters who ran an orphanage there. Oecusse is an enclave of West Timor and to get there the East Timorese travel overnight in an old and rather primitive ferry. It was on this ferry that I suffered an unfortunate accident to my leg which meant that I had to stay in Oecusse a longer time than expected. Because of a haematoma which developed on my leg, my movements were restricted and I had to rely on the charity of the little community there. After a week or so I was eventually able to travel back to Dili, and resume my teaching with the novices, but six weeks later, I had to return to Australia for treatment for my leg in Darwin. Not a very good start to my Courage to Move!

So I found myself in Darwin, living with Jan Niall and Wendy, and later I moved to Brisbane until the leg healed. Then, just when it would have been possible for me to return to East Timor the situation there had become very volatile and I was advised not to return to Baucau. All in all I was away for two and a half months.

Beginnings in Baucau

My work in Baucau then had to begin and there were quite a few difficulties in getting started at the Marist Teachers College – getting to know the scene, learning staff names and finding something to do! The bishop of Baucau had approached The Australian Marist Brothers in 2000 and asked them to initiate a Primary Teachers Training college. Most of the Indonesian teachers had left after Independence in 1999 and there was a great shortage of teachers. The College had been running since 2000 when we arrived and we were asked to help with the professional development of the staff. I began at first teaching English to the domestic staff and later was asked to be a music tutor to the First Year students who did a semester of music in their first year at the College.

In November of that year, three years after the College (ICFP) had opened, the first Graduation took place. It was a wonderful occasion full of pomp and ceremony. The Bishop lent his spacious grounds for the occasion and visiting dignitaries came from ACU in Sydney for the conferring of the degrees. It was a memorable occasion especially for the Marist Brothers who had founded the College and were now seeing the first batch of students qualify as teachers.

Private music teaching

A small music room was set up for me at the residence with three keyboards and it was here that I taught some individual students. Although there were sometimes problems when the power was off, I had batteries for emergencies. One of my students was Aurea, a State school primary teacher who asked me to teach her the keyboard. Later on she tutored me in Tetum. and it was Aurea who helped me with my story about Mary Ward which I wrote in Tetum. I realized that as Loreto sisters, if we were to spread a little knowledge of our Institute, a short account of our foundress Mary Ward, needed to be written in Tetum. I felt that East Timor was very much part of the Asian world, and Mary Ward, a Yorkshire woman, sprang from a time and place in history very unfamiliar to East Timorese. When it was finished I asked Sr Patricia Ziebarth and Rob Robinson IBVM in Australia to draw little sketches to illustrate my story and these really enhanced the pages.

Further work

Later on I was approached by the Provincial of the Canossian sisters to see if I could teach music at the Summer school which they had each year in August. This was a good introduction to my future work at the Canossian Institute. Brother Michael Herry had been running this course and as his time in East Timor was coming to an end I was to benefit by 'stepping into his shoes', so to speak and benefiting from the use of his teaching material.

In September of that year I was asked by Sister Sonia, the Vicar of the Canossian sisters if I would be able to conduct the music program of the Maestra di Compagna (Teachers of the Country side). This program runs each year for ten months at the Canossian Centre in Baucau and provides residence for a group of sixty women chosen from all parts of East Timor. The program is very varied, and includes such subjects as computer skills, dressmaking, cooking, religious studies, (including catechetics), music, agriculture and languages. The music program consisted of doing a basic course in keyboard, guitar and singing, including music for the liturgy. They also learnt to take part in small industries, for example, soap making, giving them skills to pass on later when they returned to their villages. I worked in a music team with Sister Joanna a Canossian sister and Olandina a lovely young woman who had done the course with Michael Herry the previous year. In fact both Michael and I both agreed, in consultation with Inge the assistant Director of the Mestre course that it would be good if Olandina could do a further course that she would benefit from.

(So since I have returned to Australia it has come to pass that with both funding from Loreto (MWI) and the Marist Brothers, Olandina has spent five months in 2009 doing a music course at a Jesuit Music Institute in Yogyakarta. She has now returned to East Timor to resume teaching in the Canossian Institute.)

Besides working at the Canossian Institute I also gave music lessons to another lovely group of young women who were aspirants in the Sisters of

Our Lady of Victories (the Victorianas)- a Portuguese order which were founded by an Englishwoman and followed a Franciscan rule. We met once a week, learning guitar and keyboard skills, elementary theory and solfa, including some English songs. They needed these skills mainly for the liturgy and for their work with children in the parishes.

Daily Life in East Timor

Although the Portuguese left East Timor in 1775 and were followed by the Indonesians the Portuguese influence is still very strong particularly in the church. During Portuguese times education was reserved only for the elite and all religious education for the poor took place at Mass and in the parishes.

When you go to Mass you cannot help being impressed by the simple faith of the people. The church is a central part of their lives. At mass – attended by young and old, they sing hymns - all from memory – (often in two or three part harmony) Great importance is attached to feast days. We attended so many long Masses on big feast days, often in the open air to accommodate the crowds. November 1st All Saints, and November 2nd. All Souls' Day were very important days. On November 2nd it is a time when they honour their ancestors by returning to the cemeteries to the family gravesides. It is a time for them to celebrate the dead by decorating the graves and having a really good feast!

Holy Week and Easter are also very significant times... We attended some very moving (and long!) ceremonies for Holy Week. One Good Friday we witnessed the custom that the people have of coming from all different villages on foot, praying and singing hymns till they all arrive outside the main church of the area. Each group carries a big cross and when they arrive at the church they place their cross in front of the outdoor altar. Most of the people would remain standing for all these long ceremonies, often in the hot sun.

Daily Life in East Timor

I am constantly being reminded of biblical times when I observe the simple way people live in East Timor - hearing the sounds and seeing sights that would have been similar to what Jesus saw and heard in Palestine – women and young girls, and children too, carrying heavy vessels of water on their heads, used for washing – (most homes have no running water)- people selling their wares in the street markets – mainly vegetables which they had grown themselves. The main street of Baucau was a mini market , with stalls on either side of the street. You could buy clothes, footwear, toiletries, washing powders, bottled water toys CDs and tapes. The women would be sitting under their make-shift shelters at the side of the road making baskets and young children would be running around, often in bare feet; Goats would be climbing up the steep hillsides, and hens and pigs running freely around, often quite close to the roads.

We used to be often impressed when we saw a father of his family carrying the baby about in his arms. This would happen usually early in the morning when the women were busy preparing food. Very rarely would you see a small child unattended. The older sisters would be looking after them, plus someone else's children. Although they grow up in often very poor circumstances, young East Timorese children are valued and cherished with much love.

The main means of transport is the mikrolet. These are small vans which accommodate a surprising number of people, plus the odd hen or rooster. I often hailed a mikrolet and squashed in with everyone, trying to use the smallest space possible. The East Timorese are small people and the mikrolets had a very low roof. I often bumped my head either getting in or out until I learnt to bow my head low to avoid injury! There was quite an art in getting on and then in getting off! The hospital was on the route home to the residence and one day a young mother got into the mikrolet. She was returning from hospital carrying her tiny newly born babe in her arms, wrapped around with a simple blanket. I couldn't help making comparisons with what would happen in Australia under similar circumstances.

One of the hazards when walking back and forth along the roads was the presence of the dogs which the Timorese keep as watchdogs to their homes. These dogs were neither attractive nor endearing in any way and they often barked menacingly at us as we passed their 'patch'.

Since the early 2000's there were many IDPs owing to the political unrest in East Timor. After 2006 there was an influx of IDP's to Baucau. Many of

these people camped on the premises of the Salesian school .Others were lucky to find hospitality with kind relatives and extended families who were willing to feed extra mouths at a time when their own food supplies were scarce. It was a complex issue, and it often caused tension in the districts where the IDP's were camped and it created big problems for the new government.

Getting About

Travelling around in East Timor is always very limited and often dangerous because of the bad road conditions. Four wheel drive vehicles are the main private means of transport but there are also buses, often overcrowded, which travel on the main routes. There have been some tragic accidents because of people traveling on the roofs of these buses which is of course against the law. Unfortunately one had to be prepared for mishaps on the roads.

When driving to Dili from Baucau the scenery is quite breathtaking, especially along the coast. East Timor has a rugged beauty so far untouched by tourism mainly because of the bad road conditions.

Once when Brother Mark was driving Diaan and I to the airport to catch a plane we stopped on the side of the road to take a photo of some buffalos. When Mark tried to start the four wheel drive later we discovered that it was stuck in a bog and in no way was it going to move! Mark just calmly took out a cigarette (time for a smoko !) while Diaan and I panicked inwardly. Sure enough, help came in the form of a busload of people. They pulled up to help, and with many willing hands the car was freed and we were on our way again in time to catch the plane!

This was a typical example of the friendliness and helpfulness of the East Timorese and the generosity and welcome they so often extended to us as strangers. It reminded me once again of the courageous help they gave to our soldiers during the war in 1942.

Mount Matebian, which can be seen from Baucau is a very special place. It is called Mountain of the Dead because it is where the East Timorese believe their ancestors reside and they have pilgrimages there to honour their dead.

Indeed one feels that death is often very close to their minds – so many have lost family members during the Indonesian occupation (in the terrible bloodshed of 1999. Many died of starvation as well. I have read stories written by some of the students describing their families, and time and time again there are instances where a parent or a sibling has died because of some tragedy or from starvation. During our time here this year we have shared in the deaths and the sorrows of many people and unfortunately many deaths were caused by the unavailability of medication such as anti-biotics.

Survival Tactics – the things that sustained the hard times

The heat in East Timor was often a difficulty to contend with and the presence of mosquitoes made it always necessary to use Rid or some other repellent to avert any danger of malaria or dengue fever. Every day you had to remember to take your anti malaria tablet. One of the saving graces was the presence of electric fans which worked well when the power was on. We were lucky in Baucau, (compared with Dili) because its proximity to the sea meant that there was often a sea breeze in the afternoon.

Baucau also had a beautiful beach and when we had transport we could have a swim there on Sunday afternoons.

On Sundays, too, we would often visit the market in Newtown just for an outing. It was a popular, bustling place for everyone. One could make some simple purchases, buy a few vegetables or fruit or a pair of thongs for \$1.

One of the ‘tourist’ places was the picturesque town of Com on the eastern tip of East Timor. Although rather primitive as a tourist resort it was a good place for people to go snorkeling and if you had the means you could visit the small island nearby.

On one memorable occasion when it was All Saints holiday, Brother Michael took Kath, Diaan and I to Tutuwala and we camped overnight under the stars next to the beach. This was a very special experience. We also did some snorkeling, and were able to view some colourful fish and coral.

Apart from these 'times' life was pretty much confined to your area especially in the weekends. There was no such thing as a cinema to go to! Our main resource was books and we used to share these around with each other. The Brothers had quite a good library acquired over the years. Until we got our own TV and DVD we used to go to the brothers' house and watch their TV or look at a DVD with them. Life was a very much 'community shared' kind of existence!

I really appreciated the kindness of the Marist Brothers whilst I was there- Brother Mark Paul, Chris Popplewell, Michael Herry, and John Horgan. And then there was Margie Beck, the Deputy Dean of the College who was a wonderful presence in the College and a very good friend to all of us. Those of us who lived in the residence, including our good friend Kath Richter shared all our meals together and it was a very much a shared life existence. Many people used to drop in and stay in Baucau – people on long term or short term work. You came into contact with a great variety of people, all involved in some way to improve conditions in East Timor. We had a good relationship with the Australian Army in Baucau and there was a strong presence of UN personnel in East Timor as well. Some of these men and women were resident in our quarters, sharing meals with us. Hearing their stories and learning about their countries all added spice to the variety of experiences which life in East Timor presented to us.

As I was coming to the end of my time in East Timor I was not looking forward to saying goodbye to all the many friends that I had come to know and love through working and praying with them.

As I mentioned before, in spite of all the sufferings that the Timorese had been through they were always ready to greet you with a beautiful smile and extend their generosity to us in so many ways. As is usually the case when you have to leave a place where you have been working it is not easy to say goodbye to those you have grown to love. When you enter another culture you are there to learn by your experiences and to be prepared to receive more than to give. Being in such confined circumstances and not having many outlets can be quite a hardship. But I know that my time in East Timor was an invaluable opportunity for me to stand back, and look at myself from a different perspective and learn from this. I am grateful for this special enriching time.

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