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Southeast Asia

Curt Gabrielson, a science teacher and an Institute Fellow, is observing the re-establishment of education in East Timor.

The Church in East Timor

By Curt Gabrielson

AUGUST 1, 2001

DILI, East Timor — When my partner Pamela and I first visited East Timor in 1997, we went to a mass given by Bishop Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo in downtown Dili. The Bishop had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996, just months before. After mass, we joined the end of a long line of people waiting to meet the Bishop. Halfway up the line, I realized with some trepidation that the people were not just greeting the bishop and shaking his hand. They were kissing his ring. I weighed the options and decided I would follow local custom and kiss it as well.

When we finally arrived, I took his hand and leaned down to kiss the ring. Strangely enough, he pulled it away at the last second. I wasn't sure what to do next, but we had a short conversation — thanks, keep up the good work — and Pamela and I left.

A few weeks ago, at the opening of the new language institute at the University of East Timor, I saw Bishop Belo give a rousing speech of support and encouragement. When the ceremony was over, the Bishop was ushered out by the rector of the university, the head of education in East Timor and the director of the language institute. They walked with him to his waiting car and he stretched his hand out to them. Once again I was taken by surprise: instead of shaking it, they each leaned down and kissed his ring.

I know a 60-year-old radical nun from Brazil who recently visited East Timor



The cathedral in downtown Dili. This architectural monstrosity looks like a Maltese cross when viewed from above and was built with unwanted support from Indonesia.

to carry out training in community-based education, literacy and grassroots organizing. She passed up an opportunity to meet the world-famous Bishop Belo, allowing that she hadn't kissed any rings for decades, and was not missing the experience.

Ring kissing (not only bishops', but also priests') is one of the many indications that the Catholic Church in East Timor is extremely conservative. Some would say it still lives in the days of Colonial Portugal. At the same time, the Church in East Timor was an absolutely crucial player in the resistance to the Indonesian occupation for 24 years, and continues to play an enormous role both in people's everyday lives and in the political economy of East Timor.

I met a man who told me tales from recent East Timorese history, as so many East Timorese are anxious to do. When he got to the part about how Indonesia had accused East Timor of being communist, he said,

"But they were wrong. East Timor has never been communist. We are one hundred percent Catholic."

He was not far off: around 90 percent of East Timorese claim Catholicism. (It remains unknown how many claim communism, though I could introduce him to several Catholic communists I have met.) In a bitter irony, the Indonesian occupation provided the greatest impetus toward conversion. Under the Indonesian moral law, one must claim a religion, and animism is not among the choices. Since few East Timorese were drawn to share the Muslim beliefs of their oppressors, the familiar Catholic faith was by far the most popular option. The result must be an all-time record for conversion: though the Church has been in East Timor for at least 300 years, as recently as 25 years ago Catholics amounted to only 10% of East Timor's population.¹

The first priest to visit East Timor was likely from another Southeast Asian mission. Goa, India, was made an official Metropolitan See of the Roman Catholic Church in 1558, and from that time on the Church worked hard at proselytizing this hemisphere. Priests were received better in some places than others, and the legend of the first priest's landing on East Timor rings quite true.

The story goes like this: There was an enormous party going on among the peoples of East Timor. All the kings and chiefs were dancing and singing; everyone was



Salesian nuns playing basketball at a retreat in Baukau. It is rare to see a nun out of habit here, even in unbearable heat. The white color is a bizarre impracticality in this land of dust and mud.

dressed up in their finest, and a large feast was in progress. Then someone spied a few ships on the horizon. Soon the ships drew near, and the crowd went to the ocean side to watch them come in. A man dressed in a long black robe with a cross on his chest was rowed from a ship to the shore.

Upon alighting in the sand, he proclaimed that he had come from a great land across the ocean to bring news of the King of Heaven, and to save their souls. The feasters were quick to reply: They had no use for the man's "king of heaven," they were currently doing all right and he better return to his boat and go back whence he came. The man in black then asked if his men could be permitted to fill their water jugs and they would be off. The East Timorese obliged, and went back to their festivities.

While drawing water, the men from the boat dropped an anchor into the well. They strung its chain back to the beach, rowed back and secured the chain to their ship. With a vehement prayer from the deck, the ships started away.

Soon the partying East Timorese noticed something peculiar — their land was moving! They rushed to the beach and saw that indeed, the chain had tightened and the boats were dragging the island back to Europe. All their knives and swords were useless on the chain, their gods unresponding, their begging in vain. Eventually

¹ Various small protestant churches exist in East Timor, and proselytizing work is being done by international protestant development/missionary organizations, but the Catholic faith is so deeply seated in the culture of East Timor that I don't give the protestants much chance for success.

they relented, welcomed the priest back to their island and invited him to teach them about the King of Heaven.

After this grand and mythical start, the Catholic Church found limited converts in East Timor. Success was greater, however, than on the nearby islands of Dutch-held Indonesia where the hold of Islam was tight. As the Portuguese gradually solidified their rule of the half-island of East Timor, the Church took an integral part in the colonizing process, and soon spread, though thinly, to all corners.

In the early 1920's, Portugal's government shifted to the hands of the fascists. Under Dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, the Church was essentially an arm of the government. In East Timor, a "native" could become an *assimilado* by speaking Portuguese, finishing school, paying taxes, wearing European clothes and being baptized Catholic. Only *assimilados* could hold government jobs. The Church was an institution for the educated and elite: the commoner had little reason to join, and most East Timorese continued to follow their many animist beliefs.

In an effort to raise conversion rates, some East Timorese Catholics were selected and trained to be priests and nuns. One, Don Martinho da Costa Lopes, was to become the first native leader of the Church in East Timor. Father Lopes succeeded Bishop Jose Joaquim Ribeiro, a Portuguese. Both Fathers wholeheartedly supported the

Salazar regime in Portugal, and saw to it that their followers did so as well. Father Lopes spent several years in Portugal as representative of East Timor on the Portuguese National Assembly, promoting East Timor as a colony with great economic potential, if only it could be developed.

In the years leading up to the Indonesian invasion of 1975, there were only around 30 priests and 30 nuns residing in East Timor, half of whom were East Timorese. While the population of Catholics was still quite small, locals as a whole respected them, and priests were sought as mediators between the political parties that arose after the fall of Salazar in 1974. Unfortunately, the mediation was far from unbiased. Father Lopes was not fond of Fretilin — the most popular party to this day — because there were communists among its central-committee members. Bishop Ribeiro actually published a pastoral letter in 1975 forbidding Catholics to vote for communists or socialists. There is also some suspicion that he was in communication with intelligence forces from Indonesia.

Nevertheless, Indonesia's brutal invasion of East Timor was a shock to Bishop Ribeiro and the entire Church in East Timor. Ribeiro stayed on as Bishop for a year and a half, despite the fact that most other Portuguese had fled. He resigned in 1977, overwhelmed by the difficulty of the situation. Instead of naming Father Lopes as bishop, the Vatican withdrew the position of





May is called the month of Maria. Every night, a little statue of the Virgin Mother is brought to a new home to stay the night and bless the family. It is a huge affair and the party can go on till dawn, complete with music and a generator if the power goes out. As the Virgin makes her rounds, each house makes space for her and contributes money to the local church. These photos are from the evening the Virgin entered the house of our neighbors Pedru and Joanna Tilman. The Virgin had spent the night in a neighbor's place. They then carried Her with much singing and praying down the street and to the elaborate gateway put up outside the Tilmans' front door. Pedru and Joanna then received Her with a ceremony and more song and prayer. Upon entry to their house, She was propped up in the front room to observe the house.

Bishop from East Timor, and installed Lopes instead as "Apostolic Administrator."

The Vatican was to hold an extremely controversial position on East Timor for the entire Indonesian occupation. Never once did the Vatican make a clear statement on the immense injustice and cruelty of the Indonesian military in East Timor. What's more, it periodically made life difficult for both Father Lopes and his successor, Bishop Belo. The reason for the Vatican's position is as clear as the reason behind the U.S. and Australian governments' deplorable position on East Timor: With a population of 220 million and plentiful resources ripe for exploitation, Indonesia is a fat jewel in the crown of Southeast Asia. East Timor, with less than a million people and limited resources, is just a pebble in the dirt. Indonesia is only 6 percent Catholic, but 6 percent of 220 million is still 12 times the entire population of East Timor. Thus the Vatican consistently followed the advice of the Indonesian Bishops Conference (which was aligned with the Suharto government) and did little to help rectify the situation in East Timor. In 1980, as tens of thousands of East Timorese were dying from hunger after being dislo-

cated from their farmland by the Indonesian military, Pope John Paul II mentioned only "drought-stricken victims of East Timor" in an address on the condition of the world.

In this light, it is all the more incredible to learn what the Catholic Church in East Timor was able to do in response to the genocide of its people. From the day of the invasion, Father Lopes took on the responsibility of documenting atrocities, protecting fugitives, mediating with the military and sending out to the world information on current conditions. Priests throughout the land also risked their lives to extend these services. The Church was the solitary entity able to perform these roles. As Rowena Lennox points out in her biography of Lopes, "The Catholic Church was the only organization in East Timor with infrastructure and independent links to the outside world." And while the Vatican was not interested, there were many other Catholic entities across the globe following every move.

Father Lopes scoured the Bishops Conferences of Southeast Asia and Australia to find sympathetic souls

to whom he could pass his information. He brought the issue of serious human-rights abuses up to Indonesian military commanders on several occasions. He was instrumental in getting Catholic Relief Services and the International Committee of the Red Cross into East Timor during the military-induced famine of 1979 and 1980. He openly proposed a referendum to allow the East Timorese to decide their own fate. He got the Vatican to sanction mass in Tetum, the lingua franca of East Timor.²

Father Lopes paid dearly for his outspokenness. In 1983 Australian officials visited East Timor with the clear purpose of discounting or downplaying the gravity of the situation. They pressed Lopes for evidence of the many massacres his priests had documented and were unimpressed by his answers. Later that year, the Vatican representative to Indonesia forced Lopes to resign, citing political contentions, and hand-picked another East Timorese, Carlos Belo, to take Lopes' place. It is widely rumored that Belo, age 35, was chosen for his meekness and obedient manners. Lopes was not pleased with the choice, but was not permitted to stay around and com-



The statue of Christ the King stands on a jutting peninsula 4 kilometers from Dili. This statue was also an unwanted gift from Indonesia in 1996, and was to be a symbol of Indonesian support for East Timor's culture. At that time, over 200,000 East Timorese had died as a result of the Indonesian occupation.

plain: he was immediately forced into exile in Portugal.

Soon thereafter, however, Father Lopes was encouraged by word received from Belo that he had taken up all Lopes' old duties. After a detailed documentation of killings, torture and other human-rights abuses, Belo wrote: "I ask you, Monsignor, to continue to pray for us and to launch an appeal to the free world to open its eyes to the barbarities of which the Indonesians are capable." Until his death in 1991, Father Lopes did just that.

Belo was persecuted immediately in his new role both by Indonesian forces that shadowed him night and day and by the Vatican. He continued to speak out about the abysmal situation in East Timor, and proclaimed his willingness to be removed for speaking the truth. During his first year, he made many enemies in Indonesia. This in turn helped gain him acceptance among the priests of East Timor who had originally questioned his qualifications.

But Belo became less outspoken, and made few public statements or moves in the international arena in the late 80's. Some say he was sealing his position as bishop; others say he was buckling under to Indonesian pressure. At any rate, when his title was raised to Bishop in 1988, all of East Timor was happy. Dili Diocese had a proper bishop once again. And as bishop, Belo renewed his open struggle for the people of East Timor.

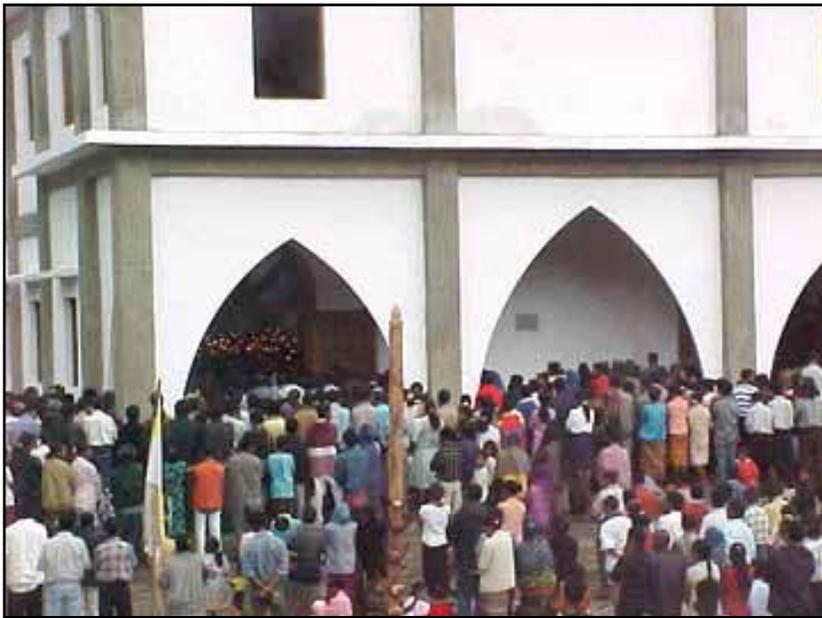
In 1989, Bishop Belo wrote to then-UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, calling for a popular referendum in East Timor because "We are dying as a nation." He continued to press the Vatican to take a stand on East Timor, and hosted Pope John Paul II in Dili in 1989. Belo's life was threatened several times. After the Santa Cruz Massacre in 1991, in which the Indonesian military killed well over 200 peaceful demonstrators and 200 more disappeared, Belo gave sanctuary to hundreds in his compound despite military intimidation. He counseled both Xanana Gusmao, the armed guerilla resistance leader, and student activists on their plans and methods.

In 1996, after several more years of outspoken criticism of the Indonesian military along with steady efforts to bring justice to his people, Bishop Belo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, together with Jose Ramos Horta, the international spokesperson for the East Timorese resistance. With this added credential, Belo went on to make even bolder statements condemning Indonesia's military atrocities in Aceh and other places across the archipelago. Belo also made the Church in East Timor active in preparations for the referendum of 1999, in which the East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence.

Belo's recent biography, "From the Place of the Dead," by Arnold Kohen, reads like a typical hero's tale. Nary a

² This move was a great boost for the development and standardization of the Tetum language. Books and pamphlets were written and literacy courses were conducted in order to teach the Catechism in Tetum.

I went with Pedru and his family to visit his hometown of Maubisse on the opening day of its new church. I saw this church under construction when Pamela and I visited East Timor in 1997. The entire town and many surrounding villages turned up for the opening. Both Bishops were there, and around 100 youth received their first communion. We showed up late and so had to stand outside, but I could see the raised candles of the congregation inside through one door. After the inordinately long mass, Pedru and I slipped in through a side door to see a throng of youth charge the pulpit. When they had all had their photos taken, it was Pedru's turn.



criticism can be found in 300 pages. But here in East Timor, I have heard more than a few criticisms of the Bishop, and many carry over to the Church as a whole. Common people admire him single-heartedly, but elitism, ultraconservatism, posh living with scant giving, and lack of action on crucial social issues are all common critiques of Belo and his Church from intellectuals in East Timor.

I have seen good basis for these criticisms. The posh living of clergy is easy to observe. Bishop Belo is building a new house from the ruins of the one that was destroyed by the Indonesian military-supported militias in 1999. It is a beautiful, grand building, and has invoked criticism in light of the fact that many people in East Timor have yet to realize a stable food supply. The other bishop of East Timor, Basilio do Nascimento of Baukau, is also

constructing an enormous new building for his diocese. It is not clear where the money comes from to do these projects, but in them the priorities of the Church are laid bare.

I work with a nun involved in a teacher-training institute here and meet with her frequently. I prefer to meet her at the convent, because I know I'll be offered yogurt, Coke, cake and other treats not widely available here. In fact, there are a large number of nuns who are noticeably heavy. To get fat in East Timor requires a lot of money.

In the foyer of this colleague's convent hangs a huge painting of their patron saint. Clothed in an immaculate white gown, she is standing with a basket of bread in the open door of an elegant stone building. She emanates holy light. Around the door are huddled ill-clad beggars,

vagrants, orphans, dogs and other rabble of society. With a flawless, white face of angelic sweetness, she hands out her bread into the bitterness of the night.

It is not clear from the picture where this woman got her bread or her dress, but this same set-up can be observed in many Church-led projects: charity given without analysis as to why the situation is so grim for some, so sweet for others.

Priests I've seen here tend to display the stereotypical fatherly image, and often the fatherly stretches to paternalistic. Last March I was doing teacher training that included some activities investigating our heart, and concluded with the dissection of a cow heart. One teacher wanted to bring the pieces home when we were done and give them to his son who was sick (heart meat is quite expensive here). There was a "brother" — a priest-to-be — in the class, and he sternly reminded the man that it was a Friday of Lent. He told the teacher straight out: "You can't eat this today." Since the man had no refrigerator, the meat went to waste.

The Church of East Timor holds extremely conservative views on women. No pants are to be worn to mass; only dresses. Wives must submit to their husbands and divorce is nearly impossible. I heard Bishop Belo himself make two cutting remarks about women in his Maundy Thursday address this year. His theme was arrogance and its deleterious effect on East Timor. He lamented that no one wants to work and everyone wants to be president: farmers, teachers, soldiers, *even* women want to be president! Later, he said people need to accept their positions and learn to "bow" — that is, submit — more often: students bow to teachers, children bow to parents, wives bow to husbands.

Given the enormous incidence of domestic violence in East Timor today, this is extremely troubling advice. Far from taking a strong stand against domestic violence, the Church in fact puts great pressure on women's organizations to avoid presenting divorce as an alternative, and to focus all efforts on reconciling husband and wife. Fokupers, a major women's organization that focuses on assisting women survivors of violence, has dealt with several cases of domestic violence that have resulted in divorce. Now Fokupers suffers the wrath of the Church, a wrath made tangible through the great political power it holds.³

At a fundamental level, many critics hold that the Church focuses on the spiritual and ritual at the expense of the practical. In homily after homily, priests encourage a righteous, holy life with no mention of the elements

needed to sustain that life physically. Mass is a must, whatever the event: birth, death, marriage, sickness, holiday, etc., but few are the cases of the Church helping to run (or even encouraging) economic cooperatives, community-education projects or health programs.

Some of the many Catholic organizations in East Timor are exceptions to this norm. The Salesians, Canossians, Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Mary Knoll Sisters, Ursuline Sisters and Marist Brothers are all here with members from across the globe. Often these organizations have missions with practical outcomes that directly assist locals to better their lives. The Mary Knoll Sisters in Aileu teach and run a small agricultural cooperative. The Marist Brothers in Baukau are starting a teacher-training center. The Salesians and Canossians run some of the best schools in the country, and focus on the growth of quality education. I have done teacher trainings at three different schools run by Catholic organizations. I was drawn to them because they were organized and had adequate facilities. I'm more interested in working with the decrepit public schools, but currently the level of chaos in the public schools is very high and it is difficult to get much accomplished. The Catholic schools as a whole exhibit much more discipline and rigor. (They also charge tuition.)

Pamela and I know two East Timorese women who left the convent to take on grassroots activist work. These two women have personally taken the vows of a nun, and are in good stead with the Bishop, but run their operations apart from the Church. One is Sister Maria Dias, who runs a free health clinic in a suburb of Dili and on the island of Atauro, and does broad-reaching community-health projects. The other is Sister Maria Lourdes, who has started her own Catholic order and trains young women and a few men to live within a community and work together with others to meet their needs, both spiritual and physical. Sister Lourdes also shelters dozens of orphans and children from poor homes in her houses throughout the country.⁴ Both these sisters openly criticize the Church as being overly pious, hierarchical, hypocritical and not concerned with bettering the physical lives of its most needy members.

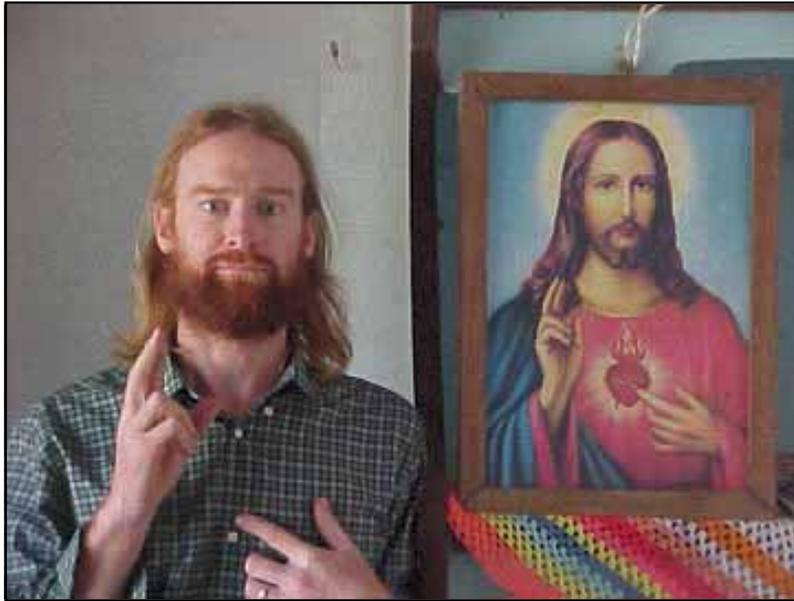
The staunch ritualism of the Catholic Church fits nicely with that of the animist beliefs of East Timor. Traditionally there was a holy man (not a woman — the gender bias fits well too) with great authority in the community, who could perform rituals for each event of life. As in many converted areas of the world, the old ways die slowly. People still have great respect for traditional holy men, as well as holy places and objects. When someone dies, the long sequence of ritual that takes place comes from

³ Politicians must always act like good Catholics if they are to go far in politics. Fokupers is thus also a target for certain politicians. Dr. Sergio Lobo, former Surgeon General for East Timor, is one major critic. Fokupers provided services to his wife after he had beaten her with a stick and injected her with a tranquilizer from a syringe he had hidden in his sock. Now she lives in a Fokupers domestic-violence safe house, and Lobo claims Fokupers is breaking up his home.

⁴ In my sixth newsletter, I told of how Sister Lourdes took a great risk by traveling to West Timor to minister to the refugees there.

both traditional and Catholic law and practice.

To a mostly illiterate population, rituals are extremely important. So are images, as I have come to find out. Soon after I arrived, I began to notice people saying the name of Jesus in my presence. They would look at me, sometimes point, and say with awe, "Jesus!" Soon I realized they thought I resembled Jesus. Since then, I have seen paintings of Jesus hanging in many homes. All portray a Northern European man's face, not at all the Middle-Eastern stock from which Jesus sprang (nor at all similar to East Timorese features). I have tried to explain this geographical impossibility many a time, and sometimes elaborate on the dissimilarities between myself and Jesus (perhaps least of which is appearance). But several times a week, I still hear the call: "Jesus!"



Christ-like? You be the judge.

The familiarity of the Church makes it a strong political entity. In July, the Catholic Church of East Timor held a conference on its relation to the state and emerging government of East Timor. Hundreds attended to hear Church officials from East Timor and abroad speak together with local politicians and representatives of civic groups.

In Bishop Belo's address, he said the Church will be nonpartisan, yet take a great interest in seeing a democratic government take root. He made clear that the Church is to "serve humanity, establish a reign of peace, justice and love." He talked much about truth, justice, solidarity, democracy and liberty. But his speech also im-

plored order, obedience and submission to authority. He went so far as to state that even non-Christians "can not ignore the presence of the Church" in East Timor, and that to chart the path of the country without connection to the Catholic Church would, "manifest immaturity and unrealism."

The Catholic faith is indeed deeply ingrained in the culture of East Timor. This makes the Church and its leaders, if not the strongest political entity, certainly the strongest moral authority in the land. With its nonpartisan voice, the Church could do much in the struggle to end violence between youth gangs, between political parties and within homes. Or, it could continue to prioritize dogmatic ritual and emphasize the spiritual while largely ignoring the physical. How the Church chooses to use its enormous power in East Timor will be one of the great determining factors in the future of this nation. □

For further information:

Studies in Languages and Cultures of East Timor, Volume 2, Edited by Geoffrey Hull and Lance Eccles, Academy of ET studies, University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, 1999

William Brennan, *Relations between the Catholic Church in Australia and the Catholic Dioceses of East Timor*, Address given at the Sydney conference "East Timor towards Self Determination, 15 July, 1999

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