

VOLUNTEERS ROLL UP THEIR SLEEVES TO ENHANCE LOCAL TIMOR-LESTE SCHOOL

“Oh to be in East Timor when the rains come” – so sang Fr Tom Brophy and myself on the balcony of the Loreto home in Bacau, Timor-Leste. To rejoice with the locals after such a dry spell was just wonderful as everyone was smiling.



We had come at the invitation of Loreto Sister Natalie Houlihan to assist as volunteers with the painting of a government primary school in the remote area of Gari-uai. It was our task to support the Loreto Sisters in their quest to improve the standard of education for children in the region. The restoration of the old primary school was a critical step in that objective.

We were assisted by several members of the local community as well as Sisters Natalie and Francine Roberts in the preparation and painting of the school.

Admittedly, neither of us are tradesman or painters. However, with some common sense, guidance and direction from Sr Natalie and our foreman Martinus, the essential preparation of the wall surfaces progressed. We must not ignore the assistance of the school children and the dozens of young observers!



The work was an example of Loreto’s engagement with and inspiring the local community to improve the educational standards of Timor-Leste, one of the poorest countries in the world.

We witnessed the energy and ability of the Loreto Sisters to establish authentic relations with the local community. To facilitate the work, provide equipment, supervise and join in the labour whilst also attending to the educational needs of the classes of children who had no teacher. We noticed several teachers were absent for the day as they had travelled to Bacau, over 30 km away to collect their monthly wage in cash from the one and only bank.

Sr Natalie also organised for us to stay overnight with a Timorese family. This social experiment was a wonderful success. We were the recipients of great kindness and hospitality. The children were delighted with the skipping ropes, bubble blowers and rosary beads they received from us. Importantly both parties acquired a heightened understanding and appreciation of our respective cultures.

The main highlight of our trip was to witness the dedication of the Loreto Sisters in Timor-Leste. It was their founder Mary Ward who urged members of her Order "to bring those forced to live in poverty to the centre of their lives. To go where the need is greatest. To acknowledge vulnerability and fragility". Fr Tom and myself observed numerous examples of the Loreto's selfless energy and commitment in reflecting those values in Timor-Leste, in particular helping to lift the educational and health standards of the local community.

What a great privilege and pleasure it has been for us to witness such inspirational women who are all shining examples of the spirit of Mary Ward.

Words: Volunteer, Professor Andrew Finlay

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