

THE SEEDS OF MORNESE IN TIMOR. FMA CONTRIBUTION TO THE IMPLANTATION OF THE SALESIAN CHARISM

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Introduction

The present paper, a textual elaboration of the power-point presented at the Batulao Seminar, tries to re-capture the salient moments in the history of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) in Timor (and Indonesia) from their arrival up to the present day. Our presence in this land is rather recent considering that we arrived in Timor only in 1988. The development of the Salesian presence and charism through the dedicated and sacrificing service of the sisters, despite the severe challenges they faced, is delineated in this paper. The gradual expansion of the FMA presence through the opening of new foundations along with the vicissitudes that accompanied them and the attention the sisters paid to the Salesian values, in particular the education of the young, constitute the central theme of the paper. In the step by step development of the Salesian activities, starting from the first years under the auspices of the Philippine Province, the establishment later of the Vice-Province of “Mary, our Help” consisting of Timor, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar (Burma) in 1997, and following further growth the erection of the Vice-Province of St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello comprising only of East Timor and Indonesia in 2003 are landmarks.

The narrative is based on the oral testimonies of sisters who pioneered Salesian missionary work in Timor, on the chronicles of the houses and on the “Elenco”¹ of the Institute.

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¹ ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Elenco generale 2008*, vol. I, Roma, Istituto FMA 2007.

A general picture of Timor with particular reference to the religious values of the Timorese sets the background to the educative and pastoral action of the FMA in this land.

1. Brief Historical Background of East Timor

The East Timorese, living in the eastern half of the island of Timor, which lies between Indonesia and Australia, occupy a territory whose area is 14,874 square km. Timor is a small crocodile-shaped island situated north-west of Australia. For historical reasons East Timor, a Portuguese colony from 1516 to 1975, shares a common boundary with West Timor which is part of Indonesia, the former Dutch East Indies. The population of East Timor in 1975 when the Portuguese left was 680,000, consisting of 97% Timorese (including *mestizos*), 2% Chinese and less than 1% Portuguese.

For centuries the East Timorese had been farmers, living in scattered hamlets, eating what they grew. Only a few coastal East Timorese were fishermen. Trading and shop-keeping had for generations been in the hands of the Chinese.

East Timor is extremely mountainous; hence the majority of East Timorese had always lived in isolation, far from towns and foreign influences, tied to their fields and animistic practices. In spite of centuries of Catholic missionary work by the Portuguese, in 1975 animists still numbered as much as 72 % of the population. The local Timorese kings still played an important role in their lives and allegiances, whilst interference from Portuguese administrators and military was almost non-existent.

Timor spent more than four centuries under Portuguese rule before Indonesia annexed it in 1975. Following a long period of political and social unrest, the United Nations, Indonesia and Portugal agreed to hold a referendum on 30 August 1999 on the future status of East Timor. The referendum produced an overwhelming mandate for independence and triggered widespread violence which resulted in the displacement of about two-thirds of the population, the loss of

many lives, damage and destruction of property and a serious disruption of economic activity.

Major damages were sustained by the educational infrastructure in East Timor. Community and social infrastructure where education and schooling were imparted was severely disrupted. Buildings, furniture, teaching materials and above all human resources were lost.²

On 20 May 2002 it became the smallest and youngest country of the new millennium.

2. Religious Values of the Timorese

The Timorese have a great sense of the Transcendent as a fundamental need of moral life. In the past every tribe had a temple called '*uma lulik*' (sacred temple) which is found even today in certain zones. It used to be in the center of the village, the symbol of strength, power and protection for all. It was elevated from the ground and supported by various pilasters to indicate that there is no fusion between the earthly and the sacred. The roof is rather high and large, symbolizing the height and omnipotence of the Divine. It was the place where all the people of the village gathered for the religious ceremonies to express their devotion through rites, songs, offerings and prayers.

Deep in the souls of these people is one certainty: the faithfulness of the Divinity. He who is sacred, *lulik*, is faithful to himself, to his promises and his will. The trust in such faithfulness not only offers a sense of security in daily life but also arouses as a response, the faithfulness of man to the Divine.

² In September 1999 the zone of Lospalaos where the FMA community of Blessed Maddalena Morano is situated, was particularly affected by the destruction carried out by the militias. The boarding school and the rooms for vocational training activities were bombed and the community residence ransacked. The school of Blessed Eusebia community in Comoro too was burned and destroyed.

The deep faith in the Divinity arouses in the consciousness of the Timorese people a lively sense of good and evil. The Divinity is considered the seat of goodness and justice and as such it directs human behavior.

The sense of solidarity is deeply rooted in the souls of the people of Timor and is not limited to the need of mutual cooperation only. Solidarity is lived for truly deep and transcendent reasons: most of all since it is pleasing to the Divinity. Hence gestures of mutual solidarity are numerous and frequent in every tribe, be it for moral support or material help. Hospitality is the privileged expression of this solidarity. For this reason the homes remain always open.

The Timorese have a special veneration for the dead. The belief in the life hereafter places the dead in proximity with the living. They are felt as present and active in interpersonal and family relationships as well as in the significant moments of life. The dead are entrusted above all with the task of mediation with the Divinity.

The population of the Eastern zone has known Christianity through Portuguese colonization 400 years ago. The proclamation of the Good news in all the villages and the spontaneous response of conversion are developments of later years. Perhaps it has been prompted by the sufferings caused by the war, when the people of Timor experienced the difficulties of wandering from place to place, without the stability of a home or the securities of life.

However, the vital integration between faith and culture is not easy because the deep cultural values of this population were ignored by Christianity since its beginnings, that is from the time of colonization under the cultural influx of diverse nationalities – first Portuguese and after 1975 Indonesian. There is the need to heal the Timorese wounded by pressures of various kinds and help them be themselves, purify even their quest and acceptance of God and their way of responding to Him.

3. The FMA in East Timor-Indonesia

“Main³, we are waiting for you”. This was the significant word of welcome to Sr Lina Chiantotto, Visitor to the Missions and Sr Florita Dimayuga, her secretary, who came to visit Timor for the first time in 1987. After the visit it was decided to send FMA missionaries to Timor to open a presence in Venilale - Baucau, and for the first time the “seed of Mornese” was sown in Timorese soil. This visit was in response to the letter sent by a group of young Timorese girls who asked Mother General, Mother Marinella Castagno, to send sisters to Timor. These were the group of young girls being followed up by Fr Joao de Deus, a Portuguese Salesian, missionary in Timor for many years. He suggested to this group of young girls to write a letter to the Mother General. Some of these young girls became the first Timorese FMA.

On 2 October 1988 the first three FMA arrived in Venilale thus completing the Salesian Family in Timor. The three pioneer FMA missionaries who started the presence in this breathtaking island of the great archipelago in the Pacific were Sr Paola Battagliola (Italian), Sr Maria Fe Silva (Filipina) and Sr Marlene Bautista (a Filipina-American citizen). The mission in Timor was entrusted to the care of the Philippine Province under Sr Anna Maria Mattiussi, the Provincial superior until 1991, followed by Sr Felicidad Boado, her successor from 1991 to 1997.

The sisters assumed the care of 150 orphan boys and girls from 1 to 16 years of age. The arrival of the sisters brought hope also to the hearts of many young girls who had been expressing the desire to answer God’s call to work for young people.

The sisters didn’t have a house of their own yet. They first stayed with a family – that of Aleixo and Maria Ximenes. The first months were an experience of sharing apostolic concerns and the difficulties of adaptation. The first young pre-aspirants⁴ who lived

³ “Main”, a term used to refer to Mother Mazzarello.

⁴ They were Floriana Guterres, Jacinta Maria Gusmão, Alexandrina Pinto, Olga da Conceição Belo, Justina Lopes, Ermelinda Gomes and Simoa.

with the sisters as they arrived, learned quickly that our trademark is the family spirit, the deep joy that warms up even the most difficult situations. All of them became FMA except Simoa who left during the novitiate.

The first house dedicated to Mary Help of Christians opened its doors for the first time to the girls who came for vocation encounter on 8 December 1988.

An oratory was started, and with the help of the pre-aspirants also the teaching of religion in village schools. Thanks to new activities and initiatives, often carried out in collaboration with the Salesians, the seeds gradually sprouted and grew. The local people could read our spirituality in what we were doing:

- Our preferential love for the young and the effort to work with them, making them assume the central role
- The way we shared our life as in a family, especially with the orphans and the young people in formation
- The emphasis and care given to the educational aspect and the joy of serving God in our brothers and sisters
- Solidarity with the poorest
- Care for the sick who continually came to our doors
- Work seen and done as a participation in the building of the Kingdom.

With the coming of the new missionary sisters our Salesian family was able to widen its horizons! A house in Dili was opened on 6 August 1990. The sisters were asked to teach in Kristal school. Soon the house was filled with young people looking for a family-like environment where they could express the richness of their inner resources. The oratory was thus born. The new house of "Don Bosco" was also characterized by simplicity and joy, openness and solidarity with the poorest.

In this small Southeast Asian island, we have received a lot of gifts from God and from our Mother, Mary Help of Christians,

especially the frequent visits of our Superiors. These have helped strengthen our unity in the charism and the sense of belonging to our Institute. One big gift was the first visit of Mother General Marinella Castagno in August 1993. She came to share our joy for the grace of the first profession of the first five Timorese FMAs on 15 August 1993 in Venilale. The Institute by this time had taken root in Timorese soil! The first five Timorese FMA are Sr Floriana Gutteres, Sr Jacinta Maria Gusmão, Sr Alexandrina Pinto, Sr Olga da Conceição Belo and Sr Justina Lopes.

4. Opening of New Missionary Presences

The seed has borne fruit and thanks to our new missionary presences, our service for the Kingdom has acquired quality and depth. We could thus respond better to the needs of young people. A rapid glance at the succession of new presences started bears witness to the marvelous growth of the seed that was planted in Timor.

A new vocational school was opened in Venilale in August 1994. It aimed to equip young women with skills with which they could find work and thus become active and empowered women, and responsible mothers in society.

In August 1995 another branch sprouted giving life to the new community of Maddalena Morano in the far Eastern side of the island, in the district of Fuiloro, Lospalos-Lautem. The sisters were asked to open a boarding house for the girls who were attending the agricultural school of the Salesians.

In April 1996 a house was opened in Laga to coincide with the Feast of Gratitude to Mother Marinella.⁵ She was present when this house was blessed and inaugurated. The sisters opened a home for the many orphaned children of this land and also engaged in youth ministry.

⁵ In 1996 Mother Marinella Castagno chose East Timor for the 'Feast of Gratitude', occasion for the entire congregation to thank Mother General, who selects alternately a province in Italy and one outside for this yearly celebration.

January 1997 saw the birth of the new Vice-Province of “Mary, our Help” consisting of Timor, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar. Sr Lina Chiandotto was appointed Superior of the Vice-Province. Guided until then (1988-1996) by the Philippine Province in our educative pastoral work, we began thereafter to share the joys and labour of the apostolate with these nations.

In the same year (1997), the seed which had by then grown into a young tree, began to draw life-giving sap from its own soil. A novitiate was opened in Dili in August. The decision to open a novitiate was with a view to imparting a more inculturated formation.⁶

The tree continued to give life to new shoots. In 1998 we were asked to run the Catholic elementary school in Comoro, Dili. The challenge was made even greater by the war which destroyed part of the school but also saw an increase in the number of children we ministered to.

The new community of “Regina Pacis” in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, was opened in August 1999 prior to the tragic events that followed the referendum in East Timor. This community was opened to facilitate the studies of the sisters and to provide accommodation to sisters in transit. The first steps were quickly taken to respond to requests of the local church for the animation of activities for the children and young people.

The General Chapter XXI of the FMA marked a new phase in our journey, an important stage for the FMA in East Timor. Thanks to the growth of the presences and increase in the number of sisters, in June 2003 the Vice-Province of “St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello” consisting only of *Timor Leste* (East Timor) and Indonesia was canonically erected with the Provincial House in Comoro, Dili, and Sr Maria Lourdes Pino Capote its first Superior.

The growth of this tree continues to amaze us. Two new foundations were established within a year in Comoro, Dili. First,

⁶ In the period 1989-1995 the pre-aspirants were sent to the Philippines for their formation up to the novitiate.

“St. Joseph”, the Provincial House of the new Vice-Province and novitiate, was opened in August 2003, and secondly, the community of “Blessed Eusebia Palomino” was finally set up in September. The latter was previously attached to the “St. John Bosco” community in Balide, when the elementary school was initially opened.

In September 2004 another shoot grew up in Baucau: the “St. Teresa of Avila” community for student sisters and for prison ministry and other pastoral activities.

The tree strikes its roots more deeply. In August 2006 a new presence was established in the island of Sumba, Indonesia – the “St. Mary Mazzarello” community – at the request of the Bishop for pastoral activities and teaching in the parochial school of Palla, Sumba.

With the help of “Misereor”, “Manos Unidas”, “IMRS” and “CEI” the John Paul II Center was inaugurated on 27 December 2006 to conduct formation programmes, seminars and workshops at all levels. This center is directly dependent on the Provincial Council and Sr Paola Battagliola, the Provincial Vicar, is directly in charge.

The tree keeps growing with the blessing of Divine Providence. “St. Mary Mazzarello” Vice-Province of Timor-Indonesia opened the first presence of the FMA in the Western part of East Timor on 9 August 2008 in Kailaku, Maliana-Bobonaro. The “Blessed Maria Romero” community was opened in response to the request of Bishop Alberto Ricardo da Silva, who wanted to have the FMA in this area where there are no religious congregations, in order to collaborate in the work of evangelization through the teaching of religion in the pre-secondary and secondary schools and the formation of catechists. There is no Salesian (SDB) presence yet in this area.

5. FMA Communities in East Timor-Indonesia Today

The extent of the growth and fructification of the seed planted in Timor may be measured by the communities dedicated to pastoral and educational services today. An analysis of the various activities they are engaged in on behalf of the youth and the poor reveals the fidelity of the first generation of FMA in this land to their mission,

with regard to the choice of the services offered and the beneficiaries, as well as their commitment to implanting the genuine Salesian charism on Timorese soil. The highest priority given to the education of youth in the Don Bosco way is obvious.

2.1. *“Maria Ausiliatrice”, VENILALE, Baucau*

Diocese of Baucau, East Timor

Founded in 1988 as requested by the Salesians for the administration and care of the orphanage

Activities:

- orphanage
- pre-aspirantate
- oratories in villages
- teaching religion in public schools
- vocational animation
- evangelization

2.2. *“St. John Bosco”, DILI Balide*

Diocese of Dili, East Timor

Founded in 1990 for teaching and pastoral activities in the city

Activities:

- formation house for aspirants and postulants
- oratory
- typing and computer course
- teaching in elementary and high school
- collaboration in the diocesan youth ministry
- pastoral work in the parish
- hospital ministry

2.3. *“St. Mary Mazzarello”, VENILALE, Baucau*

Diocese of Baucau, East Timor

Founded in 1995 to offer vocational training to girls

(The school was started in 1994, but the community was established in 1995)

Activities:

- technical professional school
- boarding
- oratory and pastoral services
- evangelization and human promotion
- health services / 'Mary Help of Christians Clinic'
- collaboration with the Marist Brothers in the College of Baucau

2.4. *"Blessed Maddalena Morano", FUILOORO, Lospalos*

Diocese of Baucau, East Timor

Founded in 1995 at the request of the Salesians for the care of the boarding for girls studying in the agricultural school

Activities:

- boarding
- professional courses (one year course in computer and sewing)
- direction of and teaching in the Salesian elementary and high schools
- oratories in villages
- pastoral activities
- teaching in the pre-novitiate of the Salesians (SDB)

2.5. *"Blessed Laura Vicuna", LAGA, Baucau*

Diocese of Baucau, East Timor

Founded in 1996 as requested by the Salesians for the care of the orphanage

Activities:

- orphanage
- oratories
- formation of catechists

- parish activities
- teaching in the school
- pastoral activities

2.6. *“Regina della Pace”, JAKARTA, Indonesia*

Diocese of Jakarta, Indonesia

Founded in 1999 to welcome student sisters and sisters in transit

Activities:

- community for student sisters
- accommodation for sisters in transit
- collaboration in the parish
- teaching religion in the school

2.7. *“Blessed Eusebia Palomino”, DILI, Comoro*

Diocese of Dili, East Timor

Founded in 1999 to open a kindergarten and elementary school (initially part of “St. John Bosco” community; established as a separate community in 2003)

Activities:

- kindergarten and elementary school
- oratory
- pastoral work in the parish
- collaboration with the diocese in the education sector

2.8. *“St. Joseph”, DILI, Comoro*

Diocese of Dili, East Timor

Founded in 2003 as the new Provincial House and new novitiate

Activities:

- provincial house
- novitiate
- oratory
- coordination of formation programmes at the “John Paul II Center”

- teaching in elementary and high schools
- catechesis in the parish
- inter-congregational formation course for novices
- past pupils

2.9. *“St. Teresa of Avila”, BAUCAU*

Diocese of Baucau, East Timor

Founded in 2004 for student sisters and to respond to some pastoral requests of the Diocese

Activities:

- community for student sisters
- animation of groups of the Salesian family
(Association of Mary Help of Christians - ADMA)
- oratory
- prison apostolate

2.10. *“St. Mary Mazzarello”, PALLA, Sumba (Indonesia)*

Diocese of Weetebula, Indonesia

Founded in 2006

Activities:

- teaching in the elementary and high schools
- parish activities (catechesis, evangelization, liturgical animation)
- boarding

2.11. *“Blessed Maria Romero”, MALIANA, Kailaku*

Diocese of Dili, East Timor

Founded in 2008

Activities:

- teaching religion in pre-secondary and secondary schools
- youth ministry
- formation of catechists
- oratory

- parish activities (liturgical animation, catechesis, celebration of the Word)
- village visits
- promotion of young women

Conclusion

At present the Vice-Province has 71 sisters (56 Timorese, 4 Indonesian and 11 missionaries from Italy, Philippines, Spain, Poland and Colombia), trying to live in reciprocity and openness, giving love and hope to the people through our presence and offering as relevant a response as possible to the needs of the territory. There are 10 novices and around 15 young women in the aspirantate and postulancy. The communities number 11: in East Timor 9 and in Indonesia 2 (Jakarta and Sumba). The FMA continue to play an important role in the development of the country with the conviction that the real key to development is education. The sisters continue to give hope to the future generation. The FMA are strongly present in the field of education, both primary, secondary and vocational. They are also involved in the inter-congregational formation courses for novices and sisters. They run hostels, orphanages and a rural medical centre. One of their priorities is youth ministry which has the goal of forming oratory-animators, teachers, catechists and sisters in our charism, as well as of helping them to be familiar with and draw closer to the Word of God.

The challenges posed by the new situations and current reality of Timor, where the majority of our young people live in a situation of insecurity, disillusion, vulnerability, uncertainty and violence urge us to respond in creative ways. There is need to offer the young quality education, giving them the basic foundations and professional competence necessary to live responsibly, face their future with dignity and insert themselves in the social fabric with a sense of belonging to their own country. In order the better to orient and accompany the lives of our young people, help them become critical in a positive way and enable them to make courageous and proactive choices, as FMA

we feel the urgency of investing resources and energies in the education to peace and in the education to faith.

Looking at reality with the eyes of Mary our Help, we the Salesian family, courageously forge ahead together, educating the young in communion and to communion, taking practical steps to express visibly in this beloved land of Timor the greatness of the *love* we profess. We continue to spread our roots in Timorese and Indonesian soil, giving hope to the future generations, in the expectation that our endeavours may redound to the glory and praise of God.