

East Timor's Church stands with the people

Since the 1975 Indonesian invasion, the only indigenous Timorese institution that has been able to function fairly freely has been the Catholic Church. When Indonesia invaded, perhaps a third of the Timorese had adopted the faith brought by their Portuguese colonizers; today, 680,000 of the 800,000 people living in East Timor are Catholics. The bulk of the others are immigrants from Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country. East Timor joins the Philippines as the only two predominantly Catholic countries in Asia.

This change is partly due to Indonesian law requiring everyone to declare allegiance to a monotheistic religion. Traditional Timorese animism does not meet the requirements for an "official" religion, and its practice has largely been absorbed by Catholicism - a religion that has changed to accommodate indigenous beliefs.

The Diocese of East Timor remains separate from the Indonesian Church, directly administered by the Pope. It also has its own Bishop. The Church runs school, orphanages, aid programs, and many other Timor-wide programs. The church in East Timor has also become a space for resistance. Church protection makes organizing dissent easier, and has kept many protesters safe.

Timorese Bishop wins 1996 Nobel Peace Prize

East Timor's Bishop, Monsignor Carlos Ximenes Belo, first drew the anger of the Indonesian authorities by calling, in a 1989 letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations, for a referendum on self-determination to be held in East

Timor. "We are dying as a people and as a nation," he wrote. It took five years for the UN to acknowledge the letter.

Bishop Belo has upset the military by intervening on behalf of protesters. After the 1991 massacre at the Santa Cruz cemetery, when hundreds of unarmed Timorese were gunned down by Indonesian soldiers, Bishop Belo opened his home to protesters who would otherwise have been killed by the military. In this way, he has personally saved many lives.

Nominated three years running for the Nobel Peace Prize, he won it in 1996, sharing it with East Timorese activist José Ramos Horta.

A people's church

The importance the Church has assumed in the lives of many young Timorese was demonstrated in 1989, when a Mass conducted by the Pope

drew hundreds of thousands. The service, conducted over mass graves in the killing fields of Taci-Tolu outside Dili, was ending when young people in the crowd raised pro-independence banners welcoming the Pope. Those holding banners were attacked by Indonesian soldiers, while John Paul II looked on.

Speaking on the role of religion in the lives of the East Timorese, Bishop Belo has said: "You know, even as animists, the Timorese community have their vision, their beliefs, so that even as animists, we call them here 'gen-teels,' they believe in one God. They believe also in the eternal life of the souls of their relatives. And when they are presented with the opportunity to become Catholics, I see that there is a similarity between the Catholic faith and the local religious beliefs. Many people feel that it is natural to become Catholics and we see that our people have a simple faith, but are

*Bishop Carlos Belo, co-winner of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize
Photo: Hugh O'Shaughnessy*



very, very profound in this faith. Not intellectual, not theoretical but a kind of emotional faith, a living faith.... During the second world war when the bishop, the priests and sisters left to seek refuge in Australia for two years, here the people by themselves organised catechisms, baptisms and brought it to the forests and mountains, and took guard of the objects of the church. This is very significant - it shows the strength of the faith of the people."

Bishop Belo did not start off as an outspoken critic of human rights abuses. He was personally appointed in 1983 by the Pope, who is officially responsible for the Diocese of Dili. A Timorese-born Sulpician who was out of the country at the time of the Indonesian invasion, his appointment was opposed by radical Timorese priests who saw him as pro-Indonesian. These priests even showed their dislike by playing basketball during Belo's inaugural ceremony. But Bishop Belo has shown himself a strong defender of human rights and a passionate voice for justice.

Bishop Belo and the Church of East Timor have received strong support from U.S. and Canadian national Bishops organizations, plus Bishops in Australia (including Cardinal Clancy, Catholic Primate of the country), Japan, Portugal and elsewhere.

Church under attack

There have been death threats against Bishop Belo and many of his more outspoken priests in the past, but the military has generally

hesitated to directly attack the church. However, that has begun to change. Bishop Belo has warned of an "Islamicization" campaign, which also includes government support for Protestant missionaries more supportive of the Indonesian occupation.

The aim is to splinter the Church, dividing the people among themselves on religious grounds. The campaign has not won the hearts of the Timorese, however.

Since 1994, the military has turned to more direct intimidation. Soldiers have broken into churches; desecrated communion wafers during mass; harassed nuns; and smashed holy symbols like icons, pictures of the Virgin Mary, crosses, rosaries and Vatican flags. Thousands of Timorese respond to provocations like this by protesting in the streets - protests that are then attacked by the Indonesian military.

In June, 1996, for example, about 1,000 people protested in Baucau (the second-largest city in East Timor) after Indonesian soldiers desecrated a statue of the Virgin Mary in Baucau church. The march ended in bloodshed when police opened

fire on the crowd. The shooting sparked rioting that lasted into the next day, with at least two reported dead and

165 arrested. The whereabouts of those detained is still unknown. "The latest wave of violence and arrest are only the tip of the iceberg. The human rights situation in East

Timor has deteriorated seriously in the last two years," according to a statement on the incident by the Timorese resistance movement CNRM. In other demonstrations, Indonesian security police have broken up crowds with tear gas, police dogs and knives.

"East Timor is like hell," Bishop Belo has said. "Christians are constantly being arrested, beaten and intimidated by police." In an interview with Australian journalist John Pilger, Belo described the "routine nightmare that we live under" and lashed out at Western governments in particular.

"Their lies and hypocrisy are in the cause of economic interests," the Bishop said. "We ask the people of the world to understand this, and not to forget that we are here, struggling for life every day...you must understand that we are undergoing a

second colonization. If I am asked for one description, I would say we live as if under the old Soviet Union regime. For the ordinary people, there is no freedom, only a continuing nightmare."

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