

NEWS from

the Jesuits in Timor-Leste

June 2016



Being in East Timor

Time indeed travels fast. My time in East Timor came to an end as I departed Díli on the morning of 14th May. It was not an easy experience by any stretch of imagination but it was an experience from which I can draw much fruit. I hope I tried hard enough to make the most of it.

It was a formative experience in which I learned much about myself, and about being a Jesuit working in a place so different from other places where I have lived and worked. It took a long time for me to adjust to everything from culture and language to the construction business to the layered history and complexity of the Society of Jesus in Timor. It helped me to accept the limitations of this least Society in what it could do for the people of East Timor. It helped me to accept my limitations in what I could do in sharing our mission in East Timor.



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Being an architect, I was keen to solve problems but my 13 months in East Timor were an experience in struggling to 'be' with the problems as I was unable to 'do' something about every one of them that I encountered. The eventual peace in the 'being' could only be attained when I accepted that many questions would remain unanswerable for some time.

Being a Jesuit, I was eager to share in the mission of the Society in East Timor. Despite the responsibilities that I had on the ground, I was only one of the many people who worked and are still working hard to make reality the vision set out for the Kasait project. I was a worker among them in the service of this vision.

These 13 months have helped me know my personal needs and those that could sustain my life as a Jesuit - community life, and friendships within the Society. I have come to know and accept the complex reality of community life and the diversity of its members. I have come to accept the limitations of what the community can and cannot give me. Yet, I am grateful to have been cared for in my temporal needs and for a community that allowed me to be myself.



I am most grateful for the gift of friendship given by my Timorese Jesuit brothers as well as those from other places. Without their companionship and the opportunities to share deeply about life and work, my experience would have been much more challenging than it was.

It was a rather surreal departure from East Timor. It was hard to believe that I was really leaving even though I was looking forward to moving on. Now I realize I needed to mentally let go of the responsibilities I have physically handed over. This is something I will continue to learn in my Jesuit life.

I guess that writing a reflection on one's experience is part of the process of letting go and moving on. Maybe it can be about recalling the aspirations and dreams, and what one and others can achieve. Perhaps it can be about flushing out the long held questions and accepting that one can't give answers to some of them and to letting them go. Part of that reflection is quoted below. It is an essay I wrote for The Jesuit Post, published on 18 May.

I often wonder whether my work has helped grow ideas rooted in this country or has been yet another foreign influence dictating how things should work here. I have often asked myself, "What the heck am I doing here? Why is a local Timorese not doing this? Am I really helping at all?"

On one hand, I know that I have skills and ideas to contribute. On the other hand, the very skills and ideas can be seen as an imposition if not used with a sensitive approach.

For myself, the struggles have been the recurring questions. Where are the vernacular ideas in the buildings that I have helped build? How do the local Timorese see those buildings? Are the students able to learn better in those classrooms? Can they keep them well maintained? How can I engage and integrate the local ideas into innovative designs? Why haven't I been able to change some of the project management, construction, and building maintenance practices? Some of these questions remain unanswerable. Perhaps different questions should have been asked.

In the course of my one-year assignment in East Timor, I often wondered whether the ideas I helped to become buildings were coming from what is rooted deeply in this country. I often wondered whether those buildings would eventually become, as difficult and challenging as it is, distinctively Timorese architecture.

I'm content in handing over the responsibilities to my Timorese collaborator. He will face challenges and discover opportunities. Most importantly, the nation he builds is his own.

As I leave East Timor, Jacob Kushner helps sum up my sentiment rather fittingly: "To many of these people, simply experiencing a foreign culture is not enough. They must change that place for the better. ... I've come to believe that the first step toward making the world a better place is to simply experience that place." [*The Voluntourist's Dilemma*, *The New York Times*, 22 March 2016]

For myself, I hope that my being in East Timor, and not so much what I have done, was enough to help enable others to make East Timor a better place.

I remain hopeful that users will benefit from and readapt the buildings I helped to design and build. Thereby, they can continue to grow new ideas to express an architecture that is Timorese, in all its diversity. In the long run, it is not just about building buildings, but building communities of persons, their identities, relationships, and a sense of belonging.

Andy Nguyen SJ

Australian scholastic Andy Nguyen SJ did the second year of the Regency stage of his formation in East Timor, where he put his training as an architect to good use coordinating the various Jesuit design and construction projects.



Update on the clinic in Kasait

Construction on the Centro de Saúde Daniel Ornelas began in September 2015 with the clearing of palm trees from the piece of land. Some challenges delayed the project. The late arrival of material that had to be imported extended the completion date by a month, and in February, a security problem disrupted the project for few days. The problem was resolved by with the intervention of the police and local officials.

The clinic is a project of Jesuit Social Service Timor-Leste initiated to supplement government efforts to improve public health services. A part of the Projeto Educação Jesuíta, the clinic will serve students and staff of both Colégio Santo Inácio de Loiolá and Instituto São João de Brito. It will also serve the local community with medical consultations and by organizing health education and wellness activities.

Centro de Saúde Daniel Ornelas is managed by JSS and is in the care of a religious sister. Two Timorese women are training as nurses to work there.



Extreme left: Entrance lobby

Left: Patient ward

