Letter from Railaco No. 1  Vol Vlll, No. 1

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Dear Friends and Supporters,

This letter is actually coming from Melbourne where I am confined while awaiting the outcome of a medical issue.  However, I was able to return briefly to Timor and caught up with progress there.  I was accompanied, on this occasion, by a colleague, Helen Smith, from Mater Christi College in Melbourne who has been very active in her support for Railaco School and the Mission in general.

Road Rebuilt

The first wonderful surprise as we left Dili and took the road to Railaco was the sight of the road being rebuilt!  The long-awaited time had come!  There was evidence of the sharp bends being removed; the road widened; holes filled in; and collapsed sections being re-established.  What a glorious sight!  It actually took fifteen minutes off our trip and the main work had not yet begun!  We had heard last year that the Government was giving contracts to various countries to do different roads and that the Indonesians had been given the contract for our road.  But now it had begun…..

Scholarship Students

An important reason for my brief return was to give the University Scholarship students their second semester fees.

It looked as if a hundred of them had come to Railaco for this purpose when they heard that I had returned.  They gave us a great welcome, made speeches and presented tais.  There was sincere joy in their welcome but I know their monetary needs were the overriding purpose!  The Timorese have such a history of people leaving them that I think the re-occurrence of this is always prevalent in their minds when friends leave them for any length of time.

Helen and I worked non-stop perusing reports, checking paper work and handing out the fees.  It was great to see so many of them so keen about their studies and eager to continue with their courses.  Helen was a wonderful help as dealing with so many students at once has its complications.  In addition, Helen entered all marks and fees into the Scholarship computer programme.  This was a fantastic help.  I like the idea of having a financial secretary!

Our Railaco Community

Unfortunately for Helen, Fathers Phuong and Bong were both absent during her visit:  Fr Phuong was attending meetings in Vietnam, his home province and Fr Bong was in Manila receiving medical attention.  He is progressing well and should be back in Timor this week.  Our community task is to try and keep each of them content with doing the work of just one man each and not try to work 24 hours a day!

I was delighted to see Fr Bert again and our two Jesuit Brothers:  Rui and JP.  In addition there were two Jesuit Novices, Blasius and Nelson, living at Railaco and being very busy helping all of us.

Nossa Senhora de Fatima Secondary School

As soon as possible Helen and I went over to the school where we received another warm welcome from staff and students.  I was so pleased to see all the students looking resplendent in their uniform and obviously so happy to be at school.  Under the capable leadership of Fr Bert sj and with the energetic assistance of the two Brothers, the students are experiencing a wholesome, worked packed day with firm but clear discipline prevailing.  The school day has been extended from 8.30 am to 3.30 pm and the students have been encouraged/persuaded to bring something to eat at a midday break.  This, the students told me, is usually a cassava root to munch on or a small amount of rice or some noodles.  I made a mental note that we MUST get our canteen built so that we can provide a more nourishing snack for them.  Seeing the difference an orderly-run school can make the co-operation of the staff is being achieved and both they, and the students, are learning to arrive on time.  The gates are closed during morning assembly and not opened until the school day is finished.  Br Rui is in charge of discipline and the ‘lessons’ being learned by the teachers are the most valuable result.  The students are delighted to have teachers turning up for classes!

Water

The great disappointment at Railaco was to learn that we were without water once more.  Some kind of electrical problem had occurred in the connection between the solar pump and the retaining tanks.  The very frustrating aspect, apart from the awful inconvenience of being without water, is that we cannot get the firm in Dili, who installed the work, to come to Railaco and/or fix the problem!  This is when one truly realises the difficulties of living in a developing country.  Repeated visits have been made to the firm in Dili but without any positive results.  A visit to Dili then was a must on this visit.   The secretary informed me that the Manager was at a meeting (another one!) but would ring me when the meeting was finished.  I am still waiting!

Prior to this problem occurring we had been able to use only one of the retaining tanks as a split had occurred in one of the tanks due to an iron pipe being used to convey water into the tank.  Movement of the pipe had caused a split in the tank.  Our ‘friend’ in Dili is supposed to be getting a replacement tank.  None of the required size are available in Timor.  To import one from another country would be extremely costly because we would have to pay all the shipping and import costs as well as purchase a new tank.  We are evidently waiting until a supply of tanks are being brought into the country.  To think there would be many of these tanks in Darwin only 1 hour away!

The Canteen

On a much happier note, the building of our school canteen has begun!  My heart rejoiced to see the men at work excavating the foundations.  The original site has had to be modified slightly so that the canteen is not too close to our main gate.  We had tried to avoid this because it means the back section of the canteen has to be built over a steep slope in the ground.  This requires a lot of building up and consequently more money.  Overall, this is a better position and I am hopeful that the money can be raised.  It will be such a good thing to be able to supply nutritious food to the students and to teach students how to provide nutritious meals without buying expensive items.  All kinds of vegetables and fruits can be grown here and used to build healthy bodies.  The heavy stones being carted and thrown into the ground to construct the foundations symbolize so much more than just a building.  It is exciting to see it happening!

Helen’s Diary

During her time here, as well as working very hard, Helen made time to record her impressions and reactions in her diary.  I have been here so long that I have become used to the way of life here.  I read Helen’s first impressions with interest.  I am finishing this letter with an extract giving details of her trip up the mountain to Railaco.

Arrival - Day 1

Dili itself is a haphazard sprawling community of both makeshift and solidly built buildings. The "shops" are open to the street and everybody is outside.

People are everywhere. They sit in crowds under trees or outside mechanics shops, walking around in large numbers with children in their arms and at their feet. There is a steady stream of peddlers with their wheeled barrows, selling vegetables to people in cars and motorbikes.

I have never seen so many children in a community that wasn't a school. There is a reason for that, and I will come to that later.

Our driver for the day met us at the airport. He knew Rita well and there was a happy rejoicing at the reunion. For a time there was that usual and happy exchange of news about friends and relations.

We travelled along the road to Railaco, which was a rather tatty road, passable, but in need of some money to bring it up to standard we might expect in Australia.  All the while, Rita and Rui exclaimed about the marvellous work that had been done on the road.  An Indonesian company was widening the road. It was already, apparently, a vast improvement on what had existed before.

I likened it in my mind to some of the small winding, back roads through Australian bush, that early settlers carved and which road builders simply and crudely macadamized rather than redesigned. I had expected to be fearful of great chasms and rock slides but was not.  I was made aware that these dangers had existed by the signs of previous events but none looked very serious now.  There were piles of rocks along the sides of the road where locals had gathered the excavations and separated the rocks for wall building.

In several places I could see where the rock walls showed some genuine crafting and holding some sense that the walls would eventually become a thing worthy of admiration.

What I did find unnerving was not the physical landscape but the human and animal occupation of this major road.  Drivers use their horns regularly but it did not seem to me to be with any form of aggression. It was saying hello and warning of oncoming traffic.  It was cheerful and friendly.  On every bend and every corner there were people standing, walking and working.

Groups of young men and children stood around heaving large loose rocks onto the piles. There were homes within inches of the road and families sitting outside their front doors doing their regular household duties.  Cars ground by and motorbikes left dust clouds on their way along the newly hewn road. Apparently during the Dry, this dust covers everything for months.

My very ordered and obedient heart was challenged frequently.  Where were the traffic warning signs that some roadworks were in progress, stop signs, people granting me permission to pass and holding back traffic at the other end? The ubiquitous mikrolets, minibuses that are the public transport vehicle come doof doof doofing along with bodies hanging off the side. I was pleased to see crash helmets on most of the huge number of motorcyclists but there were frequently as many as three small children clinging to their father as they went about their daily work on that vehicle. No helmets for the children.

Then there were the hundreds of mangy, skinny and feral looking dogs trotting along; goats, singly and in family groups, wandering all over the place without any sign of being spooked by the traffic. Whole flocks of chickens crossed the road, back and forth without a single joke being made at their expense.

My first sighting of a pig caught me by surprise. It shouldn't have when I think about it, but we see wandering porkers very rarely in suburban Tecoma.

I cried out, “fahi”, one of the very few words of Tetum I could recall without thinking. There was the slightest pause in the conversation between Rita and Rui, then laughter. First there was the laughter at my sudden and unexpected use of the Tetum word for pig, then there was the fact that I was surprised by seeing one.

The surprise faded as we repeatedly dodged sows lying down suckling their young, many well nourished young ham bones rummaging in the undergrowth and trotting down paths and human families just doing their normal thing right in amongst it all. It was all on or just beside the road.

I also saw some very attractive looking cows, called Bali cow, a couple of scraggy work horses and a man walking his two buffalo “karau” towards his home. I was informed that this man was obviously very wealthy.

We passed many small villages that had no beginning or end, but clearly existed in the middle. Life and buildings popped up everywhere.

I wondered if there was an understanding of the concept of planning permission by some of the building I saw. There must have been something in the city but as we moved further out, this became less and less obvious. It was something that my law abiding Aussie brain marvelled at.

I could feel the atmosphere in the battered Toyota Troupie (sans seatbelts.... Sigh) change.  The conversation was all about how close we were getting to Railaco. Both Rui and Rita extolled the virtues of the "best place in Timor". They were as proud of their village as any Aussie is of the Uluru, Brit of Buck House and the Americans of the Statue of Liberty.  As we turned the corner, both triumphantly announced, "We are here! Can you see? Railaco! The church of Senhora de Fatima. What do you think? Isn't it great!  Ahh home."

Helen Smith

Sincere best wishes to everyone and many thanks for your generous support of the mission in Railaco.  May God continue to bless us and strengthen us as we participate in His wonderful work of creation.

Rita and the Railaco Mission Team