



First Letter of Michael to the Caniceians from Timor

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I travelled to Timor-Leste with the Program Manager of Jesuit Mission Australia, Angela, and two volunteers from Melbourne, Karl and Lucy, who accompanied us for part of the trip to photograph and collect material to make a series of short videos. I thank them for their good humour, lessons learned, and company. All members of the Jesuit communities in both Railaco and Dili made us feel so welcome. I think they are aware just how grateful all we visitors are for the time they made available to make us comfortable. We thank them.

East Timor may have revenue from their natural oil resources, but the government's current priority is focussed on development. The pressing need for government spending on Education, Health and Infrastructure Programs is being addressed, but unfortunately, for now, plans for the nation do not count the human cost. Many impoverished people are being completely neglected.

The Vision of the Jesuits here is to see a Timor-Leste Church and Nation that is grounded in faith and justice of the gospel, and where the humanisation of life especially youth, women and children is included.

First Letter of Michael to the Caniceians from Timor

CHAPTER 1: The elusive 'pastoral' dimension in our relationship with Railaco

Being here 'on the front lines' really lets me see how extensively the humanitarian works of the Railaco Mission improve lives. Sitting around the dinner table on my last night staying in the Jesuit Residence in Railaco, both Fr Phuong and my old friend Fr Bong, brought home to me that the valued St Canice involvement is as much 'pastoral' as it is 'humanitarian' in nature.

In the eight years that I've been involved with fundraising for Railaco Mission, I've been grappling with, and trying to enunciate how 'pastoral' and 'humanitarian' aspects intertwine. My primary motivation for involvement has been to raise money to maintain our commitment to funding 'humanitarian' welfare services at Railaco Mission – Children's Feeding Program, Mobile Medical Clinic, and Secondary School.

To understand the 'pastoral' aspect better, perhaps I should have listened more closely and absorbed what Fr Steve Sinn SJ was saying when speaking at a Railaco fundraising event in Sydney in 2013. He said, *"our outpouring of generosity is not for reasons of philanthropy, not for honour or esteem; it is for our love of Jesus, a love that shows itself in deeds: Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are*

members of my family, you did it to me". He went on, "we can forget what a difference it makes to our life to meet the Lord; so, it is good to stop and remind ourselves of this link between our faith and our work for Railaco".

Fr EJ Gerilla SJ, Director of Jesuit Social Services Timor-Leste comments that it's very much part of the gospel to address the social justice needs of the people. *"You can't preach to people who have nothing in their stomachs, who are hungry",* says Fr EJ. Am I finally starting to see where pastoral and humanitarian works intersect?

In Railaco, parish priest, Fr Joseph Phuong is a true 'shepherd' with his Timorese flock scattered in remote villages around eleven Chapel communities that span out from the parish church in Railaco. Parents and children are passionate in their Catholic faith. Fr Phuong would love to have the gospel stories painted on the walls of the chapels so that the pictures would be a permanent reminder of the practical lessons the parents and children learn from his simple homilies about Jesus and Mary, leading a good life, loving, and caring for others.

“If we *Caniceians* continue to heed the frequent calls of the gospels to reach out to the needy, St Canice's will be kept very busy acknowledging all our contributions, large and small. But beyond that, and as importantly, we would be living out our faith, enriching our spirit and building our parish community.

As we nourish our parish, we colour Timor's future". Our accompaniment allows Railaco's marginalised families to grow in community, opportunity, and hope. Our impact extends far beyond a simple nutritious meal, a medical check-up, and a class in school; we are allowing Railaco villagers to lead better lives now and for generations in the future.

CHAPTER 2: Why East Timor?

In the lead-up to this latest trip, I spoke with friends and donors about our commitment to continue fundraising. One question kept popping up. *"Why East Timor? Don't we have enough calls on us from here in Australia?"* (Friends were also curious as to what the parents of the children we serve do for a living, and interested in knowing more about life and living conditions in the villages.)

The emerging nation of East Timor is our nearest neighbour, only one hour by air from Darwin.

The country gained Independence from Indonesia in 2002 but it still struggles with many issues. East Timor has high childhood malnourishment, high stunted growth, and ranks third on the UN's World Hunger Index (the only nation in Asia in the Top 10). This challenging situation speaks to the heart of what the Jesuits here are about.

Evidence suggests that education interventions, especially girls' education, are proven to be one of the most effective contributors to a country's future development and stability.

It could be said that the Jesuits in East Timor are helping to 'build the nation' with their Education Project, formed to provide valuable resources to the local Church and civil community through two complementary institutions: The College of St. Ignatius of Loyola, a secondary school for six hundred secondary students at Kasait, and the adjoining St. John de Brito Institute, a training centre for teachers.

I visited this already vibrant Kasait campus situated by the sea about 20kms out of Dili on my way to Railaco, and was very impressed. The Jesuit Education Delegate in charge of this major initiative is Filipino Fr Roberto Boholst SJ, the very man who devoted his previous three years raising the academic standards of students at 'our' smaller Secondary School in the more rural area of Railaco. Fr Bert devoted nearly as much time recruiting special teachers, and forming them in Ignatian pedagogy as he spent with his students.

In 2004, just two years after the nation's Independence, St Canice's was instrumental in opening this school in Railaco, and initiating the feeding program and medical clinic that continue to operate largely by contributions from generous donors like St Canice's – more than \$600,000 to date, but slowing.

Timor's role in WWII is another important reason for Australians to connect with and extend friendship to the brave Timorese people. Five thousand Japanese invaded Timor on the same day that Japanese bombers first attacked Darwin. Their strategy was to neutralise the Allied air power based there that had the potential of halting their advance towards Australia.

Thousands of 'silent heroes' of Timor died protecting the 2/2nd Company of Australian diggers, stranded in Timor fighting these Japanese invaders. All radio contact with the Australians headquarters in Darwin was lost but the Aussies could keep fighting thanks to the assistance of East Timorese '*criados*'.

For fourteen months, the Australians were befriended by the local people, these '*criados*', who fed, housed and nursed them. Soldiers describe the day they left Timor as their worst, because they knew what awaited their loyal Timorese friends. Over forty thousand Timorese were murdered by the Japanese in reprisal. No other nation has lost so many civilians as a result of helping Australian soldiers.

Australia is a strong and free nation today, and spared, partly because of the bravery and friendship of these silent heroes of Timor. Even seventy years on, we Australians owe the Timorese people a huge debt of gratitude as they continue working to build their fledgling independent nation.

“In honouring the past – WE can nurture THEIR future.

During our visit, we Australians went up to the Dara Memorial that commemorates the Timorese and Australian friendship during the War. It's located beautifully at the top of the mountains, overlooking Dili on one side, and the Christ the Redeemer Statue on a promontory stretching out into the sea on the other.

CHAPTER 3: Life in the villages

On the drive, back from Railaco to Dili, Filipino Jesuit Brother Jeff Pioquinto SJ threw light on another of the questions about 'life in the villages' that friends had been asking me. On first coming to East Timor, Br Jeff spent three weeks in Railaco with Fr Bong SJ while he was learning the local language, Tetum. Jeff lived with a family in a village for a whole week, having to survive on their simple diet of rice, boiled with cassava leaves and salt, and no nutrients in the diet. This was a true eye-opener for him, and a rude awakening to the deprivations of 'life on the front lines' for the families that our involvement assists.

"Health is really a problem", he says. The government medical services are far distant, and families simply can't afford the bus fare to go to a hospital in Dili. If the people are sick they just have 'to endure'. He says:

“When you live with these people, they cry as they tell you how grateful they are for medical doctor Fr Bong's 'Railaco Mobile Medical Clinic'.

Their children go to government primary schools but they must walk up to two hours each way every day. *"What is really edifying is that the children are so eager to get an education"*, he says. The sad thing is when they get home, tired, and need to study, they must help the parents by pushing a cart often over difficult terrain to fetch water from the source, collecting firewood, tending to livestock, or looking after younger siblings.

“ They really want their children to be elevated out of poverty through education.”

Where the land is fertile, the father works to provide a subsistence living, but this becomes a problem with so many areas being difficult to cultivate. This stems from the use of poor agricultural methods. For example, slash and burn and deforestation have depleted many areas, particularly in the mountains where the heavy rain washes the loose soil down to the rivers.

The people need a lot of input with soil preservation and rotation techniques and most especially to stop the deforestation. Having said that they don't take readily to change! This is a great opening for a Railaco 'Ambassador' from Australia, who has this type of expertise to come and share!

Life in the villages is a day to day existence so most of the time the people don't have savings.

CHAPTER 4: Nutrition

It's very easy to be personal about sharing the story of the Railaco Children's Feeding Program where the manager of the program, the ever-smiling Christina, is involved. Christina, the mother of seven and grandmother of one, has been managing the program since 2005. Two of her children come to NOSSEF the Railaco Secondary School. Christina and her assistant Leonora work every day preparing the meal before climbing aboard the battered old 4WD to bounce over mountainous roads to reach the remote communities.

On the day that I trailed along on this visit to the community of Cocoa, I enjoyed interacting with the many pre-school children who sang songs for us before being served a nutritional meal, always with milk and an egg. There was one family of seven children, and another with five. Each family has a booklet containing the names and dates of birth of each of their children who come.

Ensuring that both parents and children understand the importance of cleanliness and hygiene as much as the need for nutrition, our program workers supervise washing of hands, before serving the meal.

Sustainability? Seeing that these poor kids continue to receive nourishment takes precedence over the oft-suggested notion that we should be considering more ways to make this feeding program more sustainable by empowering parents to assume more responsibility. We have tried doing this, but it just doesn't work.

Initially, the Feeding Program was supposed to be supplemental only. It is not happening. Parents choose not to do it. So, what we serve becomes the main meal and the sole source of nutrition for these children. Chickens were provided at one time to provide eggs for the family, but even this effort was over when Fr Bong found that all the birds had been eaten!

Now that the Bishop of Dili is raising Railaco to Parish-status later this year, and the Jesuits are most likely to extend their time in leading the Mission, they are prioritising and preparing for a community-led development plan that will no doubt include new projects designed to improve the quality of farming environments and skills in Railaco's villages.

CHAPTER 5: Education

'Our' Railaco Secondary School that started with a two-classroom besser block building in 2004 is now known by the name, NOSSEF. (This is the abbreviation for the Portuguese name of the patron saint of the school, Our Lady of Fatima - Escola Secundária Católica Nossa Senhora de Fátima.) Student enrolment exceeds 300 for the first time in 2017, with classes in Years 10, 11, and 12. A recent renovation project to repair and paint white the 'besser block-grey' classroom blocks, inside and out, has brightened not only the buildings, but also raised the spirits of the students. A class 'garden' competition to beautify an area outside each of the classrooms has further added to the overall sense of well-being.

Four religious are engaged with the school. Fr Martin Bong SJ who has been in Railaco for twelve years and is the Rector, and East Timorese Luis Martinez SJ are currently the only Jesuits. Another Indian Jesuit Scholastic arrives from India next month. Sr Augusta from the Convent of St Paul de Chartres teaches English, and Sr Rinna comes to the school weekly as a counsellor for the students.

Of the twenty-one other teachers, four are assigned by the government. The remaining seventeen, including Vice Rector, Cesar Borges, have been recruited for their qualifications and experience, and 'formed' in Ignatian pedagogy. All are motivated to work with and see the students succeed.

Responsibility, Leadership, and understanding of the importance of being 'Men and Women for Others' is something that the students learn from their very arrival at NOSSEF. It's the desire of the Jesuits and teachers to assist these students to take responsibility, and to develop their leadership skills.

A dormitory for thirty-one boys was opened last year, and today, fewer students need to walk long distances. These boys piled in and helped in the construction of the very modest corrugated-iron sleeping quarters and kitchen. Under teacher Lucio's supervision, their study practices are enhanced. They're also learning the beauty of growing their own vegetables to cook in the attached 'dirty kitchen' to supplement what they bring back from their families after every weekend back home.

The SPC Sisters in an adjoining property have graciously agreed to supervise a girls' dormitory of twenty beds, now under construction, and which is expected to be ready in August 2017.

“ The academic achievement of the NOSSEF students talks to the sustainability of our Railaco education program. All sixty-seven students in the graduation class passed the National Exams in 2016, and nearly half of these went on to tertiary education in 2017. This is an amazing achievement for a rural school where the parents of most of the students didn't attend school.

CHAPTER 6: Health

Fr Bong, a Filipino doctor, serves the needs of poor people in nine remote communities who live outside the reach of local government services through his mobile medical clinics. He views his role as one that can treat preventable diseases. Until 2015, medications used in Railaco were sourced by a Rotarian donor in Australia, but government regulations in Timor-Leste put a stop to that. 'Bong' now purchases his medicines, usually made in Indonesia, from a Chinese Pharmacy in Dili, at a higher price. Many pharmaceuticals that he regards as essential are simply not available. We and other charities continue to press the government to grant the necessary licence.

Patients of all ages, but many mothers with new-borns cradled in their arms walk for miles to see the doctor. Ligia and Nivia, two trained local assistants accompany

'Bong' in his battered old 4WD to receive the patients, and dispense medications from the 'mobile pharmacy' in the back. It's quite remarkable for Bong to manage all this; along with his role as Director of NOSSEF; in addition to travelling to surrounding chapel communities to celebrate Mass; and keep smiling as he does.

In addition to the Railaco Mobile Medical Clinic, Fr Bong has Medical oversight responsibility for the clinic in Kasait.

CHAPTER 7: Jesuit Social Services in Timor-Leste

Jesuit Social Services (JSS) in Timor-Leste is committed to promoting integral community development where the cultures and identities of the people are respected and promoted, empowering the poor to become self-sustaining.

JSS' focus for the next three years is focussed on three areas, Dare, Hera, and Kasait. I enjoyed a visit to see first-hand the benefits of a 'water project' that has transformed life for a community of twenty families in the Malanes community near Kasait. One of the older women at the central water tap, Claudina, doesn't know how old she is but her smile tells you how much she enjoys having water handy. Another stop showed us an unskilled worker who has been empowered by what he has learned through a JSS livelihood project that showed him how to make furniture from the inexhaustible supply of rubber tyres that are available free-of-charge in the country. He is about to open his own showroom!

Railaco Parish is regarded as a stabilised community where the focus is both pastoral and humanitarian. However, the next Pastoral Plan for Railaco could address 'capacity expansion', and include plans for a Social Action Centre. Aspects of the JSS activities could be considered in this, but only with consultation with the different communities to ensure their priorities are included.

JSS is committed to fostering the humanisation of life where all people especially youth, women and children are included. JSS sets out to ensure their basic needs are met and they can live lives to the full through agricultural and livelihood projects, training and mentoring for entrepreneurial and related functional skills, and public health development.

A future Railaco Pastoral Plan would also consider JSS assistance in opportunities such as NOSSEF graduates being trained in various fields, or to learn how to improve agricultural practices, thereby equipping them to find employment in their home communities.

CHAPTER 8: In Conclusion

In conclusion, I repeat the final paragraphs of Chapter 1.

If we *Caniceians* continue to heed the frequent calls of the gospels to reach out to the needy, St Canice's would be kept very busy acknowledging all our contributions, large and small. But beyond that we would be living out our faith, enriching our spirit and building our parish community.

“As we nourish our parish, we colour Timor’s future”. Our accompaniment allows Railaco’s marginalised families to grow in community, opportunity, and hope. Our impact extends far beyond a simple nutritious meal, a medical consultation, and a class in school; we are allowing Railaco villagers to lead better lives now and for generations in the future.

A slogan emblazoned on a T-shirt gift from CPA, the Jesuit Timorese Audio Visual Unit proclaims: DALAN BA FUTURU – (Road to the Future). The symbol above the slogan is a stylised ‘Stump of Jesse’ with a green shoot as a sign of hope and new life. This symbol represents all countries that have been conquered and have found freedom again. Timor-Leste has been conquered twice in the past century – firstly by the Japanese, and more recently by the Indonesians. Freedom and Independence since 2002 heralds new hope.

By continuing to support the works of the Jesuits and volunteers in Railaco, we at St Canice’s can play our part in turning this hope into a reality.

‘Railaco – Road to the Future’

CHAPTER 9: Be a Railaco Ambassador

I was invited to join Sue, Graeme, John, Nikki, Shenagh, and Sheila in the St Canice Parish East Timor Support Group in 2009. Since that time, I have visited Railaco on three occasions witnessing first-hand the humanitarian and spiritual good that impoverished people of great faith receive from the St Canice involvement and generosity. I’m inspired to do more.

In writing to thank us for our tremendous support on behalf of Railaco, the Provincial of the Jesuits in Asia Pacific, Mark Raper SJ elaborates:

“Thanks for your tremendous support for our people in the Jesuit Mission in Railaco. Apart from the physical help, the food, shelter and health care, you give so much encouragement and hope, simply by your friendship and solidarity.”

As funds to maintain an ongoing level of commitment become a little scarce, I’m driving for a wider engagement with Railaco. This means reaching out to our amazingly diverse and sympathetic St Canice community including a younger demographic to see how you might want to get involved and support us in continuing these good works. What might you like to do? How might you want to be engaged?

There’s a small but growing number of people in the parish who want to do more than hand over a credit card or subscribe to the occasional special collection. They’re seeking to be educated, to understand, to be able to connect their passion with our work to share it with friends and family.

The Jesuits we work with so closely in Timor would also be very happy to host a group of committed 'Railaco Ambassadors' from St Canice's on a **familiarisation and formation visit** to experience 'life on the front lines' first-hand.

The first step is to let us know that you're interested in knowing more, and potentially becoming involved in this important pastoral and humanitarian endeavour. You may see opportunities to host small functions in your homes, or among friends; or perhaps involve your work colleagues in activities like a fun run for charity, or suggest that friends donate to Railaco in lieu of gifts for significant birthdays, or at Christmas; or simply be available to assist at functions. The ideas are endless. The nine-year-old daughter, Cheley, of Jesuit Mission colleague, Angela Ford, shaved her head as a fundraising initiative, and raised \$2,700!

We are also **considering a tour**, of about six days' duration, to East Timor for potential donors **in 2018**. You would not only visit and participate in all our programs in Railaco, but you would be welcomed by local Jesuit workers engaged in other activities within Timor. A local sightseeing program for you has also been discussed. It's envisaged that you would be staying at the Jesuit's scenically situated Montserrat Retreat Centre, in individual houses atop a hill overlooking the sea.

Pope Francis was recently telling elders of the church that they are 'grandparents' whose story is open, still: it is open until the end; we are not ancient; we still have a mission and purpose in life. 'Grandparents' of St Canice's, I among them by age, think about what you might do to help raise funds not only for our programs that benefit families in Railaco, but perhaps how to **be a 'hands-on' Ambassador**. Consider volunteering, be it as a painter, plumber, or electrician to assist the Jesuits address many of the ongoing maintenance issues that recur frequently in their many premises in East Timor.

As much as I enjoy my role as a volunteer, I still like to travel. I'm not ready to '*lay down my nets and follow the Lord*', entirely, yet. But I really would appreciate assistance to respond to the need that I have experienced first-hand up there in Timor.

Become a Railaco Ambassador! Or let me know that you could be interested in joining the planned tour. Please get in touch with me personally on mmus@me.com, or tell Lynelle or Elizabeth in the parish office 02 9358 5229. I will get back to you.

Michael Musgrave, 30th June 2017

ONLINE DONATION FOR RAILACO

Please log into the Jesuit Mission Australia 'Online Donation' page.

<https://secure.donman.net.au/client/jesuit/jesuit.asp>

In the Payment Details area -select campaign- choose 'St Canice's Lorosae Project'

Your donation will be processed through the tax-deductible

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Thank you

RAILACO / CANICE CONNECTIONS



**Mobile
Medical
Clinic**



**Making
a difference
through
Quality
Education**



**Food
for
Kids**



**Why
East
Timor?**



**Australia owes
a debt of
gratitude
to the
'silent heroes'
of Timor**



**Fr Joseph Phuong SJ
& Fr Martin Bong SJ
Thank You**



Standing in Solidarity with our Sister Parish in Railaco