

Memories of a Past Pilgrimage by Sister Breda O'Reilly

When Mercyworks Inc advertised for a Sister of Mercy to go to East Timor for three months in 2011 I ignored the advertisement mainly because I was in my first year at Mercedes College as Pastoral Minister. I felt it would not be right to leave the school. However, the Lord thought differently. Mercyworks rang me and asked me to go to help out in a crises situation. I said I couldn't go because I wouldn't drive in East Timor. The answer was 'we have a driver for you'. When my boss – Sheena Barber - said 'it's OK to go to East Timor as long as you promise to come back to Mercedes in 2012' I had no excuse not to go. I had spent a month in East Timor in 2010, so it was no big deal going there for three months.

East Timor is the poorest and smallest country in South East Asia. While I was there the people celebrated the tenth anniversary of Independence. I noticed some differences since my last visit to East Timor eighteen months ago. I think the people looked healthier. There were a lot more motor bikes (with a family of four riding on them). A lot of new homes had gone up. I didn't need to go up to the next mountain to use the mobile phone. We could depend on having electricity for at least three hours a day (most days). Access to water is still a major problem. I was very happy to go up the next mountain (on a terrible road) each week to visit the Mercedes Kindergarten. On the way back we always stopped to fill our containers with fresh spring water which would last the week. It was tough washing sheets and towels by hand in cold water. We didn't have a proper shower. Our daily wash was taken with a basin of cold water!

One thing that did not improve was the roads. Fohorem (in the mountains) where I spent the three months is only 150 kilometers from Dili. It used to take us eleven hours to travel to Dili. There was such a stark contrast between the beauty around us - the mountains, the ocean at times - and the terrible roads that had to be negotiated. I was very scared and thought the journey would never end. There were dangerous winding, twisting narrow paths and pot holes to be negotiated. The scariest part was going down the steep decline to cross the river. There was little water in the river, so driving on a river is not such fun! On one of our monthly visits to Dili it took us thirteen hours! This was because we got stuck in the mud in the huge river which we had to cross!

My job while I was there in Fohorem was to be responsible for the Kindergarten – The Catherine McAuley Centre, the computer room and the sewing room, as well as the Kindergarten – Mercedes Kindergarten, which was up in the next mountain. It's an interesting job especially when you can't speak the language! So it was just wonderful having John Ravadotti from

Mercedes College with us in Fohorem for one month. The people just loved him. I use to carry my English/Tetun book around everywhere with me. Every day after 5.00pm I walked I always had someone with me who wanted to practice their English and I would practice my Tetun. I had to contend with the cows, the pigs and the dogs while I walked! The people love to celebrate. There were many major celebrations while I was in Fohorem. They love to dress up in their Tias (material made in East Timor), sing, dance and give long speeches. After a few months I couldn't manage the food very well so I lost eleven kilos while I was there. So the moral of the story is if you want to go on Mission and you want to lose some weight go to East Timor.



Top photo - Tias Scarf given to me as a thanks for being part of their community.



Bottom photo - An East Timor man is collecting water for me