

LAUNCH OF THE *TIMOR-LESTE WE FORGET* VIDEO

Mary MacKillop Place, Mount Street, North Sydney, 17 December 2011

Pat Walsh

I found the film we are about to watch very thought provoking and there's much I'd like to say about it but time is short, so I'll talk in dot points as I heard a dad describe his son's conversation recently.

The title of the film - *Timor-Leste We Forget* - is clever and very cool! Congratulations to its inventor.

The fact is of course that we do forget or we remember only selectively, due in the main to what we are told or not told. Let me give three examples related to the first part of the video which deals with World War 2 and the debt we owe the Timorese and is the source of the video's memorable title.

I was in Darwin the day before President Barack Obama's recent flying visit. Amongst other things, the President used his visit to highlight Australia's own version of Pearl Harbour. He laid a wreath on the Esplanade to remember the 92 US servicemen who died on 19 February 1942 when the Japanese bombed and sank the USS Peary in 27 meters of water off Darwin.

The President's gesture got knowledgeable local East Timor watchers talking. Over grilled barramundi down on the wharf I learned three things from them. First I learned that the strike on USS Peary and Darwin was kept quiet by officials to avoid panicking people in the big population centres over on the east coast. As a result, Australians who live in NSW and Victoria don't know much about the attacks on Darwin and other northern territory centres and I only learned about the extent of the loss of life and damage to property when I visited Darwin in 1996. The second thing I learned over fish and chips from my Darwin colleagues was that the Japanese strike on Darwin was not the beginning of the invasion of Australia, but of Timor island. In support of this, they cited the Australian War Memorial and Paul Cleary's recent book *The Men Who Came Out of the Ground*.

Cleary's research into Japanese military records shows (a) that, contrary to popular belief, the Japanese High Command never contemplated invading Australia and (b) that the attack on Darwin was all about Timor. It was planned as a pre-emptive strike ahead of the Japanese invasion of Timor 12 hours later and carried out to neutralise Allied ships and planes that could have been used in a counter-attack against Japanese forces landing there.

The third thing I learned (I think we'd finished our fish and chips and were into our second bottle of red by this stage) was that the Japanese High Command did not invade Portuguese Macau and hesitated to violate Portuguese Timor's neutrality and only decided on that course following the landing of Australian commandos in Timor two months previously. Research on Timor and World War 2 is a work in progress and not something I am involved with, so I am reluctant to jump to any conclusions. However, these revelations certainly confirmed for me one of the principal contentions of *Timor*

Leste We Forget, namely that we Australians owe the Timorese a massive debt because we used their soil, in violation of their neutrality, to fight Japan and they suffered terrible war crimes as a result of that strategic decision taken in our national interest.

One is also left to wonder about some hypotheticals. Might both Timor and Darwin have been spared had Timor's neutrality been respected? Might Japan, if its presence in Timor had been left unchallenged, have viewed Portuguese Timor similarly to the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) which it also occupied at the same time, namely as a European colony deserving of liberation? Further, if it hasn't already been done by some enterprising PhD student, someone might research whether the Timorese, like the nationalists in the neighbouring Dutch East Indies which shared a land border with Portuguese Timor, saw the Japanese occupation as an opportunity to break away from Portugal, and if not, why not?

Following its treatment of Timor's shocking Asian colonial legacy – Portugal escapes scrutiny - *Timor-Leste We Forget* addresses some of the current challenges facing the new nation – including population growth, education, land, gender and natural resources. I want to take a couple of minutes to comment on just one of these, namely education. The video tells us that the engagement of the Josephite Sisters with Timor-Leste commenced with Bishop Belo's visit to Sydney in 1993 and his appeal to help preserve and develop Timor's culture through education. Bishop Belo and the Josephites were spot on here. Pope John Paul II also made this point when he visited East Timor in 1989. Then and in 1993 talk of identity and culture was Church-speak for self-determination. Both church leaders were effectively saying the Timorese have their own identity, history and culture and this should be respected not suppressed. They should be allowed to be themselves, the sub-text being they have to be free. Translated into educational terms this means, inter alia, being free to learn your own language, your own history, to study and enjoy your own literature, dreaming, myths, culture and traditions, not foreign imports imposed from Portugal or Indonesia.

So I want to applaud the Josephites for their vision and commitment to education, for seeing so early and so clearly the fundamental importance of education, in the 90s in the cause of political self-determination and today in the cause of cultural self-determination and the on-going growth in self-knowledge and self-confidence this involves. Circumstances in Timor have changed since the 90s but the need for education in the fundamentals (e.g. logic, the three rs, civics, history), for education in all its forms (including vocational training), and for education in all parts of society (including the seminaries and convents), is as urgent and challenging as ever, as anyone who has worked in Timor can attest. Learning from history is critical lest Timor-Leste also forgets! Annie and I have paid for lots of Timorese kids to go to school. There is nothing more rewarding – for them or for us. I urge you to consider how you can help the Josephites do in Timor-Leste what Mary MacKillop did for education in Australia.

My last comment relates to an important question asked by Rodney Lewis early in the video. Rod, a lawyer with a distinguished and long track record of concern about human rights in Timor, wonders out loud 'will there ever be justice for the Timorese'? It was not possible to address this complex issue in a 60 minute video, so I'd like to leave you with a couple of thoughts.

My first point is that history has a way of catching up with perpetrators and the chances of this happening are far greater these days. This is because (a) the compiling of persuasive, incriminating evidence is much easier than in the past thanks in the main to

technological advances and (b) because the international legal system and its associated monitoring mechanisms are more developed today than at any previous point in history. I therefore agree with Geoffrey Robertson when he says in his book *Crimes Against Humanity – The Struggle for Global Justice* (1999) that the human rights movement should go on the offensive in this new millennium. To be honest, however, I don't think we have in relation to East Timor. But not to be pessimistic, let me give just one brief example to support my belief that we should not give up on justice which as Martin Luther King said, quoting the Bible, will 'roll down like waters and a mighty stream'. (Amos 5.24)

In 1947, during Indonesia's war of independence from Holland, Dutch troops rounded up and shot some 430 Indonesians in a village in East Java. Last September, 64 years later, a Dutch court ruled that the Netherlands State was responsible for this massacre and should pay compensation – the first time the Netherlands has been held responsible for crimes in its former colony. Last week, after arguing for decades that the killings were justified and the term for prosecution had expired, the Netherlands Government apologised for the massacre and agreed to pay individual reparations. This is a landmark achievement. An inspiring victory for the law over the vested interests and formidable resources of a wealthy country, for the media who exposed the case, and for a Dutch woman lawyer – Liesbeth Zegveld - who led the case working with a small group of widows and a survivor. One widow who was 20 when her husband of 2 years headed to the rice fields on the morning of the massacre never to return, told the *Guardian*: 'It makes me feel my struggle for justice was not useless'. The parallels with the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre 20 years ago (featured in the video) and the shallow excuses made by the Indonesian state are obvious. Indonesia is still to accept responsibility, apologise and compensate the Timorese victims of Santa Cruz, but the Dutch case demonstrates the real possibilities if the human rights movement rises to Geoffrey Robertson's challenge and goes on the offensive.

This leads me to my second point. This is that I am convinced that eventually an Indonesian Liesbeth Zegveld will emerge and, with the support of Indonesian academia, civil society and the media, will use Indonesia's growing commitment to the rule of law, both domestic and international law, in the service of justice for Timor-Leste – Santa Cruz and all the other massacres and violations it represents. This belief in the essential goodness of Indonesians is a point I make several times in my book *At The Scene of the Crime* which Chris Sidoti launched here in Mount Street on 14 October.

For that to happen, however, it is critical that Indonesians learn the truth about what really happened in Timor-Leste. This is why the CAVR report *Chega!* was published in Indonesia last year (in Indonesian) and why it is important that books like Paul Cleary's *The Men Who Came out of the Ground* are translated into Indonesian and made available in Indonesia. Educating Indonesians about Timor (including the many hundreds of young Indonesian intellectuals studying in Sydney – are any of them here today?) is also an important educational project (though the Mary MacKillop East Timor Mission can relax, I am not suggesting that they add this to their already long list of things to do!). So Rod: my answer to your important question 'will there ever be justice for the Timorese?' is a definite yes. Yes, there will be but to achieve this goal we should all give much more attention to consciousness raising in Indonesia, lest they forget too or continue to believe the lies about Timor-Leste that were propagated by the Soeharto regime and that will obstruct the mighty river of justice if left unchallenged.

To the wonderful Sisters of St Joseph and particularly on this occasion to Sisters

Josephine Mitchell and Susan Connelly, the public face of the Mary MacKillop East Timor Mission - what can I say: home-grown, iconic Australian institution, salt of the earth and sometimes salt on the the Government's tail feathers, sisters in solidarity with the Timorese. It is nearly 20 years since you joined the Timorese on their difficult journey. True to the spirit of Mary MacKillop and the Australian ethos of a fair-go, sometimes feistily represented in *Letters to the Sydney Morning Herald* and in other ways including Sr Kath O'Connor's early work with Christians in Solidarity with East Timor, you have stuck with the Timorese through thick and thin fiercely determined at every point to see that they are free to be themselves and to enjoy their full potential. *Timor-Leste We Forget* is just another practical expression of your deep commitment and love.

I am sure I speak for everyone here today when I congratulate you on this latest project and wish you every blessing for your future engagement with Timor-Leste. It is now my great pleasure and honour to launch *Timor-Leste We Forget* and to urge everyone present to join me in purchasing copies and promoting it far and wide. Thankyou.

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