

**REDEEMING THE PAST**  
**Towards a spirituality of reconciliation in Timor-Leste**

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This is the second time I've attempted to address the question of truth and reconciliation in Timor-Leste from a faith perspective. The first time was at the Parliament of the World's Religions here in Melbourne in 2009. My talk on that occasion can be found in my book *At The Scene of the Crime: Essays, Reflections and Poetry on East Timor 1999-2010*. This second attempt, also from a Catholic perspective, will be equally tentative. My purpose is to highlight some of the elements and lessons that could possibly feature in a yet-to-be-developed spirituality of reconciliation that largely Catholic Timor-Leste and its new *Centro Nacional Chega!* might add to its suite of reconciliation strategies. I would welcome feedback and suggestions as part of a broader effort to take this idea further.

Timor-Leste is small but what happened there around the turn of the millenium was momentous. The deeper significance of those events is still being fully explored and more widely appreciated.

What happened and Timor-Leste's response is a hopeful metaphor for a world where idealism is fading. The Timor narrative speaks of many encouraging things: the triumph of principle over pragmatism; the critical importance of the international order and its system of human rights and law; the imperative of accountability over impunity; the irreplaceable role of civil society or the third sector in the affairs of the world; the positive contribution that religious faith can make; the importance of good leaders; the existential notion that its not the dog in the fight but the fight in the dog that matters.

The Timor story also speaks of the priceless dividends of truth and reconciliation, processes employed in the service of transitional justice that are secular but owe much to religion and can also be looked at from a faith and church perspective.

Timor's journey can be broadly framed in theological or salvation history terms. It has much in common with the great master narratives of Judeo-Christianity, the exodus and the Jesus story. The Israelites' long exile and oppression by the Pharaohs in Egypt ended when a charismatic leader, inspired by God, led them on a hazardous journey through the wilderness to their promised land. Memories of their past define Israel's identity and, as a paradigm for liberation from slavery, the narrative remains universally archetypal today. Much the same can be said of Timor's experience.

I was first prompted to think of Timor's story in these terms when a South African parliamentarian, Johnny de Lange, told his Timorese audience at a workshop I attended in Dili in 2000 soon after liberation that they were the chosen generation. As the first generation to inherit the promised land of Timor-Leste, he said, they had a unique opportunity and a responsibility to create something magnificent and enduring. They had a window, he said, that would open only once in their lifetime and once in the lifetime of Timor-Leste. The idea was rivetting. It also suggested that, like the people of the Old Testament, their mission had a divine imprimatur. History or Providence had signed up the first post-independence generation to a covenant. Their assignment was sacred and blessed but also binding and burdensome. They would be held accountable to it, not only by their compatriots who had survived epic ordeals but also by the judgement of history/God. It was also an idea, one should note, that in the wrong hands can be dangerously self-serving and destructive.

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The Timorese are not the first to think of their precious nation as God's own country. Here's a joke (with apologies to the Irish original) to illustrate how close they feel to God. Paddy from Ireland was holidaying in the Philippines and being a good Catholic lad he visited a few churches (also to take selfies to send to his mum to show he was behaving himself). At mass in Manila he noticed a marble column near the sanctuary with a golden telephone on it. A priest told him it was a direct line to heaven and if he'd like to call, it would cost US\$1000. Paddy was amazed but declined the offer. Each

church he visited had a golden telephone on a pillar and he was given the same answer each time he asked... the phone was a direct line to heaven and he could call for a 1000 US dollars. Before returning to Ireland, and being a good Catholic lad, he decided to visit the other most Catholic country in the area, Timor-Leste. And of course he went to mass on Sunday in Dili. No sooner had he entered, however, than he spotted a golden telephone on a pedestal near the sanctuary. But underneath it was a sign that read in large block letters: DIRECT LINE TO HEAVEN – 25 CENTS. Amo, he called to a priest, I've seen lots of these golden telephones in the Philippines but the price of a call to heaven was always a 1000US. Why is it only 25 cents here? The priest smiled and said: my son, you are in Timor-Leste now. It's a local call!

The Timor story also mirrors the Jesus story. In fact, some think that as the Timorese turned to the church in large numbers during Indonesia's military occupation in a way they had not under the Portuguese, they came to identify their experience as a way of the cross that would finally end well.

Joel Hodge, a theologian at the Australian Catholic University, addresses this in his book *Resisting Violence and Victimisation: Christian Faith and Solidarity*. Hodge applied Rene Girard's theories to his post-independence field work in Timor-Leste and concluded that the new faith the Timorese embraced during the war gave their experience meaning, hope and the tools to resist and overcome seeming impossible odds. 'The Catholic Church', writes Hodge, 'opened spaces of resistance and communion that allowed the Timorese to imagine and live beyond the violence and death perpetrated by the Indonesian regime'.

Bishop Belo, who headed up the Church for much of the war and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work, the first and only Catholic bishop I think to be given that prestigious award, concurs. Commenting on Hodge's study he writes that the independence of Timor-Leste 'was not only the result of diplomacy, of guerilla resistance, of using the means of social communication, but also of the prayers and of the suffering of the simple people in the villages and small towns'. Hodge's study, says the Bishop, gives an insight into 'the Timorese soul' and the Timorese people's passage out of 'calvary' and rise to a new life of hope, of enthusiasm and of joy'.

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Susan Connelly, a Josephite sister in the Mary McKillop tradition, also feels Girard's framework helps interpret the Timor story. She is using it to reflect on Australian government policy on the Timor issue during the decades prior to independence. Girard, a French philosopher of social science, including anthropology, believed that many ancient myths told of the scapegoating of victims by perpetrators or those in power as a way of protecting vested interests and maintaining the status quo. These myths, however, exonerated the scapegoaters and shifted blame to the victims – a phenomenon familiar today in cases of sexual violence and also exemplified in the Indonesian military's attitude to Timor-Leste. Girard concluded, however, that the ancient practice of scapegoating was turned on its head by the Jewish and Christian traditions. Rather than exonerating those who blame the victim, Judeo-Christian myths proclaim the innocence of the victim and the guilt of the scapegoaters. We will have to wait for Sister Connelly's thesis (to be entitled *Seeing through Violence*) to know what she has made of Australia's East Timor policies from this perspective. No doubt the suits in Foreign Affairs will be much aggrieved to learn that they might have been acting out of an ancient pre-Christian mind-set.

Bishop Belo's reference to new life is shared by the American theologian Robert Schreiter. According to Schreiter, the Jesus story is essentially about liberation, or salvation from sin through reconciliation with God, by overcoming violence and injustice. In his book *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*, he writes: 'A focus on the stories of Jesus's suffering and death might provide a helpful way of enduring suffering. But it does not explore adequately how we might be released from the bonds of suffering.... The gospel stories of Jesus' passion and death – stories of betrayal, humiliation, torture, and abandonment, culminating in his execution as an enemy of the state – may tell us how to act in the face of violence' but, says Schreiter, without the resurrection God's plan for 'a new humanity and a new community' are meaningless. The way to redeem the past, insists Schreiter, is reconciliation which, in faith terms, was achieved through the passion, death and resurrection of

Jesus. He describes this transition as a dynamic process that requires both spirituality and strategy. In alternative everyday secular terms, reconciliation should be the path not just to surviving but to thriving, or to what the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls 'enjoying', as opposed to just 'having', the rights that make for a full humanity.

I have taken the title of this talk *Redeeming the Past* from Father Michael Lapsley's autobiography. Lapsley's experience exemplifies in a graphic, inspiring and practical way how an evil past can be redeemed for the good of others. An Anglican priest and active campaigner against apartheid in South Africa, Lapsley lost one eye and both his hands when agents of the apartheid regime sent him a letter bomb planted in religious magazines. On recovering, he resolved to become a healer and established the *Institute for Healing of Memories* in South Africa. 'The outpouring of love and support I received', writes Lapsley, 'enabled me to walk a journey from victim, to being a survivor, to finally becoming a victor... someone who once again participates in shaping and creating the world'. At the invitation of Timor-Leste's Prime Minister, Dr Rui de Araujo, he has recently joined the International Advisory Council of Timor-Leste's *Centro Nacional Chega!*, a new institute of memory and action about Timor's past that is being set up in Dili. His involvement will enable him to contribute to the Centre's spirituality and strategy on healing and enhance its work with victim-survivors.

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Like a lot of divorces, Timor-Leste's separation from its serial partners – first Portugal, then Indonesia - was protracted, messy and often violent. In 1960 the UN challenged Portugal's 500 year presence by declaring the East Timorese were its colonial subjects not its citizens. Portugal, under a dictator at the time and proud of what it called its Christian civilising mission in its distant territory, was deeply offended and rejected the notion. In 1974, however, a new regime in Lisbon faced reality... Portugal's crumbling empire was in terminal decline and the Timorese had a right to stand on their own feet, to form political parties and decide their own future. Tragically, and to some extent due to Indonesian meddling, civil war broke out between the major Timorese parties in 1975. Projecting a left wing led Timor as an existential threat to Indonesia, the Suharto military dictatorship invaded under the pretext of restoring order and saving the region from communism. It did so backed by Washington and with Canberra's connivance.

Suharto's actions also enjoyed the endorsement of sections of the Catholic church. East Timor's Portuguese bishop forbade Catholics to vote for Fretilin and welcomed the invaders as liberators (though soon after he famously declared that the 'Indonesian paratroopers descended from heaven like angels but then behaved like devils'). Disillusioned he retired to Portugal in 1977. In Australia, Bob Santamaria and the NCC also chose to view the drama in black and white Cold War terms, and denounced Fretilin and any Australian Catholics who protested Indonesia's invasion. The CAVR truth commission was not able to find any evidence that Pope Paul VI made public comment on the invasion or used his office to back calls by the UN Security Council for Indonesia to withdraw and allow the Timorese to exercise their internationally recognised right to self-determination. The answers are probably hidden in the Vatican archives and await research by scholars. Visiting Portuguese Timor as part of an Australian humanitarian mission immediately after the civil war, Father Mark Raper SJ, now President of the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific based in Manila, took the opposite view and declared that the worst outcome for East Timor would be Indonesian military intervention. His prediction was fully realised but his view did not prevail in Australia. In his new book *Bonded through Tragedy, United in Hope – the Catholic Church and East Timor's Struggle for Independence, a Memoir*, Bishop Hilton Deakin documents what he calls 'the roar of silence' on East Timor from Australia's Catholic Bishops.

The battle lines running through the East Timor drama were ideological, party-political, geo-political, strategic, tribal, and primal. On the ground in Timor throughout the 25 year period 1974-1999, families, clans, friends, colleagues, the Resistance and the church, including its religious orders, were fractured and divided. Much of the period was marked by great violence and trauma. Though brief, the civil war still resulted in over 1000 deaths, many detentions and displacement – of Timorese by Timorese. The Indonesian occupation, which lasted the following 24 years, resulted in well over

100,000 civilian deaths, famine, detention, torture, displacement, sexual violence and denial of the full spectrum of human rights, on such a scale that the CAVR truth commission concluded that the Indonesian state and its military were guilty of crimes against humanity and war crimes. Some of the perpetrators were themselves Timorese; they included some members of the Resistance faced with life and death decisions about strategy and Timorese who collaborated with the Indonesian military for a range of reasons.

Tomorrow, 30 August, is the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN-supervised popular consultation or referendum on Timor's political status in 1999. On that historic day, 78% of Timorese, despite brutal intimidation, voted to Brexit from Indonesia. Indonesia and the world accepted the result.

One of the many challenges then facing the emerging new nation's leaders was what to do about the violence and deep divisions of the past referred to above, particularly within the Timorese community. At its assembly in Dili in 2000, the Resistance chose unanimously to follow a path of intra-Timorese reconciliation or restorative justice. Forgetting and moving on, it was felt, risked allowing revenge and payback within the Timorese community that could undermine the building of the new nation. Reconciliation was the way to redeem Timor's past. Though called for, punitive justice was considered beyond Timor's capacity and something for Indonesia itself and the international community to deal with.

The church was also involved in redeeming Timor's past. Its important role is documented in Vol II of the *Chega!* report ([www.chegareport.net](http://www.chegareport.net)). After a poor start, the Timorese church walked with the Timorese people throughout their struggle. The church was represented in the councils of the Resistance and on the committee tasked with designing the mechanism that would facilitate the reconciliation and peace that were so vital for the future. Assisted by the UN, the committee created what it called the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR, its Portuguese acronym). The CAVR functioned 2002-2005 and produced a 5 volume, 3200 page report entitled *Chega!*. The single word 'chega' (Portuguese for 'no more', 'enough'), nails the loud *cri de coeur* to the CAVR by the mass of Timorese. Spare us and our children a repeat of our violent past and do everything possible to pre-empt that history repeating itself, they cried.

A core program of the CAVR was its community reconciliation process. It was designed to facilitate peace at the grassroots between Timorese perpetrators of less serious crimes and the victims of those crimes. Serious crimes, including murder, rape and torture, were exclusively matters for a separate UN Serious Crimes process. Though secular, the CAVR employed both animist and church practices familiar to the Timorese. Two of its seven commissioners were clergy. In community consultations about the commission during its design phase, Timorese welcomed the idea of incorporating the Catholic culture of confession, penance and forgiveness in CAVR's reconciliation processes. CAVR did not define crimes as sins against God, but a deponent seeking forgiveness and reconciliation had to confess the full truth of his offence, show remorse and accept a sanction (described as 'acts of reconciliation') acceptable to the community.

### For Christians forgiveness is not impunity

The purpose of these ceremonies was *acolhimento*, a Portuguese word used in CAVR's title that translated as 'reception' or in Tetum *simu malu fali* (receiving each other back again). *Acolhimento* also refers to the Gospel parable of the prodigal son. As such it was intended to express the spirit of magnanimity and joy, not begrudging reluctance, with which an offender's conversion and the reconciling of a divided community should be welcomed. It was a lovely idea and in fact reconciliation ceremonies were often followed with big parties into the night. The parable also fitted CAVR's concept of reconciliation, viz that forgiveness was conditional on certain requirements being met by the perpetrator including admitting guilt and expressing remorse. Xanana Gusmao's embrace of Indonesian generals who professed their innocence despite being indicted by the UN Serious Crimes process endorsed impunity not reconciliation, it was felt. As the Vatican Ambassador to Timor-Leste reminded East Timor's leaders in an address in 2008: *'We cannot forget justice. For Christians forgiveness is not impunity. There will be no true and lasting peace without justice'*.

The CAVR was also mandated to establish the truth, objectively and impartially, about human rights violations committed between 1974 and 1999. This included examining whether UN member governments had upheld and defended the East Timorese people's UN recognised right to self-

determination; that is, their right to peaceful decolonisation of the kind exercised by many UN member states including Australia's former colonies of Papua New Guinea in 1975 and the Cocos Islands in 1984.

The CAVR also examined the position of the Vatican on self-determination. Its findings are recorded in Volume II of the *Chega!* report ([www.chegareport.net](http://www.chegareport.net)). In brief, CAVR concluded that Vatican diplomats tended to accept that the Indonesian occupation was a *fait accompli* and that relations with the Muslim world and Indonesia in particular had to be factored into the Church's position. On the other hand, Rome acknowledged that the people of East Timor had a right to self-determination. I witnessed both sides of the Vatican's ambivalence. In New York in 1981 I asked the Vatican's Ambassador to the UN about the church's policy on the Timor issue. He presented the realpolitik view that the situation was irreversible, a position held by most diplomats and therefore not a surprise, but – and this threw me, he added that the Timorese should make the most of their misfortune and accept that God's plan for Timor, its vocation if you like, was to serve as an island of Catholicism in a Muslim sea analogous to that of Israel in the Arab world.

Travelling on to Rome from New York, I was presented with a more acceptable, if less creative, version of the church's official position at a meeting with Vatican officials in the secretariat of state. Officials informed me that Rome supported self-determination and that the Vatican would continue to administer the Church in East Timor directly through an Apostolic Administrator. The Vatican, they said, would not integrate the Timorese church into the Indonesian bishops' conference until the East Timorese had freely decided on their political status. In view of this and Pope John Paul II's deeply appreciated visit to Indonesian occupied Timor in 1989, CAVR concluded that *"the Vatican did not desert the Church in Timor-Leste.... But its contribution (to a principled political settlement) was limited"*.

I have indicated something of the spirit and strategies used in Timor-Leste to redeem its past and to answer the questions I posed in the notice about this talk. Let me conclude by acknowledging that the good work for reconciliation undertaken by CAVR stalled for some years after the commission handed over its report with its recommendations on what more needed to be done not only to prevent a recurrence of the past but to redeem and transform its past.

I am happy to advise, however, that Timor-Leste's response is now back on track in significant ways. As mentioned, a centre of memory is currently being established in Timor-Leste called *Centro Nacional Chega! – da memoria a esperanca*, a name that neatly reflects the titles of the reports of both Timor-Leste's truth commissions. The Centre is resourced and mandated by the State to implement the proposals for change made by both commissions. My photo on the flier for this talk shows me standing beside a statue of Saraswati, Indonesia's goddess of knowledge and wisdom. Indonesia honours knowledge but the State is still largely in denial about the excesses of its military in Timor-Leste and clinging to what Donald Trump might call 'alternative facts'. The Centre is mandated to work with Indonesian scholars and educators to correct this aberration and place the relationship between the two nations on a better informed basis.

### Victim-survivors are central to this work

This new Centre will help redeem Timor-Leste's past. As Sister Susan Connelly observes: 'the work of Dili's new Centre for memory is further evidence of Timorese willingness to open a space wherein humanity can be restored to all'. Its core mission is to contribute to the redemption of the humanity of victim-survivors and by listening to, projecting and facilitating learning from their experience, to help form the new community that is the deepest wish of all Timorese and friends of Timor-Leste. Victim-survivors are central to this mission. Fiona Richardson, Australia's first minister for the prevention of family violence who died last week, often rightly said – the voices of victim-survivors are central to change and reform. Fr Michael Lapsley says the 'outpouring of love and support' he received helped transform him from being an object of history to being an actor. A spirituality of that kind will enrich and energise the new Centre's service to the most vulnerable and the role of these victim-survivors both as actors in Timor-Leste and as signs of hope to survivors in other societies.

Church people are warmly invited to contribute to this project. ENDS.