

Beauty and Grace

Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv. Chair of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service, congratulated the people and the government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the UN administered vote for Independence.

The courage of the Timorese on 30th August 1999 was on display for the world to see as they overwhelmingly voted for freedom, thus ending the 24-year occupation by Indonesia.

The process of the ballot included the presence of many international observers who testified to the dignified and resolute determination of the people to gain their freedom.



Timorese dancers leading the procession in St Mary Cathedral in 1995

One observer later spoke of being deeply moved when travelling to a polling place in the early hours of the morning and seeing hundreds of people, dressed in their Sunday-best clothes, emerging from a misty valley, all with their voting papers held tightly in their hands.

The peaceful conduct of the vote mirrored the general attitude of the people from the time of the invasion in 1975.

Their sense of identity was assisted by strong leadership, their shared Catholic faith and the strategic measures they took to claim their customs and languages.

Their remarkable history testifies to the human capacity to resist revenge and violence. The current President José Ramos-Horta noted that despite the devastating effects of the Indonesian occupation, not a single Indonesian civilian was murdered by a Timorese during the occupation.

In a world where retaliation is rampant, the Timorese example is remarkable.

“The Timorese people have shown that telling the truth is a necessary prelude to trust and to peace,” said Bishop Long. “They maintained the truth of who they were as a people and refused to capitulate. But they did so supported by their Christian beliefs, personal integrity and with an acute understanding of the dangers of revenge,” he said.

Monsignor Tony Doherty, then Dean of Sydney's St Marys Cathedral, commented “the Timorese response to violence has been beauty and grace”.

Whilst widespread poverty still affects the people, the anniversary of the vote for independence is a moment of national pride. The impending visit of Pope Francis to Timor-Leste within a few weeks will be another moment of cohesion, an impetus to the people to follow the way of Jesus: a way of truth, cooperation, non-retaliation and peace.

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