

Holy Spirit Province

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER

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MURDER, MAYHEM, AND MERCY: 27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Lest we forget!

Thanks to the mass media, in 1999 the world became aware as never before, of the people of East Timor, Australia's nearest neighbour. Many people cheered at the good news that 78.5% of the East Timorese had voted for their independence from Indonesia, whose armies had invaded and annexed their territory in 1975. Their hopes were shared across the world, that at long last they would be free to decide their own future, to choose their own leaders, and to govern themselves.

Within days, however, hopes for the world's newest nation turned sour. A local minority, made up mainly of murderous militias, armed to the teeth by the occupying Indonesian army, would not accept the people's vote. They therefore turned against the majority of their fellow-citizens with a ferocity equal to anything that has ever been perpetrated against innocent people anywhere. In Dili, the capital, and in other cities and towns throughout the territory, the combined enemy maimed and murdered thousands of pro-independence supporters, drove thousands of others from their homes, and forced thousands more to leave their own country as refugees. Once the people were gone from their homes, the enemy systematically looted and plundered the people's possessions, before finally burning their houses, their shops, and many of their public buildings to the ground.

What the world witnessed, thanks to the extensive news coverage, was nothing less than the implementation of a 'scorched earth' policy. It was all as horrific as the sending of so many Jewish people to the gas chambers during World War II, the mysterious disappearances of hundreds of citizens in Argentina and Chile during the military dictatorships there, and the more recent campaigns of so-called 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia and Kosovo.

It has been as totally baffling and as totally unexpected that in our own time, human beings could treat one another with such hatred and violence. As baffling and as unexpected as what the enemies of Jesus did to him, when God sent Jesus to his own people, to show and tell them just how much God loves them, and to show and tell them just how much God expects of them in return. God expected their leaders, most of all, to yield a harvest of ripe grapes, but it was sour grapes (vinegar) only, that they produced. So, as we have heard in the gospel today:

Finally, [God] sent his son to them. "They will respect my son" he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come on, let us kill him and take over his inheritance." So they seized him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

In East Timor, known also as Timor-Leste, the torture, the suffering, and the crucifixion of Jesus happened all over again. Night after night, television screens displayed scenes of undiminished horror, and left viewers wondering: Is there any hope for these poor broken people? Does anyone care?' Perhaps some even wondered: 'Does God care?'

It was just then, when all was seemingly lost, and after both the humanitarian agencies of the International Committee of the Red Cross and that of the United Nations were thrown out of the country, that the world became aware of two marvellous initiatives and developments. In the midst of the carnage and destruction all around, the first powerful ray of hope was from the leaders of the Church. Priests, nuns, and other church workers, constantly supported the people, 98% Catholic, in their quest for human rights, democracy, and self-determination. (Church support and protection for freedom and justice, in fact, went back to the days when Timor-Leste had been a colony of Portugal). This time, for that love and loyalty towards their people, many church persons paid the ultimate price. They too were expelled from their homes. They too were mutilated. They too were murdered. They too saw their own houses, and the church buildings of their people, ransacked, robbed, and burnt to cinders. But the great expectations which God had of them during that darkest period of their history, were not disappointed. Put to the test, they have yielded an abundant harvest for God and for God's people.

The second powerful ray of hope, one which arrived later, was the preparation and deployment of the Interfet (the International Force for East Timor), led by Australian troops. At enormous personal risk, this Interfet force went in to protect the surviving East Timorese from further murder and mayhem, and to prepare for the re-building of their country almost from zero. Viewers became amazed at the integrity, the decency, the humanity, the generosity and the restraint of the troops, who, under mandate of the United Nations, entered East Timor not as aggressors but as peace-keepers and Good Samaritans, indeed as agents of divine mercy and compassion.

Finally, Timor-Leste's struggle for independence was firmly established on May 20, 2002. Further good news is that bit by bit its relationship with its former enemy has been steadily improving. Today the relationship is quite peaceful and harmonious, and Indonesia is Timor-Leste's main trading partner, and regularly contributes to its development.

For all the achievements and signs of hope just outlined in commemoration, would you please join me in praising and thanking God during the rest of our shared prayer today? And would you also please join me in praying that God will continue to bless and protect its government, its peace-keeping forces, its Church leaders and workers, and the people of God entrusted to their care? Will you, please?

bgleesoncp@gmail.com