

My life changing Railaco Experience by Dan Elias

Thank you, *Fr Sacha*.

Good morning and thank you for welcoming me into your beautiful parish to share what were incredible and humbling experiences on my recent visit in Railaco, Timor-Leste.

Being a proud father of two young children, I look at life not only *through my eyes, but with my children's future in mind*. Returning from Railaco, I say to them:

"Alessandra and Jayson, Daddy's eyes and heart were opened beyond belief. I now wish to show you how to live your lives with your eyes wide open. Don't be ok with just being fortunate and comfortable, learn to make your small contribution to those who so desperately need it."

My name is Dan Elias. I have been distantly involved in St Canice's outreach to Railaco since coming across Michael Musgrave in a professional business setting.

I was initially attracted by Michael's enthusiasm, passion and conviction. Not only the good being done in Railaco, but the lessons he had obviously learned in return.

On my first evening in Railaco, sitting around the table, I started get to know the wonderful people of the RAILACO Jesuit community – Fr Bong, Fr Hyoe ('Shoo-ey'), Father EJ, and three other Jesuits. Later it would become apparent to me that this happy 'family' of various backgrounds are nothing short of courageous and selfless heroes!

Let me share just one conversation I had on my first night. A young Jesuit priest-in-training, Akino, spoke to me of the **gratitude** he had for the people of St Canice's.

"All this great work wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for the continued help we see from Australia, and particularly St Canice's - no hope, no dream, no change!" he said

He then went on: "For the very first time, the programs have provided this generation of Timorese people with a lot of **hope** in a country where **hope** was non-existent".

What Akino failed to mention in our conversation is that, in return, I too was provided a lot of hope and guidance from the community - to look at life with gratitude, love and presence.

There are three key programs in Railaco – providing nutritional meals to children, the mobile medical clinic, and the education program through the secondary school NOSSEF.

Feeding Program

I met the wonderful Christina, the mother of seven, who has been leading the children's feeding program since 2005. She and assistant Lenora pile into an old 4WD vehicle and drive through mountainous terrain 6 days a week. They serve pre-school children with a meal of rice, vegetables, tofu and some meat. The aroma coming from the food was pleasant. And seeing the smiles on the faces of the children, I know how much they loved it.

As we pull-up to our first stop, children and parents stream from all directions with clean plates and spoon in hand. Their playfulness provides such joy all round. The laughing is just infectious. About 70 children line up, no pushing and shoving, all showing respect towards one another, waiting their turn. The older children help the younger ones. The whole experience

blows me away. I feel so warmed by witnessing such sense of community and love for one another.

This love, care and respect was an ongoing theme I'd encounter throughout my visit.

Mobile Medical Clinic

Father Bong and two assistants drive in a 4WD mobile medical clinic to provide basic healthcare in nine remote communities where government services don't reach. Boxes of medicines and an organised little pharmacy are crammed in the back

As we bump along over difficult terrain, I begin to appreciate the lack of simple infrastructure such as roads that we take for granted in our daily lives. After arriving for our first clinic, Fr Bong sets-up in a rusty tin chapel on one side of a big green field. Whole families, with mothers cradling babies and children by the hand welcome us. So many of these people walk long distances to see the doctor.

There is a new-ish government medical clinic on the opposite side of the field. It is shuttered! – there is no doctors willing to serve out here, nor any medicines available from government sources.

It dawns on me that the medical supplies crammed in the back of our 4WD is all these have access to. **For 18 years, you at St Canice's have been paying for these medicines.**

Father Bong has an abundance of energy and always a smile on his face despite constantly being surrounded by such underprivilege. I can appreciate that he may just be like this from the aura released by a grateful Timorese people.

Education Program at the Secondary School NOSSEF

The secondary school in Railaco has just celebrated their 20th anniversary. It is known by the name NOSSEF. Student enrolment now exceeds 375 students.

Having spent many hours with the students of NOSSEF, I learn that the feeling of hope for a brighter future is what keeps them coming. **One step at a time.** Many have large aspirations for their lives.

Father Hyoe ('shoo-ey'), a young Japanese Jesuit, the Director of NOSSEF is doing a magnificent job leading not only the students but working very closely with specially trained teachers.

The high quality of teaching and the student/teacher engagement surprised me in a positive way. I had the privilege of being able to spend some time in the classrooms. In one of the classes I sat in, I witnessed students being taught English, and learning how to use sentences in past, present and future tense.

The learning is not all from textbooks in a classroom. One morning, I was awakened at 5 am, (not by roosters crowing that Michael loved), but by glorious singing and excitement wafting through the dark.

Upwards of 300 students were loading into the backs of trucks for a pilgrimage to the mountains to a statue of Christ the King. Enthusiasm, joy and love filled the air that morning, a feeling I have never experienced before. The feeling was so powerful that I had to hold back tears. I came to a realisation that I will later reveal.

As the trucks filled with students began to drive off and start their long journey, they all broke into song. It was a stadium-type atmosphere. On their return that evening and all covered in dust from their journey, they were just as electrifying as they had been at 5am that same morning.

At this moment I learned the valuable lesson that the spirit of family, the spirit of love and the spirit of hope is what fulfills us

in life, and these children's hearts were more content than mine.

Reflecting on this trip back home, and it has been a large process for me, I conclude that my neighbours from across the sea enrich my life more than what I can reciprocate. My Timorese neighbours have helped and taught me so much more.

CALL TO GIVE

I stand here before you this morning and challenge each of you not to be ok with just being fortunate and comfortable. I plead with you to help our neighbours that need our ongoing support. With my own two eyes I have seen how the funds are being put into good use and with my heart I have felt what it means to the community. Every little bit goes a long way.

Our neighbours are grateful for what they have!

We are ungrateful for what we don't have!

I close by recounting the biggest revelation to come out of my experience –

When I arrived in Railaco, I wanted to cry for these people, by the time I left I wanted to cry for us back home.

Thank you all.

Dan Elias 31st July 2022