

Toward a New Timor-Leste: the Shared Responsibility of Religious Institutions

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Pat Walsh

This conference is occurring at a time of great challenge for Timor-Leste and its institutions, including the faith community. The world's newest state has stumbled badly as it tries to get on its feet. Described as a grave crisis by President Xanana Gusmao in his recent address to Parliament, the situation is a tragic mix of fundamental humanitarian, communal, economic, institutional, legal and political issues. The failure of political leadership and the breakdown of the system and civic values has also triggered a serious loss of self-confidence. What is the shared responsibility of religious institutions to the people and State of Timor-Leste at this critical juncture?

Religious institutions in Timor-Leste are no strangers to crisis and have an important and influential role to play in Timor-Leste at this point. As in the past, the people have turned to them again en masse and, in the best tradition, religious institutions have responded by providing humanitarian assistance in Catholic institutions, the Al-Nur Mosque, and Protestant sites in many parts of Dili. This has both deepened trust in religious institutions and enhanced their capacity to contribute in other ways. Human beings do not live by bread alone. Spirits also have to be nourished, particularly at a time of crisis, doubt and loss of trust. In 1998, CNRT developed an inspirational mission statement for Timor-Leste called the Magna Carta. Maybe religious institutions could take a similar initiative in the current context with the objective of lifting spirits and rebuilding enthusiasm and commitment to our nation-building project.

In this short paper I would like to suggest some ideas on what religious institutions might want to see reflected in such a document. At the outset, however, I want to make four points. First, it is not being proposed that Timor-Leste should go back to the drawing board and develop an entirely new blueprint. Modifications to the status quo may be desirable based on lessons learned from the current crisis, but the purpose of the exercise should be to rebuild commitment and enthusiasm for the fundamentals of the existing system not to overturn it. The purpose should be to restore shattered confidence in the course set at independence not to create further uncertainty. Second, a collective reaffirmation of faith in ourselves and our broad policies and institutions should avoid being critical, militant or triumphal. None of us have all the answers to all the problems. Third, any initiative to create a fresh vision statement for Timor-Leste should be collaborative and participative. While the initiative might be led by an inter-faith task force, it should be developed in a democratic, consultative way to ensure maximum input and ownership by all sections of the wider community. Engaging the community will ensure that the outcome enjoys greater acceptability than something from on high which they are simply expected to sign on to. Lastly, there should be no illusions that the situation can be remedied quickly or easily or that a vision statement will suffice. It will take a sustained commitment of resources, creativity and effort on all sides to heal Timor-Leste and get back on track but consensus about basics is an important start.

Following are five broad principles that might inform the continued practice of religious institutions in Timor-Leste and your input to any future vision statement. They are: universal human rights and values; solidarity with the poor; reconciliation; partnership; integrity.

1. Upholding universal values

Religious institutions are called to promote and uphold universal human values. Though not their total *raison d'être*, this calling is fundamental to their service of humanity. Their track record in this regard is a big subject and the history of Timor-Leste demonstrates that religious institutions have sometimes failed and sometimes succeeded in carrying out this mission. Fidelity to this mission is particularly important in the current context when clear reference points, still points in a turning world, are required. At a time of great uncertainty and disorientation the community will benefit from strong, authoritative expressions of support for universal human rights, the rule of law, justice, participation, non-violence, mutual respect, community and the common good.

Timor-Leste has experienced a break down of law, order, moral values and political leadership. As mentioned, this is eroding self-confidence. East Timorese are doing a lot of soul-searching and are asking questions about fundamentals including matters such as the utility of the constitution, the relevance of the parliament, the powers of the president, the adequacy of existing mechanisms of accountability, the superficiality of commitment to the rule of law. Timor-Leste is not the only society in our region experiencing growing pains. Thailand, to name only one, is also in the grip of political crisis involving its prime minister and has so far avoided regressing to its time-honoured practice of military takeover. As in Thailand, the answer in Timor-Leste is not to take extra-judicial short-cuts. However, one hears many such proposals: the Constitution should be suspended; the President should assume additional powers; the Prime Minister should be forced from office; the circumstances justify a coup d'état; the government administration should be handed over to internationals; the hundreds of crimes committed in recent times should be forgiven and forgotten. There are precedents in Timor-Leste's history for these sorts of responses, e.g. past coups in Portugal, Indonesia and Timor-Leste itself. However, quick fixes of this kind are not the answer or in the long term interests of Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste has reason to be profoundly grateful to its President for not panicking and for upholding the Constitution, due process and the fundamental values underpinning Timor's course since independence. This should not be seen, however, as the end of the matter or as a reason for complacency or inaction on the part of the Government or the Fretilin party. Fretilin has always seen itself as the custodian of the national interest. It again has historic responsibilities and it is to be hoped that it will join other Timorese in deep soul-searching. It is to be hoped that religious institutions will always uphold due process or the rule of law and that they will throw their weight behind a fresh civic education program to uphold these principles and to address the many institutional questions that the crisis has thrown up.

2. Solidarity with the poor

Over recent weeks and months, tens of thousands of fearful Timorese have taken refuge in religious institutions in Dili. Many are homeless, many have suffered the nocturnal terror of threats and attacks by their neighbours, some have narrowly escaped or been threatened with death. The response of the religious institutions – Catholic, Protestant and Muslim - has been deeply impressive and inspirational. The Prophet Mohammed said 'the most excellent actions' are 'to gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured'. We continue to see these 'most excellent actions' in Dili where religious institutions have kept their doors and hearts wide open regardless of the burdens.

Solidarity with the poor is a fundamental, shared tenet and pillar of religious institutions. Service of the poor and their human rights must remain a distinctive

interfaith contribution in the building of the new Timor-Leste, both in times of emergency and as an on-going practical program of social service. Solidarity with the poor also requires advocacy. It is not enough to serve in silence. Religious institutions need to commit significant intellectual and other resources to ensure that issues and policy proposals are well researched and can be advocated with authority. The government has announced it will build new houses for those who lost their homes in the recent turmoil. What will be the role of religious institutions in ensuring that these houses meet minimum acceptable standards, are adequately serviced, and enjoy both security of tenure and physical security? Solidarity with the poor also challenges us to work with the poor to develop their capacity, dignity, self-confidence and independence. President Xanana Gusmao has never tired of reminding us of the importance of DYD – do it yourselves development. The people must not wait passively for everything to be done for them: they themselves must participate, organise and mobilise.

Early in the current crisis, the trouble was blamed almost totally on young men who were described in strong language by senior Timorese as ‘hooligans’, ‘rampaging youths’, ‘thugs’, and ‘vandals’. There is no doubt that, as in 2002, disaffected youth joined in and committed crimes which they must answer for. We were rightly sickened and disgusted, not to say profoundly embarrassed, by their extreme and immensely destructive behaviour – which often victimised the defenceless, innocent poor. But voices in the tradition of Don Bosco also need to be heard asking who are these young men, why are they disconnected, and what can be done to help them so that they lead constructive lives and the violence is not repeated? To demonise them is to write them off. Authentic religious institutions will promote an assets based community development approach which sees strengths, not just weaknesses, and asks what can be done with the pluses. These young men feel left out. There is no more urgent social project facing us than helping them to find a stake in the wider nation-building project and re-connecting them to the mainstream. One hopes they will be consulted and their situation will be addressed in any vision statement.

3. Reconciliation

Reconciliation and community are fundamental concepts in theology. Faith communities have much to contribute to reconciliation in Timor-Leste. Though they represent denominational differences and choice, their membership transcends social, economic and political differences and offers potential for interaction, community building and the promotion of a culture of tolerance and the valuing of difference without which we are all the poorer. As President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono reminded Indonesians recently cultural rights are also human rights.

The events of recent times are a painful reminder that divisions persist in Timorese society and have found new expression in violence and aggression even between Timorese in the same neighbourhoods who have lived side by side for many years. This intra-Timorese violence has significantly weakened, if not destroyed, relationships and trust between Timorese. The loss of the social capital of trust is a major setback which will take sustained effort to rebuild. One fears that Dili will see more walls topped by broken glass being built, symbolic of our internal anxieties. Religious institutions, who are already setting an example by working together, have much to contribute to this healing and reintegration. It will need to be long term. The sight of small children playing with guns and shouting Viva Lorosae, unchecked by parents, suggests these divisions are already being passed on to the next generation. Over the last few days young people in West Dili have displayed an offensive banner at the foot of Malinamuk hill. It reads in part: ‘Viva Distritu Sanulu! Viva Loro Monu! Viva Joventudi Monu!’ It then goes on to tell Firaku they are not welcome in Dili and should go back to their districts. SMA students from a Catholic

High School told me without a hint of embarrassment that they helped prepare the banner.

The CAVR Report *Chega!* is soon to be disseminated to the community in all districts by the body established by President Xanana Gusmao for this purpose, the Post-CAVR Technical Secretariat. The Secretariat would warmly welcome the assistance of religious institutions in both the dissemination and socialisation of the Report. The Report addresses the period 1974-1999 but its recommendations and principal messages are both totally relevant to the current crisis and deeply persuasive because they are grounded in Timor's own experience. They include a strong plea for a national commitment to non-violence and civilian control of the security apparatus.

The CAVR Report also suggests that a Post-CAVR institution may be required and recommends that the Parliament mandates an appropriate organisation to conduct a national consultation under the auspices of the President on the role, terms of reference and feasibility of such an initiative. In view of the current breakdown in community relations, I would suggest that this conference supports this recommendation as one of its outcomes.

I also take this opportunity to refer you to other recommendations in *Chega!* Which, though specifically directed to the Catholic Church, are also relevant in part to other faith communities. These recommendations can be found on pages 158, 164-167, and 178 of the English edition of the Executive Summary. In brief, they urge the Church, in partnership with other faith communities, to continue to protect and promote human rights including through public advocacy. In due course, the Post-CAVR Secretariat will be writing to Church leaders to bring these specific recommendations to their attention.

4. Partnership

It is clear that religious institutions and government are major stakeholders in Timor-Leste. It is also clear that Timor-Leste is a new, post-conflict society which is fragile and susceptible to shock. It is therefore critical, particularly at this point in our development, that Timor's two Golkars have good relations based on trust and cooperation, not suspicion and competition. Timor-Leste needs to breathe with both lungs.

However, the issue of 'church-state' relations has been neglected since independence and deserves more systematic attention by both parties. The relationship is troubled by hangovers from the past and occasional bellicose rhetoric from both sides. It has not been overlooked, however, because the state is inherently hostile to religion or vice versa, but because the institutions involved have been totally preoccupied since 1999 with the demanding task of building or re-building themselves institutionally. President Xanana Gusmao, for example, makes only passing reference to faith communities in his recent book 'Timor Lives!', a collection of over 30 speeches given since Independence.

Much can be learned from the four models either experienced or proposed in Timor's past.

In pre-1974 Portuguese times the principal non-indigenous religious institution – the Catholic Church – was part of government. This model served to legitimise an unjust status quo and was not in the interests of the people. It is not an appropriate relationship for contemporary Timor-Leste which is committed to upholding the separation of 'church' and state based on Section 45 of the Constitution. During the

post-1975 Indonesian period, the church opposed the government despite official attempts to incorporate it. Aspects of this model should be retained, particularly the independence of religious institutions, closeness to the people, and public advocacy to promote and defend fundamental values. But there are no grounds to continue today the attitude of fundamental rejection and hostility that the church had towards government during the Indonesian period. A third model can be identified from the period of transition to independence which saw minimal engagement between 'church' and state. The UN administration effectively ignored religious institutions and they in turn largely withdrew from external involvement to focus on internal institutional challenges. Neither attitude is creative or valid in contemporary Timor-Leste. The separation of 'church and state' is not meant to be a divorce where former partners retreat into isolation and have nothing more to do with each other. Lastly, there have been suggestions since independence that religious leaders might serve as political leaders. This is an arrangement with which both Islam and Christianity are very familiar. However, it is not recommended whatever the merits of possible candidates might be. In its extreme form it rejects the doctrine of separation of religion and the state and seeks to concentrate absolute power in one institution to the detriment of freedom of religion, pluralism and democracy.

The challenge for both government and religious institutions is to develop a new paradigm appropriate for post-independence, democratic Timor-Leste. This conference might consider promoting dialogue on this subject through a program of research and seminars. In principle, the relationship should be based on mutual respect, a clear recognition of each other's legitimacy, respective roles and independence but also on goodwill and a willingness to cooperate in the interests of the common good. Working this out in practice is not always straightforward. However, the recent partnership between religious institutions and the government on behalf of Dili's internally displaced people shows what is possible.

5. Institutional integrity

Religious institutions have a long tradition of setting standards for others. They can also contribute by modelling these standards in their own institutions. While they differ in many respects from government, this should not excuse them from being what they ask government to be: competent, consultative, transparent, fiscally accountable, people-centred, free of arrogance and respectful of human rights. By providing examples of best practice religious institutions can both show how things can work and enhance their credibility as agents of change.

In conclusion, I wish to re-emphasise two inter-related points made above. First, to urge religious institutions not to give up on the Timor-Leste nation building project and to unite to defend and promote the democratic process based on the rule of law that Timor-Leste has embarked on. Second, to urge you to focus more energy and creativity on economic development and the creation of job opportunities for our youth. Religious institutions have significant credibility, resources and influence in Timor-Leste. At this time of challenge, I believe that you are called to use these resources for the twin objectives of democracy and development. Democracy and development are like the wings on a bird: without these two wings a bird cannot lift off, stay in the air or fly straight.

This paper is an individual contribution and does not reflect the views of any organisation. Pat Walsh is Senior Adviser at the Post-CAVR Technical Secretariat in Dili. Email: padiwalsh@yahoo.com.au The CAVR report 'Chega!' can be accessed in 3 languages at <<http://www.cavr-timorleste.org>>