

Letter from Maria Dunell RSJ

Institutu Mary MacKillop
Becora,
Dili,
Timor-Leste
30 November, 2008

Dear Sisters, family and friends,

Greetings from Dili, Timor-Leste where the rain is falling steadily, softening the earth and watering the newly planted corn. People have been busy with digging and planting since the first rain began to fall in Dili just over a week ago. In the mountains the corn is already growing tall as the rain came much earlier there than in very humid Dili. The power is off just now as it is at any time of day for several hours without notice, so.....sorry for any mistakes but I'm typing this on battery power with the aid of candlelight which hardly shows up the keyboard. When I'm here alone, as I've been for the past three weeks, I don't go out at night to open the generator room so have to make do without lights or fans. Somehow I'm surviving well. On Thursday this week Sr. Joan Westblade LCM is due back from Australia so it will be good to have her company for a while.

Last Thursday, António de Padua and represented the "Mary MacKillop East Timor Mission" (MMETM) at the University of Dili for the graduation ceremony of two students who have been sponsored through us. Yesterday, we did the same for three more at the University of Peace and in December there will be another two of our students graduating from the National University. António is one of our staff and is responsible for the distribution of the sponsorship funds for tertiary students. All five graduates were very appreciative of our presence and especially of the sponsors who so generously donate through MMETM. There were at least 300 graduates at each ceremony. They and their families were so happy and proud of their achievements.

At present we're looking for sponsorship for three young children. Until now, I haven't asked anyone for money but now I'm making an urgent appeal. If any of you friends out there are in a position to do so please let us know. Your contribution, no matter how small, will be gratefully received. These three children, aged 9, 6 and 3 years were given by their mother to our Parish Priest.

Father Guilhermino was reluctant to take responsibility for them as he has more than enough to do but he feared for the safety of the mother and the children as he has recently experienced tragedies in this area. Other people who live in the Parish House help with their care. Father is trying to get them into one of the Catholic Orphanages. The elder girl now attends the Parish School next door and last week the 3 year old was in hospital for a few days suffering from asthma. I understand he is now in the care of Father's sister who is a nurse.

We are very blessed to have such a wonderful Parish Priest who also recently was enrolled as a Josephite Associate. He is a very compassionate man who loves his people, 40,000 parishioners., and they love him. He is responsible for not only this Parish of Becora but also for Akanunu, Bedois, Bidau, Darlau, Hera, Manlieu ad Metinaro, some of which are not far away but the driving is difficult in the mountains especially in the wet. He has now a newly-ordained priest as an assistant. On Friday 21st November Fr Guil was driving his very old car in the town when the front wheel came off in the middle of an intersection. He was badly shaken by the experience but grateful that no other person was involved. On that day he had

performed 215 baptisms after 490 the previous week and another 164 to follow last week. He is still without a car.

Dili is **slowly** making progress with many buildings and some roads being repaired while the vast majority of buildings are still bomb-out wrecks. Streets in the middle of town are being swept and street markets have been moved out of some areas. That makes the place look cleaner and tidier but some of the vendors have suffered as a result. A trip around the back streets and even in our own neighbourhood shows that the vast majority of people are living in dire poverty and without clean water. Many Internally Displaced People (IDPs) have been helped by the government to return to their own places but those on church properties are still there in UN tents. Our parish has its share of them with most of the church grounds and school yard being taken up with these people and tents for the past two years. The water pump has been broken as well. Hopefully they also will soon be given the government assistance required to return to their own places. This was supposed to be done by November.

Yesterday, as usual, I went to 5pm vigil Mass and the church was half full of children who sang so well. I don't know what the occasion was as I don't understand the spoken notices but the singing of those children nearly raised the roof. It was really beautiful. From home here I can hear the singing at Mass and on Sundays the church is literally packed out for all three Masses. It's a very large church and people squeeze into seats already filled but there are half as many again on stackable stools or standing outside. One Sunday I took note of the time it took for the priest and nine ministers of the Eucharist to distribute Communion. It was 10 minutes!

As I write to you this First Sunday of the beautiful season of Advent I wish each one of you a very blessed time during these four weeks and a very Happy Christmas.

Love and blessings to all,
Maria