

St Mary of the Angels, Geelong in partnership with **Mary Immaculate Parish, Viqueque, East Timor**

St Mary of the Angels, Geelong has always been active in providing support and assistance to people in its parish and the wider Geelong community. However, to develop its Christian mission, a need to extend the parish commitment beyond its traditional boundaries was seen as desirable.

Parish Priest, **Fr Kevin Dillon**, noted that many parishes addressed the issue of 'mission' by forming alliances (partnerships or twinning arrangements) with a parish in a poor community and extending this relationship by taking small groups to visit, serve and learn. Assistance was given in the form of pastoral care, education, water delivery, health clinics, agricultural projects, the sale of local handicrafts, and so on. In other words, the partnership was developed to love, to care for, to feed, to teach and to protect one another.

In 2009, after due consideration, **St Mary of the Angels' Parish Council** identified the Catholic parish of Mary Immaculate in the district of Viqueque, East Timor, as a partner-parish. A sub-committee of the Parish Council was commissioned to establish and support the partnership.

Why twin with East Timor and the Viqueque District in particular?

East Timor is one of Australia's closest neighbours. It is one of the poorest nations in the world, ranking 162 out of 182 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index. *Australia ranks number 2.* Over half the population lived below the poverty line of less than one dollar per day. The unemployment rate is very high, at over 61%.

During World War 2, East Timor offered a strategic buffer zone to stop the Japanese army invading Australia. The loyalty and care given to Australians by the Timorese was unique in the annals of war. 40,000 Timorese civilians were killed as a result of their assistance to Australia. *No other nation has lost so many citizens as a result of helping Australian soldiers.*

A number of Victorian local government councils have partnered with districts in East Timor to offer support, friendship and understanding. The **City of Greater Geelong** and the District of Viqueque were formally linked in 2005. This relationship was cemented with the formation of the Geelong Friends of Viqueque Committee.

Viqueque is a remote district in the south-east of East Timor, 183 km from Dili. The district has approximately 62,000 inhabitants. It takes up to 8 hours to drive from Dili; during the wet season it can be cut off for weeks. Viqueque is poor, employment is virtually unobtainable and survival is based around subsistence farming. Essential services are scarce and unreliable, especially the delivery of clean water and electricity.

The Parish of Mary Immaculate in the district of Viqueque is an old established Catholic Mission parish in the Diocese of Baucau.

History of the Partnership

2009

Fr Dionisio Da Silva Sarmiento (Parish Priest of Mary Immaculate) visited St Mary of the Angels, Geelong, in October. The partnership was discussed and inaugurated on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in December 2009. St Mary of the Angels Parish Council Chairperson, **Mr Barry Leith**, and a small group of parishioners visited Viqueque to celebrate

the establishment of the partnership. Money was raised through the schools and the parish, particularly Café Light. In the early days of the partnership, many Geelong parishioners signed up to "**Four for Timor**".

2010 – 2012

Mr Chris Hansen and **Ms Karyn Phillips** (teaching staff at Christ the King school in St Mary of the Angels Parish) travelled to Viqueque in July, 2010. This was the first of 3 trips over two years which strengthened the partnership, particularly the bond between schools in the two parishes. Chris and Karyn taught in the Viqueque schools, visited Mass stations and participated in a variety of parish activities. Their first trip to Viqueque coincided with a local landslide due to heavy rain and the evacuation of an entire village to higher ground!

2013 - 2014

Through the years, Chris Hansen continued to make regular trips to Viqueque. On his return, he would report to Fr Kevin Dillon and the St Mary's Parish Council. This included preparing a newsletter for distribution at weekend Masses and through the schools.

Money was regularly transferred to the Viqueque parish from St Mary of the Angels. Financial assistance from Geelong was extended to the priests, parish staff, catechists, teachers and seminarians. St Mary of the Angels also supported university students, field trips to Dili and parish groups such as Youth for Christ. Major projects were also undertaken such as the purchase and maintenance of a parish car, building classrooms in the schools, a new presbytery and renovating chapels in the Viqueque District. These have been very big financial commitments extending over years.

Cafe Light at St Mary of the Angels has been a longstanding pillar of financial support for the partnership with Viqueque. A team of weekly volunteers offer coffee and a light lunch (for a donation) after Mass on Sundays. Their total profit goes to our partner-parish in Viqueque. Fr Dillon dreamt of a partnership that would inspire love and care for each other. Cafe Light has been the embodiment of that sentiment!

Students in the four parish schools, St Mary's, St Robert's, Christ the King and St Margaret's participated in "Immersion Days" at St Joseph's College over a number of years. The innovative program was organised by a small group of members from the Geelong Viqueque Friendship Schools Committee and focussed on a day in the life of a person living in the Viqueque district. In 2019, the special program will be held in the Pioneer Room at St Mary of the Angels. A feature of the program will be the involvement of Geelong secondary college students who have visited East Timor with their schools during the year.

2015 - 2016

In August 2015, Chris Hansen represented St Mary of the Angels Parish at the inauguration of the new parish church in the district of Viqueque. The ceremony was attended by the President of Timor-Leste, The Prime Minister, Bishops, past Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, politicians and District Administrators. The church was built with money provided by the Timorese Government. Fr Dionisio Da Silva Sarmiento supervised the building of the church over three years which was modelled, in part, on St Mary of the Angels Basilica, Geelong.

In December 2016, the parish-partnership celebrated its seventh anniversary. Fr Dionisio Da Silva Sarmiento (Fr Divo) sent many boxes of beautiful local, hand-crafted gifts for parishioners in the Geelong parish. A beautiful plaque designed by **Mrs Lisa Hunter** (Christ the King school) was presented to both communities to mark the anniversary. 'Seven' is a lucky number in the Timorese culture.

2017

A new **St Mary of the Angels Viqueque Steering Committee** was formed in February. The committee was made up of staff from the four parish schools. One of the aims of the new Committee was to spread the responsibility for the partnership and build a stronger base with the students and families in our schools.

In July, we said goodbye to Fr Kevin Dillon after 16 years as Parish Priest of St Mary of the Angels. Assistant priest in the Viqueque parish, **Fr Pascoal Natalino Soares Moniz**, and seminarian, **Jesse Ferreira**, made the trip to Geelong to participate in Fr Dillon's farewell celebrations. Fr Divo thanked Fr Dillon via a short video and Fr Pascoal presented Fr Dillon with a beautiful tias. Fr Pascoal and Jesse spent two weeks in Geelong. They visited the parish schools and participated in Mass on the weekend. The new Parish Priest of St Mary of the Angels, **Fr James Clarke**, is very supportive of the partnership.

2018

After almost ten years as Parish Priest, Fr Dionisio Da Silva Sarmiento left the Viqueque parish in February to take up his new position as Director of one of the Catholic schools in the Manatuto District. New Parish Priest, **Fr Evaristo Antonio Da Costa** from the Ossu parish moved to Mary Immaculate in Viqueque. A quiet man, Fr Evaristo is very supportive of the partnership with Geelong. One of his aims with the support of St Mary of the Angels is to renovate many of the tiny, dilapidated chapels spread throughout the Viqueque District. After almost ten years, Fr Evaristo noted that the "twinningship" with Geelong has now stood the test of time when similar partnerships have ended.

In June, the first "Staff Trip to East Timor" was held. Six staff from the four parish schools made the trek to East Timor and spent one week in the Viqueque parish. The trip was a resounding success! Teaching staff included **Jessica Young**, **Emma Rhodes** and **Chris Hansen** from Christ the King, **Ollie Banks** from St Mary's, **Nathan Owen** from St Robert's and **Sinead Stevenson** from St Margaret's. A beautiful 2019 calendar was produced at the end of the trip and formed the basis of a fundraising project for the remainder of 2018.

Staff believe their Social Justice programs in school are more authentic when they have "hands-on" involvement in East Timor through the parish-partnership. As Fr Divo once said: **"A little for some is a lot for others!"** One of the aims is to help our students see that Catholic Social Teaching comes alive in our endeavour to stand by our friends in East Timor.

2019

This year, we will celebrate the tenth anniversary of our partnership in December. The four schools will join with the parish community at the 11am Mass on Sunday, 8th December (the Feast of Mary Immaculate) to mark the occasion. At this stage, it is our aim to invite Fr Evaristo Antonio Da Costa to join us in Geelong for the celebration. Our ongoing spiritual and prayerful support for each other has been a hallmark of the partnership.

St Mary of the Angels, Geelong is enormously grateful to have had the opportunity to work alongside Christian College who have a long association with the district of Viqueque. The link established with the Geelong Viqueque Friendship Schools Committee, under the leadership of **Mr Peter Cannon**, has been a very successful partnership. Looking back, the strength of St Mary's partnership with Viqueque has been linking in with the wider network of support established through various organisations across Geelong.

We believe the partnership between St Mary of the Angels and Mary Immaculate, Viqueque, has a vibrant future. With a revitalised Steering Committee leading the way and a staunch network of support across Geelong, anything is possible.



Mary Immaculate church, Viqueque



Banner celebrating 7 years displayed in Viqueque



Staff Trip to East Timor 2018



Fr Dillon & Fr Pascoal celebrate Mass at Christ the King school

