

## 'Respectfully Aging' The Elderly person in Timor Leste

by Br. Agedo Bento O.Carm



### Background on how we respect and care for elderly people in Timor Leste

In my country 60% of the population is under twenty-five, so Timor Leste has a very young population; but it's important to say that the way we care for the elderly is very strong as we have '*a culture of respect.*' Even though less than 5% are over sixty-five we grow up with an understanding that older people must be treated with great respect and if we fail in this duty then it is something like bad *karma*. We also realise that without the elderly people we wouldn't exist. Of course this is logical but it's important for us to acknowledge. For example, if my mother and my father didn't exist I would not have been born!



Another example, when my grandfather died my grandmother came to live with my family and we as her grandchildren would look after her. Whatever she needed we would do. It's a natural thing for us to look after other members of our family who are frail and elderly. I know it is very different to Australia as here many elderly people go into Aged Care. We don't have these institutions nor do we need them at this time, (I think, maybe in the future as the world is moved on that might be change one day.?) Why? Because, in Timor, even an older person does not have any immediate family they would still be cared for by members of the extended family; all elderly are cared for in this way. This caring extends to sharing. If I have some vegetable, it is natural for me to share them with

others... so we look after one another and yet this culture of sharing and helping one another with special regard to elderly ones is very strong.

Until recently all members of a family would live in the same region, but now more and more young people seek employment and educational opportunities in other places. Like me, I'm here in Melbourne! But there are always other members of the family close by who can attend to the day to day needs of the elderly. Even though some of us go away never are our elderly left to fend for themselves. For example, last year, when my Mum gets sick in the house, some of my extended family like my aunts, uncles, cousins who live nearby come to look after her until my sisters and brothers arrived because they have to travel some hours to come to take care of mum. And at the moment my mum lives with my younger brother and one of my nephews. They both look after her very well. I am proud of them both and other extended family who are still very strong holding on to this cultural attitude of caring and looking after the elderly who are vulnerable.

**In Timor Leste 4.71% of the population are 65 years+. In Australia the figure is 14.4%.  
Iha Timor Leste 4.71 % hosi populasaun hoidade bot maktinan 65 baleten. Figura idade iha Australia 14.4 %**

Though 4.71 % of the population are 65 years+, it does not lessen the attitude of caring for elderly people. It is because the cultural attitude of respecting and caring for the elderly is very strong. Even the way we respect the elderly is not just for those who are still living (alive) but also it goes beyond that. That is to say we respect also those elderly who have gone before us. It is rooted in

tradition and customs. For instance, before I came to Australia to study for the priesthood my aunts and uncles and other members of my family gathered together to pray to my grandfather and grandmother and other ancestors. We had traditional ceremonies including the killing of a pig and chicken to eat and the next day we took flowers to the cemetery, prayed at the graveside and lit a candle. We asked my ancestors and those who has died for their blessing to be bestowed on me to help me with my studies here in Australia. So you can see that our respect for the elderly extends to the living and the dead.

**How does the government and the church look after the elderly in Timor- Leste?**

Well, after we got independence in 2002 the government introduced a modest elderly pension payment for those over sixty of about \$100 every six months... but we have no health concessions such as you do here in Australia. Last year when my mother got sick my brother and sisters assisted her with money to pay for treatment. And also she got some financial support from my Carmelite brother, Fr. Hugh Brown and the Carmelite Fund raising team. Of course some families cannot afford to pay for medical services so they rely on traditional treatments including traditional medications.



The government has made some progress in assisting the elderly with literacy programs although in remote regions these programs are generally not available and there are some elderly people who feel they are too old to learn. But it's a good initiative. NGOs also assist with basic education programs as do some congregations of Sisters.

The Church in Timor Leste supports elderly people especially by visiting when people are sick, bringing communion, sometimes bringing medications.

**In Timor Leste the way we care for the elderly is very strong. We have a culture of respect.**  
**Iha Timor Leste, amiihadomin bot hodi tau matanbaferik no katuassira.**  
**Tanbaamiihacultura respei tobaferik no katuassira**

**Faith of elderly people in Timor-Leste**

I think that the faith of elderly people in my country is very radical. Now what do I mean by that? I mean that they pray incessantly even though many would not be quite sure about what they specifically believe they do have strong faith. Sometimes their devotion is a mixture of indigenous ritual and Catholic except of course when they are in the church then it is the Catholic way. But when they go back home it is a mixture of the animistic tradition and the more recent Catholic tradition. They are intermingled.

The oral tradition is very strong. When I was a little boy my grandma would often tell us mythological stories, for example the crocodile is your ancestor, so don't kill them, and so on.

**The passing on the traditions as way of respect for elderly**

Where I am from in Timor Leste it is a matriarchal society but it is my uncle, my mother's brother, which is often known in the Tetun Language (the language of Timor Leste) with the title of "Tiu bot" which literally means "big uncle" who holds the traditional authority. He is like a "traditional judge or executor" which we call in Tetun, "Lia Nain or hakotulianian" as he represents all the members of extended family. He is the voice or the spokes person in the family but also in collaboration with my other uncles and other elderly within the extended family. The collaboration with the other uncles and elders are also because of the culture of respect and the sense of consideration to other elders within the family. However, he is (big uncle) the chief executor.

It is customary that my uncle (big uncle=Tiu bot) before he dies must pass on his knowledge, wisdom or wit to one of the elder brother within the family (which is myself) in a ceremony which includes the passing on of a sacred shawl and all the sacred wit and tradition which acknowledges that this elder brother now has the responsibility to guard the traditions. He is given a sacred formula or

word by which he must live and to be able to use it to protect and care for all the family members whenever and wherever is needed. Indeed, if he ignores this tradition he or one of the extended family could get sick and die or may get into trouble such as going mad, have an accident or another malice could affect the family. And this has become a sort of belief, so, the one (elderly brother) who is chosen to this role must be dedicate himself fully to it and with care.

In my family, I am the older brother, so this role is passed on to me but because I am studying to be a priest and I am often away from the family, like now, I am in Australia, so it is my responsibility to say to my uncle that it is better to pass on the tradition to one of my other brothers or my cousin from my mother's side who is not going anywhere. However, there must be a criterion for this. The elder brother to be chosen for this role has to be wiser than the others and also must have an inclusive attitude toward the extended family; holding the family together, taking this responsibility, caring and guarding the family.

### How we greet elderly with respect

When we greet an elderly person in my country we kiss their hand as a sign of respect and also ask them for a blessing. we never shook hands with our mother, father; grandfather and grandfathers, uncles and uncles and people with age of sixties plus. When we meet them always kiss their hands as symbol of respect but before we hold their hands to kiss we should ask them in this word "Bensa." This word derived from Portuguese word " Bença"

means blessing. So, it means that we ask them a blessing. It is because, we know that the elderly are blessed and they have the spiritual wisdom. So we ask them to bless us the children by kissing their hands. Similar practice is also applying for the priest. People (Christian Catholics) are often after Sunday mass or whenever they meet the priest they will kiss the priest hands because the priest is considered to be the one who has the spiritual wisdom.

We also never call the elderly ones by their names. If we call them by names, it means that we don't pay respect to them. Therefore, we always have to call them by their status or according to the age. For example, we often use "Apa" for father; "Avo mane no avofeto" for grandpa and grandma; "Tiu and Tia" for uncles and aunts; "Tiu bot" for "older uncle" or big uncle; Maun bot "big brother or older brother" instead of calling them by name.

So you can see we hold elderly people in East Timor in very high esteem. Our ancestors who have come before us and those that are living deserve and get our respect. And yet, this is how it is in Timor.

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### Acknowledgment from Agedo Bento O.Carm

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*May we grow strong in support and caring with respect for our elderly and one another in Australia and in Timor Leste."*

### **SOCIAL JUSTICE STATEMENT 2016-17 'A Place at the Table'**

*Listen to the Stories and Life Experience of older people:*

The memories these men and women possess are your heritage. The story-telling shows you who you are rather than what you do or how much you possess. You may come to better understand your own place in the narrative -

- Sit with older relatives and neighbours and ask them to share past experiences
- Invite guest speakers to schools to speak about their experiences
- Arrange a project to collect stories from older people around important local or world events
- Make a video or a sound archive of these stories.



## FOR YOUR CALENDAR

<b>1 May</b>	St Joseph the Worker, International Workers Day
<b>6 May</b>	Mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia in 1992
<b>9 May</b>	War ends in Europe in 1945
<b>13 May</b>	World FairTrade Day
<b>18 May</b>	World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development
<b>20 May</b>	<b>2002 Timor Leste Constitution Day</b>
<b>26 May</b>	<b>National Sorry Day</b>
<b>27 May</b>	<b>National Reconciliation Week begins 50th Anniversary of referendum that changed articles in the Australian Constitution that discriminated against Indigenous Peoples (1967)</b>
<b>28 May</b>	Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
<b>29 May</b>	International Day of UN Peacekeepers

### **Quote from Archbishop Oscar Romero**

Let us not be disheartened, even when the horizon of history grows dim and closes in, as though human realities made impossible the accomplishment of God's plans. God makes use even of human errors, even of human sins, so as to make rise over the darkness what Isaiah spoke of. One day prophets will sing not only the return from Babylon but our full liberation. 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.

They walk in lands of shadows, but a light has shone forth.' (Is. 9:1-2)

**December 25, 1977**

However tiring, the road to Emmaus leads from a sense of discouragement and bewilderment to the fullness of Easter faith . . . As the light of the risen Christ illumines the whole universe, we can only express solidarity with all our brothers and sisters in the Middle East who have been caught in a maelstrom of armed violence and retaliation. The roar of weapons must give way to the voice of reason and conscience: sincere concern for the legitimate aspirations of all peoples and the scrupulous observance of international law are the only way to bring the parties back to the negotiating table and to mark out a path of brotherhood for those peoples.

**John Paul II, 18 April 2001**

## **ABORIGINAL RIGHTS ...**

In conjunction with the Catholic Religious of Australia, and on behalf of our Carmelite Order, our JPIC Team has written to several members of parliament supporting Aboriginal rights as follows:

*"As members of the Carmelite religious Order in the Christian tradition, we are concerned that the proposed amendments to the Native Title Act will reduce the already inadequate legal protections for land rights of Australia's First Nations people. It is unacceptable that the cultural and spiritual rights of the Wangan and Jagalingou people, and their right to self-determination, are being disregarded and overridden by governments and mining interests.*

*We urge you to oppose the amendments to the Native Title Act proposed by Attorney-General Brandis, which would make it easier for mining companies to override the wishes of the **Wangan** and **Jagalingou** and all First Nations people across Australia.*

*It's time instead that there is reform of the Native Title legislation such that it will deliver greater land justice and genuine acknowledgement of the connection of Aboriginal people to country. It's time that we, as a nation, in truth show the "respect to Elders past and present" that we so routinely express at formal gatherings."*

**JOIN THE CONVERSATION....** and support Aboriginal rights at this website:  
The Referendum Council  
<https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/>



**DON'T MISS** this amazing documentary ABC TV Tuesday 16th May to see what you can learn.

### **Laudato Si#21-22**

Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable. The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish. These problems are closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish.