



## Mother-love at the medical clinic - Railaco

*Lynda Slavinskis*

When preparing for our visit to Timor Leste, I often wondered 'what can I do to help? What can I give?'

Today on our visit to the remote mountain village of Fatu Besi, I realised that the greatest gift I could give was just to be me, a mother. I experienced the simple yet extraordinary power a smile and a gentle touch can have, in the absence of a shared language. It is the silent 'knowing', especially between mothers, that can engender trust and cement even the most unlikely of friendships.

After sharing Mass and sitting a while with the people waiting to see Fr Bong in the medical clinic, Elijah and I went for a walk with Brother Apu to see the village. Along the way, we stopped to greet a mother

Alita and her children Aveve and Akoli. Through some broken Tetum I had learnt from Apu only moments earlier and translation from him when needed, I was able to have a conversation with Alita. We sat in her sister's home made of sticks, bamboo and corrugated iron and we bonded over our children. Alita was so proud of her children, she beamed as she spoke about them.

Through her smile, I could feel her love for them, which was only matched by the love I have for my Elijah. Elijah showed the children photos of our dog at home to their delight. We played peek-a-boo and laughed together. Akoli who was wary of us at the beginning, warmed to us quickly and started to introduce me to his cousins who all lived nearby and taught me new words in Tetum. Akoli looked like a toddler but

was in fact 5 years old and I suspected wanted to show me he was a 'big boy' and peek-a-boo should be reserved for his baby sister!

In those treasured, simple moments spent with this family, I learnt that in motherhood there is no rich or poor, no division. There is only love, pride in our children and the desire to share experiences to achieve common ground. Motherhood is a club with automatic membership. It does not discriminate. Through motherhood, Alita and I became friends.

*The key observation I made during our visit to Fatu Besi was that the people have great need, but they are NOT needy. They sang like angels, lead mass, waited so patiently to see the doctor, smiled like they were the happiest people on earth. This made me feel that our desire to 'help', although noble, perhaps needs to be reframed.*

*I reflected after making the connection with my fellow mother Alita, that if we can make friends with our neighbours in Timor Leste, we become equals. We are not the givers and they the takers. We are able to sit together in conversation and connection like we did today, often with nothing more than a wink, a smile, a knowing look. We can inspire each other as friends do, help each other as friends do, love each other as friends do.*

This is what the relationship between St Canice's parish and the Railaco Jesuit Mission is all about - simply being neighbourly, the mutual comfort we derive from having good neighbours.

By moving the discourse away from 'helping' to 'empowering', from 'feeding' to 'eating', from 'teaching' to 'sharing knowledge', from 'watching' to 'noticing', we can find common ground where our hearts beat to the same rhythm just like it does in motherhood, dance, song and smiles - all of which are universal experiences. Once common ground is achieved, we can then truly understand the need of our East Timorese friends and respond through trust and hope, slathered in love, to open up and achieve endless possibilities for the future.

