

Lay Missionary, Berni Sullivan, will be a guest speaker this Sunday 30th August at the 10.00am Mass and talking to us about her experience in East Timor

Bernie is from Melbourne (originally Sheperton), has been volunteering as a Lay Capuchin Missionary in East Timor for the past two years



Berni writes in her own words of some of the challenges and the attempts to overcome them by visiting two of the outlying villages, **Samalai** and **Cairui**, that are in the care of the parish:

The *Parish of Our Lady of the Rosary, Laleia* has been under the care of the **Capuchin Friars** since 2003 and the Lay Capuchin Missionaries have also been based here since 2011. Within Laleia itself we are able to draw close to everyone we see daily in Mass, in the kindergarten and in the street. Our faces are recognised, the mission's main projects are based here and now children rarely run and hide when they see us approaching. This isn't yet the case in Cairui and Samalai, two of the other villages in the parish. So in order to know the people better,

share a little in their daily struggles and start new mission activities, my fellow Lay Missionary, Joana Ribeiro, and I spent a week in each of the towns.





Samalai is the smallest of the villages in the parish and it's home to around 300 people. Apart from the chapel, which the parishioners themselves reconstructed last year, the only other public infrastructure is a town hall, primary school and electricity. There is no sanitation, health care or communications but the biggest problem is that there has been no water source in Samalai for more than three years. We witnessed children spending their afternoons walking to and from the river carrying heavy containers instead of playing or studying, as they should be able to. Old women and men had to hike down the hill to the river, which, as we approach the end of the dry season is little more than a muddy trickle.

One afternoon two old women presented us with water that they had collected for us. They made sure to say that it was OK, this wasn't the dirtier water from close by, which they themselves would be happy to use. Rather they had walked kilometres to find clearer, better water. My initial reaction was of unease and guilt at creating this extra work for them, but in their actions we witness exactly what we are called to do. Being on the receiving end of such generosity reminded me what sacrificial love looks like in practice and, in turn, inspires me to give myself in practical ways.

Cairui was a different challenge. Geographically it is furthest from Laleia and although it remains without electricity it has a much larger population and greater access to essential services. The challenge there was getting close to the people. They are not used to having a regular missionary presence because previously the missionary priest would only visit a few times a year. So our aim in Cairui more than anything else, was really just to get to know the people through visiting them and praying with them.



As is often the case in the mission, there were times when things we had planned didn't eventuate or turned out very differently from how we hoped or imagined they would. However, the small moments of achievement that we could never have anticipated outweigh any disappointments. Things as simple as having the little girl who, days earlier, hid when she saw us, come up and take our hand by the end of the week, or watching the excitement of the teenagers in the choir at the prospect of learning a new song, or seeing the kids eyes light up when they are told that they can take their colouring sheet they've just completed home with them.

When our time in the villages came to an end and we were packing all the things back into the car we were struck by how much of what we had brought with us was unnecessary. The generosity of the people had sufficed. We were given more than enough to eat and thankfully hot coffee was waiting for us every morning. The simple joy of the children in discovering only a couple of the new games we had brought had sufficed. There was no need to assume that they would move on quickly out of boredom from one game to another. Totem Tennis was a particular hit and to see this reminder of Aussie summer holidays in Timor Leste was a little surreal.



Perhaps the greatest blessing of our pastoral weeks in Cairui and Samalai was to rediscover the joy that comes from the poverty of not knowing a place, not knowing its people or ways well. Sometimes even far from home we become too comfortable and have the idea that we are self-reliant, but to be

dependent on the other and to be in a position to receive the hospitality that they are graced to give, and that they give so freely, was truly a gift.