
MARIA LOURDES MARTINS CRUZ

She's been called the "Joan of Arc" of her country, East Timor, which achieved independence in 2002 after 24 years of violent occupation by its big neighbour, Indonesia. "My task is to prepare the ground for a new Timor" is how Maria Lourdes Martins Cruz - known as **Mana Lou** - has seen her mission. Unlike Joan of Arc, though, she has not taken up arms for a military fight but, rather, has led her people in a nonviolent struggle to regain a sense of their own dignity and identity. In this process of education for liberation, she has said, "our arms are peace, love, justice, truth, freedom, forgiveness, unity and solidarity."

What prepared Mana Lou for her exceptional role? She was born in a small village in the mountains not far from Dili, the capital of Timor. Her parents owned a coffee plantation and were reasonably well off, so all the family of four girls and three boys went to school - that is until East Timor was invaded by Indonesia, and the school closed. Though Mana Lou was only about 12 at the time, she started to accompany the parish priest on his rounds, walking to mountain villages where she saw how the poorest and most deprived were living. She became aware of her ability to sustain and help them.

Encouraged to continue her studies by the local bishop who realised her potential, Mana Lou became a novice with a religious congregation. But the convent lifestyle was too distant from that of ordinary people, and she felt that the hierarchical structure prevented women from becoming mature and independent. It was not what she wanted. So instead, in 1985, she went to study theology at a Jesuit Institute on Java,

one of the Indonesian islands. Mana Lou proved to be a gifted student and in the course of her training as a catechist she wrote a dissertation applying liberation theology - which had evolved in Latin America - to the situation in East Timor.



Gospel of freedom

Returning home in 1989, Mana Lou started to put her ideas into practice. She established her own religious order, which she called "Brothers and Sisters in Christ". Its purpose is to work alongside the poor, demonstrating that the gospel is there "to set us free from sin and from what sin has done to our society". (*1971 Catholic Bishops Synod on Justice in the World*)

The young women who have joined her community do not wear religious habit and they live in the same simplicity as local people. On land around her father's coffee estate near Dili Mana Lou has built - with her own hands - a training institute to educate girls, two orphanages (because many of them lost their families in the war) boarding houses and a home for sick people with no family to look after them. Everyone helps with the daily chores and raising crops like rice and corn, fruit, vegetables and animals which feed the community.

This model of equality and self-sufficiency is what Mana Lou advocates for Timor as a whole. Asking searching questions about the causes of poverty and violence in East Timor, she realised that change would have to be brought about by the people themselves, using the resources available to them to make lasting improvements, rather than superficial solutions imposed from outside.

"Women cannot wait for men to change - we have to get on with our own change"

However, the years of Indonesian occupation, and four centuries of Portuguese colonialism before that, had robbed the Timorese of their own identity, their indigenous culture and spirituality. Portuguese rulers had divided people by race and education, leaving the mass of Timorese poor, uneducated, and with a profound inferiority complex which made them easy to exploit. (In the 1950s under Portuguese rule, over 95% of adults were illiterate. Timor is the poorest country in Asia today. 52% of adults are still illiterate and average life expectancy is only 49.)

Recovering Timorese identity

Mana Lou challenges this disempowering legacy first of all by restoring a sense of cultural identity. "People know who they are definitely not: Indonesians. But we don't really know who we are." She teaches her girls and young women the dances and songs of their ancestors. She collects books about traditional medicine and passes on what she has learned, pointing out the plants with healing properties. The transmission of these collective memories and wisdom was disrupted by the years of war. Mana Lou hopes that recovering this shared heritage will help to build a self-confident nation of people able to work together for a better future for everyone.

Her own family was divided and split up by the war. After her parents separated Mana Lou made a promise to God: "If you look after my family and unite them, I'll devote my life to uniting the people of East Timor."

Not surprisingly, Mana Lou is particularly sensitive to the need for reconciliation and healing of relationships between people who supported different factions. Many East Timorese men had been coerced into joining the militia which collaborated with the Indonesian army. They threatened and murdered their own people, driving a quarter of the population across the border, into refugee camps in West Timor, where they continued to terrorise them. At the time of the 1999 referendum, when the East Timorese voted for independence from Indonesia, militia gangs went on the rampage, killing about 1,400 independence supporters and devastating the country's infrastructure.

After the referendum Mana Lou directed her concern towards these men. Arguing that they too had been victims of Indonesian exploitation, she successfully persuaded many to go home to East Timor and seek peace within the rest of the community. Others chose Indonesian citizenship.

A new model of leadership

Mana Lou provides a new model of religious leadership and service for the Church, and particularly as a dynamic, vocal and independent-minded lay woman. The Portuguese colonists brought Catholicism to Timor and that faith has been a great source of strength for people through all their trials. But the Church's attitude to women reinforced the subservient role assigned to women in Timor - as in most traditional societies. Seeking Vatican permission to establish her religious community Mana Lou ran into all the obstructive tactics employed by fearful clergy who wanted to maintain that role. After much delay, she finally managed to give the necessary documents to the local bishop's assistant. He cuffed her on the head with them and said: "We don't want women behaving like priests here." In 1998 the bishop gave recognition to her community - on an experimental basis - and it is only since she had gained wider recognition that he has been more supportive.

Pax Christi International is one of the organisations that have seen the value of what Mana Lou has done for East Timor. In 1997 she was joint recipient of Pax Christi's International Peace Prize, with Fr Domingos Soares, a parish priest who, like Mana Lou, proclaims the human rights of ordinary people in East Timor and leads them by example towards self-improvement and a better future. They would share Gandhi's belief that "*We* must be the change we hope to see."

Read:

Bitter Dawn East Timor - a people's story, Irena Cristalis, Zed Books, 2002

Independent Women: the story of women's activism in East Timor, Irena Cristalis and Catherine Scott, CIIR, 2005