

## **Youth Optimism Fuels Transformation in Timor-Leste: The Role of Vocational Education for the Future of the Nation**

As the elections which will define the future of Timor-Leste are currently taking place, there is an air of optimism among the younger generation. As they are hopeful to witness their nation progress and tackle important challenges at hand. The President of the Bishops' Conference of Timor-Leste, Bishop Norberto do Amaral of Maliana, in a public message, calls on politicians to promote peace and work for stability and the common good.

With 97 percent of their population being Catholic, and a median age of 21 years old, Timor-Leste has a passionate and youthful voice. A voice that has concern regarding the employment opportunities they currently have, as the country struggles to absorb the large youth population into its workforce.

In rural areas, like in the Diocese of Baucau, this situation is even more critical as many young people do not have the opportunity to pursue higher education or to learn a trade due to the lack of financial resources. This is a situation known all too well by the inhabitants of Venilale, a rural town situated 40 minutes inland from Baucau.

“Regarding the community in Venilale, [...] education is difficult, many students are poor, they lack a lot of things to support them,” says Sr Anita Freitas, the Director of Saint Maria Mazzarello Vocational School.

The Salesian Sisters and Catholic Mission, who have been walking with the Timorese people for decades, are well aware of the struggles faced by the local communities.

In 1994, they opened the Saint Maria Mazzarello Vocational School in Venilale to provide educational pathways to young people and bridge the gap existing between the workplace market demand and the lack of skilled labor.

The School was created with the aim of empowering the local community through learning employable skills. Today, it provides youth with access to culinary and hospitality training for tourism, as well as teaching them general subjects. By welcoming students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the Salesian Sisters enable them to create their own future and become independent.

One of the current students at the Vocational School, Madalena\*, is expressing her gratitude and dreams when talking about the opportunity she accessed through the school.

“I am very grateful that I can attend this school. I can gain experience from the sisters and they always motivate us if we make any mistakes. I am very grateful that I can be part of this community and do the right thing and I can also learn more about how I can prepare foods that I have learned about in school. [...] if God gave me some assistance [...], I will open my own cafeteria,” says Madalena.

When Madalena graduates, she will be more likely to get employment thanks to her skills and the development of the touristic market in Timor-Leste, which makes her training of value in the marketplace. She will be a one of the change-makers of the nation.

Read more about the work of Catholic Mission in Timor-Leste, visit [catholicmission.org.au/heartsonfire](http://catholicmission.org.au/heartsonfire)

\*Names are changed to protect identities.

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**About Catholic Mission**

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