

## **The Hilton Deakin Project**

### **The Aim of the Project**

The aim of this project is to tell the East Timor Story from a particular Church perspective. Its focus is the lessons learned about the process and costs of pursuing human rights from 1991 when Bishop Deakin became involved with the East Timorese in Melbourne, until his work was recognised in May 2012 by the East Timorese Government as part of the tenth anniversary of independence. The story is told from the perspective of a Church “insider” well-placed to tell it not only in terms of the many layers of his involvement as a churchman, but also in his capacity as a trained anthropologist. The project provides a balance to and perspective on accounts already published.

### **Who is Bishop Hilton Deakin?**

Hilton Deakin is a Catholic bishop who has long been an advocate of social justice. This began in his school days at Parade College as a speaker for the Catholic Evidence Guild and visitor to the residents at the Little Sisters of the Poor aged care facility in Northcote. His interest took a professional turn when, in the mid 1960s, the newly appointed Archbishop of Melbourne asked Hilton to ensure that there would be significant participation by Aboriginal peoples in the International Eucharistic Congress planned for that city. To prepare for this assignment Hilton enrolled as a student in anthropology at Monash University and subsequently completed his PhD which included field work among the Aboriginal peoples at Kalumburu mission in remote WA. He subsequently pursued post-doctoral studies for a time in Paris under renowned anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss.

Bishop Deakin’s involvement with the East Timorese began in 1991 when as Vicar General he was approached by Timorese living in Melbourne to celebrate a memorial Mass at the Cathedral for all those killed in East Timor since the Indonesian invasion in 1975 (at that time the number already exceeded 100,000). However, before this Mass could be celebrated 294 young people were killed or had disappeared as a result of what became known as “the Santa Cruz massacre”. The subsequent Mass became part of a National Day of Mourning. This marked the beginning of Hilton’s long fight, alongside the East Timorese, for their right to self-determination and independence.

### **Dimensions of the Story - Adversaries and Colleagues**

The main adversaries in this struggle were successive Australian governments (Labor and Liberal), the Indonesian government, the Vatican diplomatic service, and, locally, the National Civic Council, all of whom adopted as policy that East Timor should be part of Indonesia. Catholic Bishops in Australia followed the Vatican line on this matter. Hilton’s collaborators were the East Timorese refugees living in Australia, including representatives of the Fretilin movement such as Jose Ramos Horta, the trade unions, and a number of advocacy groups such as religious congregations and groups specifically set up for this purpose. This latter group included the East Timor Centre for Human Rights which Hilton chaired. Hilton became a significant supporter of and friend to Bishop Belo, the courageous leader of the Catholic Church in East Timor and Nobel Peace laureate. There were eleven attempts made on Bishop Belo’s life as a consequence of his fearless opposition to the violence used against his people. Belo’s position was made more difficult by the fact that

many of the Indonesian troops stationed in East Timor were Catholics. Isolated as he was, he needed the help of a fellow bishop.

While a vociferous critic of Indonesian violence in East Timor, sometimes leading protest marches of over 20,000 people protesting Australian government policies on East Timor and the harsh treatment of East Timorese refugees living in Australia (some of whom had been here for over two decades), Bishop Deakin was able to maintain friendly relationships with the Indonesian consul in Melbourne as a result of which he was able to make many trips to East Timor to see the impact of occupation at first hand and on one occasion say Mass with the Fretilin combatants. The fact that he accompanied Ramos Horta (later Prime Minister and President of East Timor) on a speaking tour of the U.S. and Canada to mobilise opposition to the Indonesian occupation seems not to have prevented access, nor did the fact that he was deported from Malaysia for attending a conference being held there on self-determination for East Timor.

### **Networks and Ambiguities**

While the senior Bishops in Australia followed Vatican policy with respect to East Timor, it is perhaps a measure of the respect in which Hilton was held by them that at no stage did they try to hinder his work of advancing human rights in East Timor. It is doubtful that he could have succeeded to the Chair of either Caritas Australia or Caritas Oceania without their support. In these roles Hilton was able to mobilise resources to support projects in Indonesia. In his advocacy work, perhaps as a result of his early media training, Hilton knew the value of networking. This led to some remarkable partnerships including linking up with the Freemasons in Melbourne in order to supply tools to East Timor.

Bishop Deakin's involvement with the East Timorese, as the struggle for the right to self-determination unfolded, often in the face of impossible difficulties placed in their way by the Indonesian and Australian Governments, highlights the diplomatic, moral and practical difficulties and ambiguities that arise when Church leaders seek to intervene in an international crisis. How these difficulties are identified, and how they are worked around, or resolved in such a high stakes endeavour as self-determination in the face of almost impossible odds is a story worth telling and one whose lessons need to be identified. Hilton is well placed to complete this task provided he has the necessary professional support. (His personal archives are extensive and incorporate over 1000 documents and several contemporaneous diaries.)