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Pope Francis celebrates an outdoor Mass in Tasitolu, East Timor, also known as Timor-Leste, on Sept. 10. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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DILI, East Timor — September 10, 2024
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Teresinha da Silva was on her ninth hour standing under an umbrella in the blazing South Pacific sun when she took off her scarf and proudly began to explain its history.

The weathered scarf commemorated the epochal visit of Pope John Paul II here to Dili in 1989 in the midst of East Timor's fierce quarter-century struggle for independence after declaring independence from Portugal in 1975 and then being invaded 10 days later by Indonesia, with whom it shares the island.

"The first time we were very excited, because we knew in that moment the world was watching" she said, recalling the Polish pope's one day visit here some 35 years ago that put the country's push for independence in the global spotlight. "Now, we can celebrate that we are an independent state."

The yellow and white of her scarf — the official papal colors — matched those of the umbrella that she and nearly hundreds of thousands of others held as Da Silva, now 63, patiently awaited the arrival of yet another pontiff.

When Pope Francis finally did arrive on the late afternoon of Sept. 10 to an electric crowd of what local authorities estimated to be over 600,000 people, he would go on to make history again.

With nearly 98% of the country identifying as Catholic, Francis presided over the largest gathering of people in East Timor's history since its independence was formally restored in 2002 in a part-Mass, part belated victory celebration attended by nearly half of East Timor's 1.3 million residents.



East Timorese crowd Tacitolu park for Pope Francis' Mass in Dili, East Timor, on Tuesday, Sept. 10. (AP photo/Firdia Lisnawati)

In the Tasitolu park outside of the capital that Indonesian troops once used as a dumping ground for bodies killed during the conflict that killed over 25% of the population — and in the same place where John Paul celebrated Mass in 1989 and gave hope to a people that felt it had been neglected by much of the world — shouts of "V*iva il Papa!*" again rang out as Francis arrived to begin the liturgy.

During his homily, the pope reflected on the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who "announces to his fellow citizens a new horizon, which God will open before them: a future of hope and joy, where oppression and war will be banished forever."

"He will make a great light shine upon them, which will deliver them from the darkness of sin that oppresses them," said the pope, recalling the words of Scripture. "Yet he will do so not with the power of armies, weapons and wealth, but through the gift of a son."

The parallel between Isaiah's prophecy of the birth of the "savior of the world" and the Timorese's own liberation was obvious to the enormous and deeply faithful crowd who sat silently listening to the pope's words.

Since Francis' arrival here on Sept. 9, the entire capital has effectively been shut down with the sole focus being on the pope's presence. On Tuesday morning, the city's main market had only a few stalls open for business, taxis halted operations due to the number of road closures and even the country's largest mosque had emptied out.



Pope Francis waves to the faithful from the popemobile as he circles the crowd following an outdoor Mass in Tasitolu, East Timor, on Sept. 10. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

East Timor's President José Ramos-Horta had declared the three days of Francis' visit to be a national holiday, the culmination of his own massive investment in a visit that he had, controversially, allocated $12 million dollars from the impoverished country's budget.

Still, the high costs and the soaring temperatures didn't seem to mitigate the enthusiasm for the visit for those on the streets of Dili.

Jacinta de Deus, 37, said she had walked four hours to attend the Mass and had been waiting in the park since 6 in the morning for Francis' arrival.

"It doesn't matter, it's not too hot to receive his blessings," she said of the pope.

Imitation of Jesus Sr. Irene Caj, who stood on the front row of her section of the park during the Mass, spoke of the charitable work of religious sisters in East Timor, noting that earlier in the day, Francis had visited a home for children with disabilities run by Irmas Alma School.

"We do a lot of work here in the country," said Caj. "Now, he is here to help us."



Pope Francis comforts a child during his visit with children who are seriously ill or have severe disabilities at the Irmas Alma School in Dili, East Timor, also known as Timor-Leste, Sept. 10. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Among the pope's other stops in the country on Sept. 10 was a meeting with clergy and religious sisters at Dili's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. While Francis received a rock star's welcome by those present, he used the occasion to speak of humility.

East Timor, he said, "precisely because it is at the edge of the world is at the center of the Gospel."

In a culture where priests are highly revered — leading an ongoing denial by many Catholics of a shameful record of clergy abuse on the part of some if its most storied prelates — the pope told those on hand in the cathedral that they must avoid corruption, pride and power and not to see their ministries as "superior to the people."

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As he waited for Mass to start, Salesian Fr. Lino Belo reflected on the pope's words from earlier in the day.

"The pope has called us to be a mother for everyone," he said. "For me, as a priest, I have to be more courageous to do this."

Belo, who joined the Salesians in 1989 and was in his first year of seminary training when Pope John Paul II visited the country, said that today he was rejoicing at how far the country had come since then and that now a new pope had come to further encourage the people here.

"Independence is there but the struggle for real freedom is still difficult, especially for young people," he said.

"Now," he said looking out at the hundreds of thousands of Massgoers, "we must build a church in East Timor for the future."

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