

Belo sex allegations test Timor Church's mettle

There seems to be little appetite at the senior levels of Timorese politics to confront child sexual abuse

By Michael Sainsbury, UCA News, October 12, 2022



Pope Francis embraces Monsignor Virgilio Do Carmo Da Silva (left) after he elevated him to Cardinal during a consistory to create 20 new cardinals at St. Peter's Basilica in The Vatican on Aug. 27. (Photo: AFP)

[Cardinal Virgilio do Carmo da Silva](#) of Dili, Timor-Leste's first archbishop who was named a cardinal in August, is set for a baptism of fire that will test his every fiber and that of his countrymen.

A credible allegation of sexually abusing minors has been made against one of Cardinal da Silva's predecessors — the former Apostolic Administrator of Dili Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, who has already had travel and other restrictions placed on him, and it does not surprise many in the tiny country that is only 20 years old.

Dutch news magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* published on Sept 28 an investigative report, accusing the 74-year Salesian bishop of sexually abusing underage boys in Timor Leste over a 20-year period and buying their silence.

On the following day, the Vatican responded, admitting it had known about the allegations since 2019 and placed restrictions on Bishop Belo in 2020. Yet, the Vatican did not make these allegations public and is yet to make any comment about victims. Hopefully, that will come.

Cardinal da Silva's rise through Church ranks has been swift. He was named bishop of Dili in January 2016, Pope Francis created [Dili archdiocese](#) in September 2019, raising him to an archbishop, and three years later named him to the College of Cardinals at the age of 55.

There is every reason to believe that one of the reasons behind Pope Francis promoting him, especially to cardinal, was to prepare for these public and very detailed accusations.

The Vatican has said the restrictions on Bishop Belo, which it imposed in 2020, include forbidding contact with minors and travel and contact with people in Timor-Leste. Still, the Holy See remains opaque and the pontiff's choices are never explained.

Cardinal da Silva has impressed many locally — as well as the Vatican — since being appointed as bishop. He is seen as well-educated, fair-minded and a good manager.

He has set up an ecclesiastic tribunal that can apply canon law, primarily on marriages and dissolution of marriages. Previously people had to travel to Indonesia (West Timor).

He has also reorganized the diocese's parishes and the administration of the diocese in ways that are positive according to local priests.

At present, he is operating almost alone in Timor-Leste. The [Diocese of Bacau](#) is waiting for the Vatican to appoint a new bishop following the death of Bishop Basilio do Nascimento last year. Word is that a new appointment will be made in December. The Bishop of Maliana, [Norberto de Amaral](#), who heads the local Bishop's Conference, has been unwell for some time, although he's still carrying out some duties.

One point of interest from the Dutch report is the claim that Bishop Belo abused boys before he became bishop, in the early 1980s, in the village of Fatumaca, when he was superior at the educational center of the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB), the congregation to which he belongs. This is where Cardinal da Silva studied.

There appears to be little appetite at the senior levels of Timorese politics to confront child sexual abuse. Bishop Belo shared his Nobel prize with Timor-Leste's current president, Jose Ramos-Horta, while Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak and his wife are conservative practicing Catholics

Public discussion of sex is taboo in Timor-Leste and only spoken about in whispers. Bishop Belo is not the first priest in the country to face accusations of child sexual abuse.

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In 2018, accusations surfaced against American Divine Word priest Richard Daschbach, now 85, who ran an orphanage in the remote province of Oecusse. He was found to have abused young girls on a daily basis. The Vatican defrocked him and a court imprisoned him for 12 years in 2021. But along the way, he was protected from within and outside the Church.

Daschbach has lived in Timor-Leste since 1986 and, like Bishop Belo, he had supported Timorese rebels in their 24-year battle against Indonesian occupation and has strong political connections. The Church still wields significant social and political power in the country, and priests are revered, especially in rural areas.

In the absence of any government inquiry, the best option would be to test the allegations against Bishop Belo in court but it's hard to see victims coming forward knowing they would have a global media spotlight and immense pushback from many of the country's citizens, perhaps even their own families.

That really leaves the ball in the Vatican's court. The Vatican has admitted it not only understands the allegations but also has acted upon them, suggesting that it believes there is some truth to them.

In 2019 Pope Francis set up a new process especially to investigate senior clerics known as Vox Estis Lux Mundi which was used to laicize former US cardinal Theodore McCarrick accused of sexual abuse. He is now before the US criminal court.

The procedure set in the same document is reportedly followed to investigate sex allegations against 72-year-old Australian bishop Christopher Saunders by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, reports said early this month.

The Bishops' Conference in [Timor Leste](#), now managed by Cardinal da Silva, also needs to follow the procedures of the Vox Estis Lux Mundi to investigate Bishop Belo. It should be expedited for the sake of the prelate's alleged victims and countless other Timorese boys and girls, and vulnerable young adults who have been abused by clerics, past and present.

**The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.*