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In East Timor, self-professed paedophile and former priest Richard Daschbach continues to evade justice

After meeting American Catholic priest Richard Daschbach in East Timor, a writer helped him procure funding for his orphanage, before discovering the man was a sexual predator

[Ian Lloyd Neubauer](#) in the *South China Morning Post* Magazine, 30 Jan, 2021

From the moment I first laid eyes on him, in 2009, I knew he was unlike the few other Westerners on the ship. Slowly, steadily, he made his way through the crowd, stopping as local people took his hand and touched it against their foreheads – a traditional sign of veneration for men of the cloth. Yet this old man seemed anything but missionary-like, dressed down in a polo shirt and an old baseball hat, with small stumpy teeth stained red from chewing betel nut.

Later in the evening, I saw him again, resting on the upper deck among the hundreds of passengers making the slow overnight journey from East Timor’s sleepy capital, Dili, to Oecusse, a small coastal territory of East Timor, walled in by Indonesian-controlled West Timor.

His name was Father Richard Daschbach, an American priest who had built the Topu Honis orphanage and women’s shelter near Oecusse. We talked for more than an hour and at the end of our discussion, he invited me to stay at Topu Honis as his guest. In Meto, Oecusse’s little-known tongue, *topu* means “to lead by the hand” and *honis* means “life”.

After a simple breakfast of hot rice and vegetables, we set off on a two-hour slog uphill, through dense jungle, to reach Topu Honis at the village of Kutet. At 73, Daschbach was in incredibly good shape, skirting the slippery path like a mountain goat.

“The trick is to stay active,” he chimed. “Active in the body and active in the mind.”

The son of a Pennsylvania steelworker, Daschbach was dispatched to Timor as a missionary by the Catholic Church two years after his ordination in 1967.

“At the time, it was the other side of the moon,” he said as we crested another hill. “The people were very poor and there was no electricity, no telephones, nothing – just one dirt road crossing the island.”

Back then, Daschbach had spent six weeks in the Indonesian port town of Kupang before he was able to arrange transport to Oecusse, which was under Portuguese control at the time. He worked there as a priest for the next 20 years, serving the Church and his congregation. At the same time, he used his diplomatic prowess to stay on good terms with the Indonesians when they invaded Oecusse and East Timor in 1975.

The sun was high in the sky and we were soaked in sweat by the time we reached Kutet. After a bucket shower and a serving of cold rice and vegetables, my host gave me a tour of the village. Kutet was as flyblown as a place can be but bursting at the seams with hope. In one hut, a group of women, victims of domestic violence whom Daschbach had rescued, worked on looms to make colourful shawls to sell to tourists at a market in Dili.

Further down the road was a collective vegetable garden where a dozen-odd women watered crops with buckets filled at a nearby well. Children followed us everywhere, holding our hands, filling the air with whispers and laughter.

Stories about good samaritans like Father Richard who commit themselves to helping the poor are a staple of late-night television advertisements and constant fodder for social media. But seeing a person doing this kind of work in the flesh is something else entirely – a confirmation of my naive belief that people care more about each other than they do about money and fame.

“When I first moved up to this village from the coast, in the mid-1980s, it was meant to be a rectory – a place for contemplation and prayer,” he said as the tour progressed with half a dozen children in tow. “But one day during the hungry season we had a visitor, a small boy. All the kids here are small and undernourished for their age but this one was really starving. So I told my cook the boy could come here to eat after school.



A domestic violence survivor at the shelter, in 2009. Photo: Ian Lloyd Neubauer

“The next day I came home and the boy was in the backyard. I asked the cook why he was still here and she told me the boy said he was staying. Then a few days later, we had another one, and he said he was staying, too. Soon we had 20 children here and I was providing for all of them.

“About a decade later, I think it was 1993, a representative from the Indonesian government came to visit and said, ‘Why don’t you open a formal orphanage so we can give you financial support.’ So, after reams of paperwork, we got our funding and life became easier for a while.”

I spent the next few days getting to know the children at Topu Honis. They slept on wooden beds, had only one set of clothing each and no toys other than those they made, such things as spinning tops and wooden dolls.

When East Timor became independent, in 1999, and Indonesia relinquished its hold on Oecusse, Topu Honis lost its meagre budget. Daschbach then turned to his brother, Edwin, a Catholic priest in the United States, whose flock funded Topu Honis for nearly a decade. A few months before my first visit, however, Father Edwin had died and donations had petered out.

“For the first time since we opened, we are now turning new children away,” Daschbach told me one evening as we sat on his porch, swatting at mosquitoes. “Thirty-two have already left. They were not sent away. They just left by themselves. I can’t say I blame them. We have very little food here.”

Nevertheless, he remained optimistic that his work would go on. “God will provide,” he said, his smile never wavering.

But I wasn’t so sure about his trust in divine benevolence. When I returned home to Sydney later in 2009, I took matters into my own hands by creating a fundraising booklet documenting Daschbach’s work. I chose to be a journalist so I could change the world, and here I had been given a chance to make a real difference with a few strokes of a keyboard.



Australian troops patrol the streets of Dili in September 1999. Photo: Getty Images

When the East Timorese people voted to break away from Indonesia in the 1999 referendum, the Indonesian army became incensed. More than 2,000 of its soldiers had been killed during the brutal 24-year occupation of East Timor and it took its revenge by arming and funding pro-Indonesian militia.

Some 1,400 unarmed civilians were slaughtered in the conflict that followed, and 80 per cent of East Timor's infrastructure was destroyed. Topu Honis was not spared. When a militia attacked it with mortar bombs and gunfire, Daschbach went guerilla and led a group of 121 children and around 500 villagers into the jungle where they hid for nearly a week until United Nations peacekeepers stationed in nearby Brunei arrived to restore order. When the smoke cleared, Daschbach's flock was just two men down.

In the weeks and months that followed I sent the dossier to hundreds of individuals, businesses and charities in Australia. A friend paid for a domain name and published the paper online. The endeavour paid off and donations began trickling in. The children at Topu Honis could eat properly again.

In late 2009, I received an email from an American woman who had chanced upon my dossier online, travelled to Oecusse to work as a volunteer at Topu Honis for one summer, and ended up adopting five children from the orphanage. We exchanged a few pleasant emails but I did not hear from her until a decade later, in February 2020, with very bad news. What she told me that day did more than pull the rug from under my feet. It sent me into a deep spiral of depression that lingers to this day.

“It is with great sadness that I tell you Father Richard has been dismissed by the church for sexually abusing children,” she wrote. “We are absolutely heartbroken by this news. I think everyone who had a connection to Topu Honis should be aware. I hate to be the bearer of this terrible news, but you deserve to know.”



Mealtime at Topu Honis. Photo: Ian Lloyd Neubauer

She attached a link to a news report published in February 2019 by *Tempo Timor*, an online newspaper, citing allegations from March 2018, when one of Daschbach's victims sent an email alleging sexual abuse to the Vatican.

An investigation was launched by the Divine Word Missionaries, the largest missionary congregation in the Catholic Church, with more than 6,000 priests in 70 countries – and the closest thing Daschbach had to an employer. When confronted with the allegations during a conference call, the priest didn't even bother denying them, the report said. Seven months after the email was sent, he was defrocked, in what has to be the fastest culmination of a child-sex investigation in the history of the Catholic Church.

In a world where priests accused of such abuse are often shuffled around parishes instead of being held to account for their crimes, it was a remarkable achievement, particularly in East Timor, where more than 97 per cent of the population is Catholic and the Church wields enormous political power.

I stared blankly at my laptop, unable to take in what I was reading or accept the fact that a man I respected more than anyone else on Earth, a living saint and war hero who had saved hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives, was the worst kind of monster imaginable. Topu Honis was not just an orphanage; it was a paedophile's private grooming ground. And I had been conned into assisting this monster.

Wondering whether the whole thing could be an elaborate hoax I reached out to Daschbach on email, but received no reply. I dropped the idea that the allegations might be fabricated when I saw the article's author was José Belo, president of the Timor-Leste Press Union, a veteran journalist who had been handcuffed, hung by his feet, burned and imprisoned for three years for exposing human rights violations while East Timor was under Indonesian control.

A list with the names of the girls was on his door, so we knew when it was our turn.

- One of Richard Daschbach's victims

The following day I spoke to Belo on the phone. It was all true, he told me. Daschbach had admitted it and expressed no remorse. Even more disturbing was the systemic nature of the abuse.

"A list with the names of the girls was on his door, so we knew when it was our turn," one of his victims said in a statement collected by JUS Jurídico Social Consultoria Lda, a law firm in Dili assisting the prosecution pro bono. "All the girls had to go. I don't think there were exceptions. It happened every day, during his afternoon naps and the night. Only when the girls became older they weren't called to go to his bedroom any more and the abuse stopped. But new girls, who were still little ones, had to go until they were big."

Given that Daschbach had admitted to sexually abusing children, one would assume he would have been arrested in haste. Yet, in early 2019, three months after the Catholic Church in Rome notified East Timor police of his confession, the self-declared paedophile was still living at the orphanage and working as a priest.

Daschbach may have become persona non grata in Rome following his ousting from the Church, but he still ruled the roost in tiny Oecusse. Previously, I had described him as a living saint, but I realise that for the people of Oecusse he was much more than that. To them he was a demigod, a direct line to Christ with magical abilities to heal the good, to curse the wicked.

"His use of religion and his hero reputation to create a cult is despicable," says a former foreign donor on condition of anonymity. "I cannot deny the good he has done during his many years in East Timor, but that is greatly outweighed by his abuse and deceit of vulnerable children who came to his shelter already so fragile and in need of love and healing."

Daschbach leveraged the locals' desperate, blind faith in God to install himself in a position above the law. Police in Oecusse wouldn't dare lay a finger on him and anyone who spoke out against him was intimidated or assaulted. Liliana Tarung, Daschbach's deputy at Topu Honis, was arrested and detained for inciting men to beat a former orphan who she suspected of accusing the patriarch. But the victim was too afraid to make a statement and the deputy was soon released. Meanwhile, the fallen priest continued to hold church services and work at Topu Honis.

But Belo's story soon found its mark, stirring up international media attention that could not be ignored. Two months after the piece was published, police in Dili arrested Daschbach and took him to the capital for questioning in what promised to be the first trial for sexual abuse of minors by a Catholic priest reported in a country where three out of four children are physically or sexually abused, according to a 2015 survey by The Asia Foundation, a non-profit organisation.

Yet with no certified witness statements, and no experience in handling a case of this nature, the prosecutor decided not to imprison Daschbach. Instead, as the investigation progressed, the priest was placed under house arrest in April 2019 at a rectory owned by the Church in the pleasant hillside town of Maliana.

East Timor's legal system never having dealt with a case like this, the investigation went nowhere and, seven months later, Daschbach walked out of the rectory and caught a boat to Oecusse. He was rearrested on arrival but spent another month in the enclave before he was taken back to Dili, only to be placed under house arrest again.

Jan McCall, an Australian who helped fund Topu Honis between 2011 and 2018 and put three of its now-adult orphans through university, feels the paedophile's house arrest was a joke.

"My husband and I found him living at the police academy," she says of the day she saw Daschbach during a fact-finding visit to Dili in 2019. "He had his phone and laptop and his whole entourage around him. When we asked why he wasn't in prison, we were told it was because he is old and Timorese have great reverence for elders. That's part of the truth but the fact is he is very well connected and powerful. When we spoke with him he introduced us to a member of the police intelligence unit. By the way they carried on, you could see they were close friends."

But then the wheels of justice finally turned and a judge ruled Daschbach, now 84, should serve his pre-trial detention in an actual prison. He spent about six months behind bars before his legal team, sponsored by allies who believed the trial was a conspiracy, got him out on a technicality. He is now back under house arrest, living in comfort at the home of a diehard supporter in Dili.

"Police are supposed to be paying attention to his movements but I don't think they are," says Barbara Nazareth Oliveira, a partner at JU,S Jurídico Social Consultoria Lda. "He cannot go back to Oecusse but for sure he could be leaving the house or anyone can come to see him."

Tony Hamilton, an Australian industrialist and Topu Honis' primary sponsor from 2014 to 2018, says, "It's an atrocity what has happened – where he can continue to live with his victims after admitting to sexually abusing children. He is now potentially committing the same crimes and potentially influencing witnesses."

In 2019, Divine Word Missionaries' postulator general, Peter Dikos, an expert in canonical law from Rome, held a press conference in Dili where he expressed the Church's disappointment with the progress of the investigation. "From the very beginning, it was quite a challenge to deal with the police. I would have expected the confrere would have been detained but that did not happen," he said. "I would [also] expect the judicial system to be more proactive and that the case would have concluded long ago."

But according to some of Topu Honis' former sponsors, the Church has categorically failed in its responsibility to support and compensate Daschbach's victims.

"Dikos broke into tears at the press conference but the truth is he was there for damage control," says Hamilton. "He insinuated donors were at fault, saying we should have checked into this and donated through official sources. [Since] Topu Honis was a private project, not sanctioned by the Church [...] they cannot be held responsible. Despite all of the pope's pontifications about helping victims of sex abuse by priests, all they are concerned about is the all mighty dollar. They have not given a cent of compensation to the victims."

"You know, in the beginning, I didn't understand why victims of child abuse want money. It can never right the wrong that was done to them. But now I understand. They need it simply to survive because most are so damaged they will never lead normal, productive lives."

Father Yohanes Suban Gapun, head of the Divine Word Missionaries in East Timor, confirmed the Church has not financially compensated Daschbach's victims but denied it had done nothing to assist them. "From the very beginning we always stood by the victims," he says, but "the political situation [and] the atmosphere at the Topu Honis shelter and Covid-19 pandemic have caused great difficulties [in our attempts] to identify the potential victims and assist them in their recovery."

He admitted to everything he had been accused of in graphic detail and said it was OK because it was his nature

-Tony Hamilton, a former Topu Honis sponsor

Hamilton, who travelled to Oecusse and confronted the fallen clergyman soon after Belo broke the story, also revealed something new to me during our interview: Daschbach had admitted to sexually abusing children in the US in the 1960s.

"**He admitted to everything** he had been accused of in graphic detail and said it was OK because it was his nature," says Hamilton, "that he had been doing it to girls even before he was a priest. It was the single most mortifying experience of my life."

Given the decades that have passed, it is unlikely any of Daschbach's alleged victims in the US will come forward to testify. But he is wanted in the US for three counts of wire fraud – a crime in which digital means are used to obtain money through false representation. Last July, he was placed on Interpol's Red Notice list, an online database that calls on law-abiding citizens everywhere to notify police if they know the whereabouts of a suspect.

Interpol did not respond when I informed them of Daschbach's whereabouts. When I shared the same information with the US embassy in East Timor, I was told they were aware of the Red Notice but could not publicly discuss matters relating to American citizens without their consent.

"Our understanding is that the Americans are waiting for the East Timorese to put him on trial and will continue to wait until all legal avenues have been exhausted," says former Topu Honis sponsor McCall.

"He would never be living freely if he was extradited to the US," says her husband, Michael, "and I think he would be subject to some rather nasty treatment in prison."

The last time Daschbach appeared in court in Dili was September 2020, when he was finally indicted and charged with 14 counts of child sex abuse and child pornography. A new prosecutor, the fourth, has been assigned to the case. Sources say he is doing an "adequate" job and that more witnesses are coming forward.

But powerful actors are working to free Daschbach from house arrest. The Catholic Church in East Timor has broken ranks with Rome and released an astonishing report, in which it claims police and prosecutors abducted witnesses and forced them to make false accusations against Daschbach, using terms such as “organised crime”, “human trafficking” and “justice-mafia”.

The Timor Catholic Church claims the proceedings against Daschbach have “the same modus operandi as the case against Cardinal Pell”, who was found guilty of sexually abusing minors but later acquitted on appeal.

“During our last trip to Dili [in 2019], we met all sorts of ministers and important people in East Timor,” McCall says. “Many of them told us he should be forgiven because it’s the Christian thing to do.

“By all means we can forgive. But there has to be justice for his victims, too. And he must be prevented from hurting children again.”

Ian Lloyd Neubauer is a freelance journalist and photojournalist with 20 years’ experience covering news, business, property, investigations and travel. His photos of subjects as strange as the smoked corpses of the highlands of Papua New Guinea and places as beautiful as the blue city of Morocco have been published in newspapers, magazines and websites around the world.