

## Spotlight on Indonesia



*When the tsunami took its devastating toll in late December, minds and hearts of RSCJ around the world turned once again to Indonesia, where the Society, in tribute to the newly canonized Philippine Duchesne, established a mission in 1989.*

**I**t was 1988, and Philippine Duchesne had been added to the roster of Catholic saints. In honor of its beloved pioneer missionary, the international Society of the Sacred Heart decided to go into a new country, as Philippine had done nearly two centuries before.

The Society wanted to go to a young nation, one in which Catholics were a minority, symbolic of the situation into which Philippine found herself when she arrived in North America in 1818, intending to live and work among Native Americans.

And so the Society looked to Indonesia, a young nation, where eighty-seven percent of its 238 million people are Muslims and just four percent are Catholics. This new

*Members of the two RSCJ communities in Jakarta, Indonesia, are, from left, Sisters Chizuyo Inoue, Roslan Sinaga, Jovita Triwiludjeng (“Lulut”), Sally Rude, Geradette Philips, Nance O’Neil, and Digna Dacanay. At far right is Patricia D’Souza of India, a recently professed RSCJ getting her international experience in Indonesia.*

venture, aimed at strengthening ties between East and West, between Muslims and Catholics, officially began with the arrival of Nance O’Neil, RSCJ, in Jakarta, on the island of Java, in February of 1989. Indonesia, made up of some 13,000 islands and many different cultures, was a young republic, having gained independence from the Dutch in a peaceful transition just thirty years before. Sister O’Neil had just ended a six-year tenure as the first provincial of the newly formed U.S. province.

For the first year and a half after her arrival, Sister O’Neil lived with Ursuline sisters, another striking parallel to the experience of Philippine who lived for six weeks in an Ursuline convent in New Orleans, her first stop after her arrival from France.

Although numerous RSCJ have visited Jakarta for shorter or longer periods over the past two decades – notably, Brigid Keogh, an American who joined the Japanese province,

spent a year of assessment there before the project began – Sister O’Neil, 76, has been the mainstay of the Society’s U.S. presence. She is still teaching where she began in 1989, at Atma Jaya (“the Spirit shall prevail”) University, a forty-year-old school founded by lay Catholics.

The first to join her from the United States was Barbara Dawson, RSCJ, who came in 1990 intending to stay, but returned home in 1993 when she was named U.S. provincial. Chizuyo Inoue, RSCJ, arrived from Japan in 1991 and became Indonesia’s mainstay from the East. In those early days “the Society was discerning whether this was the right place for us to be,” Sister Dawson said. In 2002, the Society’s General Council in Rome elevated Indonesia from “project” to “area,” a sign of greater permanence.

### **Inculturation**

Among changes in Catholic theology and practice formulated at the

Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s was a shift from mission as evangelization to mission as primarily relationship. This implies going to another culture in the spirit of a guest, intending to learn from the natives and build bridges across cultures. In Indonesia, this “inculturation,” as it is called, has, at the most basic level, meant learning an Asian language, adjusting to sultry heat and polluted water, awakening at 4:15 a.m. to the Muslim call to prayer, sometimes finding goldfish on one’s dinner plate, and learning to enjoy hot sauce and peppers for snacks. It has meant heating water for baths, doing laundry by hand, learning to sweep a house from front to back to avoid sweeping good spirits out. It has also brought such privileges as observing the Javanese three-day wedding celebration. On day one, the bride and groom, in separate ceremonies, ask their parents for forgiveness and blessing; on day two, each is washed by family members with water filled with flowers from seven wells, and a piece of hair is planted in the family garden, signifying that as the bride and groom make a new home, each remains a part of the family of their birth. On day three the families, including bride and groom, come together to exchange gifts.

At a deeper level, Sister O’Neil said inculturation means experiencing “the depth of the spirituality in Indonesia, which enriches our own, as we

*An Indonesian man waits for customers at the market in Jakarta, not far from one of the RSCJ communities.*



Photo by Georgie Blaeser, RSCJ



Photo by NewsCom / EPA Photos/AHMAD YUSNI

*Mahlini, a 13-year-old Indonesian girl, watches from a temporary shelter in Banda Aceh, where she lives with approximately a hundred children who lost one or both of their parents because of the tsunami that hit Indonesia in December. Relief agencies estimated in late February that ten thousand Indonesian children are looking and waiting for missing parents.*

contribute to improving the education for the vast majority in a country where good schools are mostly for the elite.” She noted that Indonesia spends less per capita on education than any country in Southeast Asia.

The RSCJ live in Muslim neighborhoods “where we, the only non-Muslims, have warm relations with people who surround us,” she wrote recently in response to e-mailed questions. Pondok Sophia, one of two RSCJ chapels, was a center for interfaith prayer for peace before the invasion of Iraq, she said. “The local imam, a great friend of the community, came with his family and some of the congregation to pray for peace there. He also attended our first vow ceremony. There, according to Sister O’Neil, “the celebrant had the presence of mind to add ‘and all who lead their congregations in prayer’ in the part of the Mass where we pray for the pope and bishops.”

#### Wide outreach

Today, two communities of RSCJ live in Jakarta. Seven in all, the RSCJ are Sisters O’Neil and Sally Rude of

the United States; Sister Chizuyo Inoue (“Kaeru”) of Japan; Sister Digna Dacanay of the Philippines; Sister Gerardette Philips of India; Sister Jovita Triwiludjeng (“Lulut”), and Roslan Sinaga of Indonesia. Lulut recently made her first vows in the Society; Roslan is a novice.

“Though we are few, we work in many places,” Sister O’Neil wrote. Three teach at Atma Jaya: Sisters O’Neil and Dacanay part time, Sister Rude full time. They also teach at the major Catholic seminary, and Sister Dacanay teaches English to the staff of a human rights organization. Sisters O’Neil and Inoue teach part time at National University (UNAS), and Sister Philips teaches at Parmedina, a Muslim university.

“So we keep busy and have outreach to many kinds of people,” Sister O’Neil reported. “We have been self-supporting from the outset. All gifts and interest go directly to projects we are connected with.”

Those projects are numerous. Among them, RSCJ have assisted street children through the Jesuit-sponsored Jakarta Social Institute and other

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Photo by NewsCom / Agence France Presse



In a 1998 photo taken in front of Atma Jaya University in Jakarta, Indonesian students light candles at the site where eight students were shot and killed by troops during a peaceful demonstration on November 13, "Black Friday."

marginalized people through FAKTA (Jakarta Poor People's Forum), an organization that provides legal aid to the many disenfranchised people in Jakarta. These include street vendors, scavengers, pedicab drivers and slum dwellers who "teach us a lot," Sister O'Neil said.

Meanwhile, Lulut started a thriving preschool for needy neighborhood children in the noviceship's garage. A project to give literacy training to some of the mothers is in the works.

### Political unrest

Since 1989, Indonesia has been the focus of international attention at least four times. The first was the often violent unrest surrounding the fall of President Suharto in 1998. Atma Jaya was the center of many demonstrations because of its proximity to the nation's parliament.

The second was the massacre of tens of thousands in largely Catholic

East Timor by the Indonesian military in 1999, following a vote of independence. From the first, the RSCJ have had ties to East Timor, now Timor Leste since it finally regained independence in 2002. Today, Sister Inoue goes to Timor Leste several times a year, where her work includes "widow weavers," a cottage industry she started with women who have become self supporting by weaving gorgeous cloth. Because of the massacre, widows abound, Sister O'Neil said.

The third event of international significance was the terrorist bombings of tourist sites in Bali in 2002.

And the fourth, perhaps the worst natural disaster in world history, was the tsunami in late December. Nearly 250,000 are dead or missing in Aceh, a province on the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Although the devastated area is a long way, more than 1,500 miles, from Jakarta, the RSCJ were soon busy packing relief supplies and translating reports from stricken areas. Ironically, Sister Rude wrote the U.S. province, "Meanwhile I help Atma Jaya students rehearse for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." Finally, in late January, the U.S. province transferred \$100,000 in donations to a crisis center established by Indonesian bishops, with more transfers to come. Meanwhile, the sisters continue to assess how to be involved educationally in Aceh's reconstruction.

So far, three RSCJ, Sisters Inoue, Triwiludjeng, and Patricia D'Souza, a visitor from India doing her international experience, have gone to Aceh. Sister Inoue's reports of her journey, filled with sad and hopeful, surreal and folklorish stories, can be found on the Society's website, [www.rscjinternational.org](http://www.rscjinternational.org).

Here is one: "A boy was floating on a wave and immediately caught



Photo by Georgie Blaeser, RSCJ

The front of Kebon Nanas, the community house in Jakarta where Sisters Nance O'Neil, Chizuyo Inoue and Sally Rude live.

something like a string. It was a buffalo's tail. Eventually the buffalo got stuck among the trees, as it was already dead. The boy climbed a tree. Then he met a monkey waiting with his mouth open. He said, 'Dear Monkey, please don't bite me. I want to be saved.' The monkey closed his mouth. He waited together with the monkey until the water went down. Then he came down from the tree and ran to the mountain."

### 'Profound relationships'

What Sister Dawson finds most hopeful and exciting about the Indonesian mission is the "profound relationships" between the RSCJ and their Muslim neighbors and friends. "To be intimately engaged with the Muslim community is really new and different for us. And it is the future," she said.

"What am I doing in here, in this fourth most populous nation in the world, and the world's largest Muslim nation, more Muslims than in Iran and Iraq combined," Sister O'Neil often muses rhetorically. "I like to say I'm just holding the place until Indonesian RSCJ take this project in hand and move it in to a future *they see*." ❖