

11 December 2017

Dear Donors and Sponsors,

I arrived back into Wagga from Cambodia on Sunday 26th November. It was a great trip and I had a wonderful time. I went with a fantastic group of people: 16 other bike riders from Queensland, NSW, Victoria and ACT, a team leader who was a British ex pat now living in New Zealand and two guides and a number of logistics staff from Cambodia. With the same group of people, I would do it all again.

It was hard work and good exercise. The weather was hot and humid. There were several episodes of overnight rain, but it never rained while we were cycling. The quality of the roads varied from very good (bitumen and concrete) to horrible (lots of pot holes, rocky and/or very slippery mud). We competed for a share of space on the road with Tuk Tuks (motor bike drawn rickshaws), motor bikes, other cyclists, cows, trucks, buses and the occasional car.

We flew into Siem Reap, spent 5 nights there, went on to Battambang, spent two nights there, and departed Cambodia after spending 3 nights in Phnom Penh. We used Siem Reap and Battambang as bases to ride out from. On the cycling days we were up between 5.30 and 6am, had breakfast and then were bussed out of the city to the “quieter country roads” where we commenced our cycling for the day. We cycled 279 kms over five days. Some of us (self-included) had to take breaks because of heat stroke and ride in the support vehicle. My GPS app “Strava” says that on the 80-km day, we did 86.3 kms. I probably did 10 kms of that in the support vehicle.



The Cambodian landscape we traversed was mostly flat with lots of rice fields and villages and the occasional forested area/jungle. We visited major tourist sites such as Angkor Watt, Chong Kneas Floating village and the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. One of our more sobering experiences was visiting the Genocide Museum, formally Prison S21



Genocide Museum, formally Prison S21.



Together with Bou Meng, a survivor of S21 prison, his biography a somewhat disturbing read.



The tourist sites we visited gave us understanding of Cambodia's history and culture, and the context in which Catholic Mission and its projects operate.

Day 6 saw us leaving Siem Reap and after cycling 60kms and bussing it for 3 and a half hours we arrived in Battambang where we spent the rest of that day and the following day, visiting five different sites associated with the Arrupe Welcome Centre Project.

First port of call was the main compound of the Arrupe Welcome Centre which houses class rooms, dormitories, craft rooms, a social enterprise shop and lots of beautiful gardens. We couldn't take photos of the children in class.



Main Building Arrupe Welcome Centre.



Mother of Inclusive Love statue, Arrupe Centre.



A rice bank for the poor and elderly.



A place to stay for youth with disabilities. Sensory garden for children with intellectual disabilities.



Columba, Bishop of Wilcannia Forbes, Toy and Lawrence from Catholic Mission.



Yours truly, Toy and Lawrence from Catholic Mission.

Arrupe Centre was founded in 2001 to help people with disabilities access education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Since then the Centre has grown to include 2 more locations named Kalapati (Arrupe 2) and La Paloma (Arrupe 3). Arrupe 1- 3 serve as welcoming homes where youth with disabilities are given food, a place to stay and support in their education. Medical support is also provided as needed. The Outreach team of Arrupe Centre gives social assistance to families of people with disabilities. Support is given through the distribution / repair of wheelchairs, food, shelters and access to healthcare services.

In 2017, the other focus of Arrupe is to reach out to children and their families who would not normally have access to education – the very poor and those living in remote areas. We met some of the teachers. We also met the “pink shirts” an outreach team who go and seek out the parents of street kids and encourage them to send their children to one of the 16 schools run by the Apostolic Prefecture (Diocese) of Battambang. There are no fees for primary education in Cambodia but there are other costs. Primary education is not compulsory. Many children do not go to school but rather work in the fields or sell souvenirs to tourists or go begging, to help their families earn an income. The diocese provides writing materials and uniforms and in some cases, bicycles for children who live far from the schools.

The next morning, we visited a Buddhist temple which provides space for Arrupe Centre to run a school. Within the temple, a primary school operates during the day and at night English and computer classes are conducted for secondary school age children.



On our way to the Buddhist Temple and one of Arrupe's schools.



Arrupe Welcome Centre is part of Our Lady of the Assumption Parish Battambang, and on the parish's website it is stated:

Cambodia's official religion is Theravada Buddhism. The Catholic Church deeply respects the local traditions. We share the Word and the Good News of God with life, prayers, love and care. We aim to share and bring together the values which were lost during the war. Cooperation in the social field is a priority. The Catholic Church is open to collaboration with others and encourages social dialogue at all levels.



After the temple we got on a bus and travelled to one of the rural schools by run Arrupe Centre, making education accessible to children in remote areas.



Most rural homes do not have a toilet, running water or electricity. This home is home to 10 children going to the school we visited, who are being brought up by their grandmother. Grandma had two snakes and a very large frog in a hessian bag and a big bowl of snails which she was hoping to sell at the market to get some income to provide for the children (the frog, snakes and snails were not going to be for the children). The children's parents went to Thailand to look for work with the aim of sending some money back to Grandma to provide for their children. We were told by a representative from Arrupe that it doesn't always workout, with Cambodians becoming enslaved to Thai employers and having to pay back debts, then having no money to send home. The question was asked "What if Grandma dies?" Neighbours in the surrounding area would look after the children for a while, but because the neighbours are also poor, the children would soon wear out their welcome. These children would probably have a better outcome than most because the school would take over caring for them.

As I mentioned, we weren't able to take photos. I found the following photos which must have been taken by the tour guides, on the Catholic Mission website.



I love how the Cambodians greet one another with their hands raised in respect to one another as if in prayer.



Bishop Columba giving out toy Koalas.



I don't think these little girls were able to figure us out.

We left Grandma's house and travelled back Battambang where we had lunch at the Lonely Tree Café, a social enterprise set up by Arrupe to employ people with a disability. It's attached gift shop sells silk products and wooden carvings made by people from Arrupe.



One way to store your wheelchair when your not using it!

After lunch and spending up big at the Lonely Tree Gift shop we travelled back to the main compound of Arrupe where we again spent up big in the gift shop there. We then went on to the Buddhist temple where we had been earlier in the day. The student were encouraged to practice their English with us. They were very shy and I think felt a bit under pressure. Some needed a lot of encouragement. Again no photos to show.

That evening we had dinner with a group of disabled students and volunteer carers. That was the highlight of my time in Cambodia. At the table, I sat opposite two young boys, one who was blind and the other who had half an arm missing as a result of picking up a land mine. To the right of the boys was a teenage girl who had terrible burns scars and disfigurement. On either side of them were volunteers who had come from Spain to spend a year at Arrupe. The children were quite adept and functional and had learnt to cope with their disability. They were getting on with their lives. There seemed to be no self pity They are obviously taught to be as independent as possible. One of the volunteer carers commented that the boy who had lost one arm, often had to be reminded to do his laundry. Tough country, tough life, tough love!!! My immediate thought was, "well at that age, my mother washed my clothes." As I observed the volunteers engaging with the children, I witnessed great love, respect and joy.

On the 2nd last day in Cambodia we visited a group of Catholic Mission projects in close proximity to one another, south of Phnomh Penh and this is what we saw on the way there.



Can you see the guy on top of the chairs?



First stop was a new campus for St Francis High School under construction. When finished the departments for agricultural training and hospitality will move here.



Attached to the school buildings is a farm which will provide the students with practical experience.

The church has realised the need break the cycle of poverty and by way of St Francis High School and is reaching out to farming communities by establishing social enterprise farming operations which are sustainable. Ventures so far have been into cow, goat and pig breeding and the growing of corn, rice, lemon grass, pepper, mangoes, jack fruit and dragon fruit.

From the soon to be new St Francis High School we went on to St Paul's Institute a small university making tertiary education more accessible to poor and remote communities. It was founded on the donation of a Singaporean lady but is kept going to a large degree by Catholic Mission donations. The school's main aim is to train young people in agriculture and information technology





The

Chapel at St Paul's Institute



The Library.

From St Paul's Institute we walked to the current St Francis High School where we met four students and saw a state of the art chook house. The chooks lived upstairs, their poo falling downstairs onto concrete and collected to fertilize the fields. I should add, the chooks were free to roam in large yards and didn't stay upstairs all the time. They were the best-looking chooks I'd seen in Cambodia. Much better looking than the chooks we saw in the villages we cycled through.



St Francis High School Students just outside the state of the art chook house.

St Paul's Institute and St Francis High School are within Our Lady of Smiles Parish (I kid you not, the parish is named Our Lady of Smiles). Just as we had the Our Lady of Inclusive Love statue at Arrupe in Battambang, we have the Our Lady of Smiles Parish south of Phnom Penh. Arrupe is very much about inclusive love: Everybody is included in God's love. God's love is for everybody. Our Lady of Smiles is about what Cambodian people seem to do all the time: smile. The church is designed in a culturally appropriate style and looks very much like a Buddhist Temple.





Just as in some of the Buddhist temples we saw, there were beautiful mural on the walls of this parish church.





After visiting Our Lady of Smiles Church, our final port of call was the Peace Centre Village.





The Peace Village is home to families who have been affected by AIDS. There is also a Special Needs School for children who are severely disabled and need lots of support. Peace village provides a boarding school for children who attend St Francis High School. The highlight for me, and a deeply moving experience was visiting a class at the special needs school. I touched by the way the support staff worked with the children. There was a lot of love and joy. Unfortunately we were not allowed to take photos. Below is a photo from the Catholic Mission web site and some of the people in this photo, were there the day we visited.





What we saw on the way back to our hotel.



Our final night dinner in Phnom Penh before departing Cambodia the next day. Tarantulas were on the menu and I was so looking forward to trying them, but they'd run out.

Before we left Cambodia, it was announced by a Catholic Mission representative that all money raised by the group, which today stands at \$68,613.00, would go the Arrupe projects in Battambang. So, once again, thank you to all my donors and supporters. I hope you enjoyed reading this email and knowing more about the cause you were supporting.

Kind regards,

John.
(John Dodwell)