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[Indonesia Is One of the World's Biggest Sources of Catholic Priests - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com)

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Once, Catholic Priests Came to Indonesia. Now, It Exports Them.

A seminary on Flores, a Catholic-majority island in Indonesia, ordains so many priests that a lot of them go abroad to serve the faithful.



Celebrating Mass on a Sunday at St. Paul Major Seminary, on Flores, an island in Indonesia.

By [Sui-Lee Wee](#) and [Muktita Suhartono](#)
Photographs by Nyimas Laula

Sui-Lee Wee and Muktita Suhartono spent three days at the St. Paul Major Seminary in Indonesia's eastern island of Flores.

On an Indonesian island about 500 miles east of Bali, an open-air truck traversed up winding roads one recent Sunday. It was taking dozens of jovial men, some already in white robes, and their songbooks and guitars to the church on top of the hill.

The men are training to become Catholic priests. While probably only a fraction of them will go on to be ordained, Indonesia — the world's largest Muslim-majority country — is producing so many priests now that many of them head overseas to serve the faithful.

For centuries, this traffic flowed in the opposite direction, with Catholic missionaries from Europe heading to the islands of Indonesia.

The Roman Catholic Church knows how significant Indonesia and many countries in the Global South are to its future. Two years ago, Pope Francis declared that to find vocations “we will go to some island of Indonesia.” He did not specify the destination, but he almost certainly meant the island of Flores, where 70 percent of the roughly two million residents are Catholic.

This is where, on a remote hilltop called Ledalero, the St. Paul Major Seminary was established in 1937. This year, it expects to ordain nearly 50 priests of the Society of the Divine Word, a Catholic order that focuses on missionary work. Over the years, it has sent more than 500 of its graduates to different parts of the world, including the United States, Australia and Latin America.



The seminary, on a remote hilltop called Ledalero, expects to ordain 50 priests this year.



Those who enroll in Ledalero are still under probation for admission into priesthood.

Pope Francis landed in Jakarta, the capital, on Tuesday as part of his Asia-Pacific tour, but he did not travel to Flores because of his frail health. Part of his agenda was to promote interfaith dialogue in Indonesia, where Muslim-Christian harmony is under strain.

First-year seminarians in the four-year track started arriving last month. One of them was Inocentius Besu, 20, who was wearing a Los Angeles Lakers cap backward and cheering on his peers as they played soccer.

The scar on his nose, from being bashed by a barbell, was proof of a naughty childhood, he said. Yet growing up, he hung out with many priests and eventually felt a yearning to become one himself. But to do so he had to leave the woman he had been dating.

“I told her I am very busy with our programs in the seminary,” said Mr. Besu, adding that he eventually “ghosted” her.

The freshmen get their own bedroom in dormitories in or near the campus, which is surrounded by a forest and was rebuilt after a large earthquake in 1992 destroyed many of the buildings. Some said life here wasn’t as stifling as it was at their minor seminary, where they had to give up their cellphones for at least two years.



Seminary students heading back to their dormitory.



Different dormitories playing each other in soccer.

Those who enroll in Ledalero come with two years' experience as novices and are still under probation for admission into priesthood. They study philosophy for four years, followed by theology for two years, and serve about one to two years of pastoral duty before they are ordained. At any point, they can drop out and obtain a bachelor's degree from the Ledalero Catholic School of Philosophy, which is considered by many in Flores to be prestigious. Laypeople enroll in the school, too.

Conradus Sola Lele Madja, 35, has found community while studying at St. Paul's. At his previous seminary in Chile, he was one of only two men. At Ledalero, he has found friends to play sports with, confide in and pray alongside.

Catholicism first arrived in Flores in the 16th century, when the Portuguese, in search of spices, sailed east, bringing traders and missionaries. Roughly 200 years later, the Dutch colonized large parts of the archipelago, which came to be known as the Dutch East Indies. The Dutch were Protestants and forbade Catholicism, but adopted a hands-off policy in places like Flores because of its distance from the main island of Java.

The Society of the Divine Word, an order founded by a German priest in the Netherlands, arrived in 1912 with missionaries. The head of the congregation and its representative in the Vatican is a Flores native and a graduate of Ledalero, Father Paulus Budi Kleden.

The island is dotted with Catholic iconography — including a gold statue of Jesus on a white pedestal and a 92-foot-high monument of Mary. Schoolchildren walk around with rosaries around their necks.

Flores is also one of Indonesia's poorest provinces. But poverty is not the sole reason driving men to the priesthood, said Father Yosef Keladu, the head of the seminary, explaining that Catholicism is part of the fabric here. Parish priests are feted and services are packed. Lay Catholics teach catechism, volunteer in the choir or help the sick. There is immense pride in the family if a son becomes a priest.

Yoseph Liliweri, 27, who is going to Bangladesh, said his parents were supportive but surprised when he told them he was joining the seminary.

"All they knew was that I was praying the Novena to get a scholarship to go to medical school," he says, "and then suddenly I told them I wanted to be a priest."

The priests from Ledalero bring with them a sense of mission to fight injustice and a broad understanding of religious tolerance. This includes discussing a sinister period in Indonesian history: the state-sponsored slaughter in the 1960s of an estimated half-million people or more under the guise of a Communist purge.

The Ledalero Catholic School of Philosophy has also organized seminars on L.G.B.T.Q. issues, inviting several transgender people to speak, and shares Pope Francis' view

that gay people should not be judged, according to Johanes Manehitu, the head of the rectorate office.



Aurelio Morghan, 32, is scheduled to be ordained in October. He has at least 16 relatives who are priests or nuns.



A philosophy class at the seminary.

Part of his induction process involved living in an Islamic boarding school and teaching the students about the Quran as part of interfaith training. At one point, he said, he

wanted to leave the seminary after meeting a woman he thought he could marry. Mr. Morghan is learning Spanish as he prepares for his first assignment in Paraguay. He also helps with parish work in Flores, spending the rest of his time on Catholic hip-hop and taking care of his seven dogs.

On a recent Sunday evening, the aspiring priests got together on a dusty field on campus for two hours of soccer. Curious onlookers, including a group of nuns, paused to watch, cheering the teams on. The loudest cries of support were for Team Mikhel, the first-year seminarians.

As he watched his new friends play, Mr. Besu said: "I wish there will be more young people out there who would want to join the seminary because, in here, they can feel happy." He added: "I realize that the world really needs priests now."

As the evening light faded, the men wrapped up their practice session. They were dirty, happy and sweaty. They passed a group of their friends playing volleyball with the staff, who were on their break. It was time to go back, back to their lives of prayer and study.



Over the years, the seminary has sent more than 500 of its graduates to different parts of the world.