‘Don’t be disrespectful. He’ll be upset if you don’t sleep with him’

For almost three decades, missionary Richard Daschbach ran an orphanage providing refuge for some of East Timor’s most needy children. He has since admitted to sexually abusing countless young girls - yet locals still support him.

By Chris Ray in the Sydney Morning Herald, June 26, 2021

Nona was born in a dirt-floor hut in a East Timor highland village, where hungry children grow up stunted and wise men see omens in the flight of birds. Her parents grew rice and corn in swidden gardens, but struggled to feed six children. At the age of 9, Nona decided on a solution: she would leave home to live at an orphanage called Topu Honis. It had brightly painted dormitories, neat vegetable gardens and a tiny church. “There was a playground with a slide and swings and the girls wore colourful, clean outfits. It seemed like a dream for a little girl,” she remembers.

Topu Honis sits in a mountain valley in Oecusse, a coastal district cut off from the rest of East Timor by Indonesian territory. In this distant backwater, religion, poverty and politics have sensationally collided in a child abuse scandal that has put the Vatican at odds with its most devout province and muddied the reputation of East Timor’s paramount political figure, Xanana Gusmão. The result is a criminal trial that raises the question: can the powerless get justice in Asia’s youngest nation?

In Meto, the regional language of Oecusse’s Atoni ethnic group, Topu Honis means to lead someone to a better life. An American Catholic missionary, Richard Daschbach, set up the orphanage in 1991 when East Timor was under Indonesian occupation. More than an orphanage – Daschbach called it a “safe house” – Topu Honis also took in non-orphans from the poorest families, widows and women fleeing domestic violence. It attracted sponsors from Australia and the US and grew to accommodate about 100 girls and boys of primary-school age.

Topu Honis’s neighbouring village, Kutet, was the site of Nona’s school – a 90-minute uphill slog from her family house built of thatch and cocowood. Out of school, she gathered firewood beneath grey and white eucalypts, fetched water from a spring and scared birds from fields of ripening rice. Now, at the age of 25, her hands flash polished nails as she gestures during a video call from her new home far from Oecusse.
Nona’s best friend, the daughter of a widowed neighbour, lived at Topu Honis, but sometimes turned up at home unexpectedly. “She’d say, ‘I’m not going back unless some other kid comes with me.’ She never said why she was uncomfortable there, and no one asked,” says Nona, who has a round, cheerful face and deep-brown hair set in a loose bun. “I volunteered to join her because I wanted to help my family and me. I knew I would get to eat every day and I wouldn’t have to walk far to school.”

Kutet was still swathed in morning mist when Nona went with her best friend and her mother to see Daschbach in 2005. He had grown up a steelworker’s son in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but almost everyone in Oecusse kneeled to kiss his hand. They referred to him as “Uis Neno” – literally, “Lord of the sky”, a Meto concept appropriated by early missionaries to describe the Christian God.

“Everybody, old and young, revered him and feared him like nothing I’ve seen since,” Nona says. Daschbach, a slight man with a bony face and sparse, grey hair, told Nona at their first meeting, “I accept you, you’re special.”

At home, Nona slept on a mat on the ground or shared a bed with her sisters. At Topu Honis, she was thrilled to get her own bunk bed, a powder-blue frock and her first comb. Nona’s daily routine began with a bucket shower before a bell announced breakfast of rice or instant noodles, eaten on the verandah of the dormitory she shared with about 20 girls before heading to Kutet school, an easy stroll away. Afternoons at Topu Honis were set aside for play. After the 6pm dinner of rice and vegetables, everyone assembled for prayers and hymns in a building that also enclosed Daschbach’s quarters and a guest bedroom.

The American, then in his mid-60s, invariably led prayers with a girl sitting on his lap. He mostly dressed in long pants and polo shirts but, on Sundays, he put on white vestments for morning mass at the village church. On Sunday afternoons he would stand naked in the orphanage shower block and wash as many children as he had energy for. “He always did us girls first,” Nona says. “He said he did it because he didn’t want us to waste shampoo.”

Within a couple of days, Nona learnt she would be required to sleep with Daschbach and have sex with him – and that his assaults ran to a timetable. Girls were put into groups of four for cleaning duties and organised according to a roster posted on a wall. “Usually, if it was your turn to sweep that day, all of you would go to Daschbach’s room during his afternoon nap and after evening prayers,” Nona says. “Sometimes, he requested just one girl.”

In 2007, after Nona had left the orphanage, Australian musician Ros Dunlop recorded girls and boys at Topu Honis singing the anthem of Falintil, the armed wing of the resistance against Indonesian occupation, which cost as many as 200,000 Timorese lives. With hands over chests and fists clenched, the children looked straight ahead “trying to be really strong”, recalls Dunlop, a renowned clarinettist who taught at Sydney Conservatorium of Music for 26 years. It’s one of her poignant recollections of East Timor, which she visited dozens of times over 13 years, mostly to record traditional music.

Lately, she’s had to contemplate a more disturbing memory: the procession of children to and from Daschbach’s room. “There were always kids sleeping in his room, and always girls. That much I was well aware of,” says Dunlop, who stayed at Topu Honis four times between 2005 and 2016, twice with her husband and three children and twice alone. “We didn’t think much of it because there seemed to be heaps of kids going in and out. There was no attempt to conceal anything.” She thought of it in the context of families like her own, with young children “always in and out of their parents’ bedroom”.

During Dunlop’s first visit, her two daughters and a son, who were about 8, 10 and 15 at the time, played with the orphanage kids, who “seemed happy and part of a cohesive community”. She was “stunned and appalled” when Daschbach was exposed as a predator: “A lot of foreigners spent time there and it seems none of us suspected a thing. It was totally and utterly a well-kept secret.” She calls it “a betrayal of so many people on so many levels – especially his victims. Some were the same age as my youngest child at the time.”
Daschbach shared his considerable knowledge of local music and Dunlop feels her re-
search is now “tainted by association” with the former priest. That includes her doctoral 
thesis and an award-winning bilingual textbook for the East Timor school syllabus.

Nona remembers Daschbach’s bedroom contained a bunk bed, wardrobe and shelves 
stacked with books and photo albums. A curtain divided the bedroom from his office, 
which doubled as a dispensary. “Usually, two girls would sleep on the top bunk and the 
other two with Richard on the bottom,” Nona says. “I thought, ‘What is going on here?’ 
I didn’t know it was wrong, but I knew it wasn’t normal, because it had never happened 
to me before.”

It seems intrusive and unnecessary to ask Nona how she was abused. In statements to 
camera posted on the Timorese news website Neon Metin, former Topu Honis girls 
have alleged masturbation, oral sex and vaginal penetration. Daschbach’s girl victims 
allegedly were as young as six; he never touched boys, it seems. According to Nona, 
when she tried to avoid going to his room, female staff members said, “‘Don’t be disre-
spectful. It’s your turn and he’ll be upset if you don’t sleep with him.’ I was frightened 
to refuse. We thought he had the power to end your life.”

Nona never discussed the abuse with other orphanage girls. “I thought, ‘This must be 
what everyone has to do to pay for being in this magical place full of opportunities,’ ” 
she says. She got away from Topu Honis after a year but asks Good Weekend not to dis-
close how she left, where she went to, or her real name. Her unease in the presence of 
men gradually faded and she wears her injustice lightly. But she’s still “traumatised and 
angry” about her maltreatment when “I didn’t even understand what those parts of the 
body are for”. (Daschbach’s lawyers in Dili did not respond to Good Weekend’s request 
for comment.)
“Priest Assigned to Indonesia – Father Daschbach Ordained Recently” was the headline over a Pittsburgh Press report on March 5, 1966. Daschbach attended the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. before serving as hospital chaplain at Fort Belvoir army base in Virginia. He was then about 30, the eldest of three children, including a brother, Edwin, who followed him into the priesthood. They belonged to the Society of the Divine Word, known by its Latin initials SVD, the biggest Catholic missionary order with more than 6000 priests in 70 countries.

Daschbach spent eight years in Indonesian West Timor before crossing into neighbouring Oecusse after Indonesia annexed Portuguese East Timor in 1975. By 1999, when the East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence, Daschbach had earned a regional reputation for his charitable work among the Atoni. His standing grew after he shielded villagers from pro-Indonesian militiamen as they butchered and looted their way across the country in revenge for the referendum result.

Tens of thousands of Australians marched in protest against the violence, as well as the inaction by the Howard government, which was forced to commit 5000 Australian troops to lead an international intervention. Australian peacekeepers in Oecusse were sufficiently impressed with Daschbach to give him a Land Cruiser troop carrier when they left.

Australian National University anthropologist Michael Rose was a young United Nations adviser to the East Timor government when he first met Daschbach in Oecusse’s tiny seaside capital of Pante Macassar in 2011. Rose returned three years later to do PhD fieldwork and would often hike a steep forest track from the coast to Kutet, where Daschbach was happy to explain whatever ritual speech or agricultural practice Rose happened to observe. “He used to say things like, ‘Everyone is welcome at Topu Honis’ and encourage visitors,” says Rose. “In retrospect, I now think it’s likely that this show of openness was a deliberate ploy to lull outsiders into believing he had nothing to hide.”

Over time, Daschbach came to embrace the Atoni indigenous religion based on sacred landscapes and ancestral spirits. Rose recorded that the American would don a ceremonial head-dress and lead village elders to make an offering of pig’s liver in order to open a door to the ancestors. To locals, he professed to interpret omens conveyed through the behaviour of birds. Rose says Catholicism has a history of adopting elements of local ritual to its own end, but “Richard Daschbach’s direct participation in divination ceremonies was unusual, if not unique. Together with his long history in the area and rare ability to speak Meto, it gave him a great deal of power.”

During the past three years, Daschbach has been dragged down to earth. In November 2018, the Vatican expelled him from the priesthood for what the SVD’s top lawyer, Rome based procurator general Peter Dikos, called the worst case of child abuse in its 143-year history. Now, Daschbach is fighting criminal charges over the alleged sexual abuse of 14 minors (including Nona), child pornography and domestic violence.

Pante Macassar sits under a denuded mountain that tumbles to a fertile river flat along the Savu Sea. Timor television shows Daschbach arriving at the town’s whitewashed, twostorey courthouse.

The sprightly, bespectacled American, now 84, looks businesslike with pen and notebook in his shirt pocket as he steps across the portico to face three blackrobed judges. Climbing into a vehicle after the court adjourns, he pulls down a blue surgical mask to smile through missing teeth and waves to dozens of tearful well-wishers, mostly women and girls, who line the road as he drives off.

Daschbach is the first priest to be charged with a sex offence in East Timor, where many believe a priest should never be doubted, let alone punished, according to Berta Antonieta, founder of Grupu Feminista, a Timorese women’s network. Priests have escaped censure even after fathering children, she says, adding, “Even for me as a Timorese, I still don’t understand the level of tolerance people have for individual priests who commit these acts.”
Why the enduring support for Daschbach in Oecusse? Without Topu Honis, its female staff face a dismal future. According to the World Bank, almost half the population of East Timor lives in poverty— and Oecusse is the poorest district of all. Musician Ros Dunlop says orphanage staff clearly enabled Daschbach’s crimes: “Topu Honis was feeding and sheltering all these people and they wanted it to stay that way.”

Material factors are not the only explanation. Michael Rose says many in Oecusse attribute illness and ill-fortune to spiritual forces, which makes Daschbach “a very powerful and potentially frightening figure. Many people believe his prayers can both heal and kill.” Officials at the Ministry of Social Solidarity in Dili have described children still at Topu Honis as “brainwashed” and unwilling to speak to ministry representatives, according to SVD records.

Internationally, in scandal after scandal, the Catholic Church has sought to cover up child abuse and protect perpetrators. Not so the Vatican in the Daschbach case: it has struggled to extinguish Timorese church support for Daschbach for three years. East Timor is more than 97 per cent Catholic, a higher proportion than anywhere bar the Vatican, and loyalty to Daschbach is not confined to distant Oecusse.

The SVD’s Rome headquarters received the first complaint of sexual abuse on March 2, 2018 via Daschbach’s SVD superiors in Dili. That same day, it instructed the congregation’s East Timor head, Yohanes Suban Gapun, to confine Daschbach to the SVD seminary in the capital, Dili. During a March 5 phone conference, Daschbach admitted the sexual assault allegations were “100 per cent true”, according to SVD records. A month later, Rome told Gapun he risked being dismissed if he failed to follow instructions to report Daschbach to civil authorities. Next, Gapun had to be told to keep Daschbach off the internet and not allow him visitors.

In December 2019, Dikos, a 52-year-old Slovak, flew from Rome to Dili, where he told Tempo Timor newspaper the former priest had engaged in “systematic abuse of girls on a daily basis ... for years and years”. The Holy See’s envoy to East Timor, Marco Sprizzi, a longtime papal diplomat, also sought to dispel persistent doubt about Daschbach’s guilt. “Richard Daschbach himself admitted and pleaded guilty before the church. It looks like he backed down before civil justice, but before the church he never backed down. I want to be clear on this,” Sprizzi told the Portuguese news agency Lusa in 2020.

The SVD has appointed a veteran missionary, Melbourne-based William Burt, to liaise with East Timor over the case. “I was in awe of this man. I thought what he was doing with the orphanage was just fantastic,” Burt says. “But the good that he did does not in any way lessen the evil that he did. You can’t quantify the harm he’s done. We don’t know how many kids were involved or how their lives were wrecked.”
Daschbach even defied the Vatican’s supreme disciplinary body, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. After it defrocked him, Daschbach spent six months in jail on remand, but senior clerics worked to exonerate him.

In September, the head of the East Timor church’s Justice and Peace Commission, Herminio de Fatima Goncalves, dipped his pen in vitriol to accuse a women’s group and lawyers of forming a “justice mafia” to kidnap Topu Honis orphans and fabricate evidence. His report revealed names and locations of alleged victims including some in hiding after receiving threats. After weeks of outcry, East Timor’s archbishop Virgilio do Carmo da Silva was forced to sack Goncalves and apologise for the commission’s report.

Since then, Daschbach has gained a powerful secular champion in Xanana Gusmão, the 75-year-old former guerrilla commander revered by many Timorese as “Maun Boot” or Big Brother. Gusmão’s sonorous voice seemed to fill East Timor’s airwaves when I last visited the country a decade ago. He was in a seven-year stretch as prime minister and would harangue audiences about Australia’s unfair share of Timor Sea petroleum fields – a dispute eventually resolved to East Timor’s benefit. Gusmão has been president or prime minister for more than 12 of East Timor’s 20 years of self-government. He no longer occupies the PM’s office in the colonial-era Palácio do Governo on Dili’s waterfront, but remains highly influential.

Daschbach spent his 84th birthday on January 26 at the spacious Dili home of a senior public servant. He was supposedly under house arrest, a limitation flexible enough to allow him a visitor, Gusmão, who arrived dressed in blue jeans, T-shirt and an olive-green slouch hat over thinning silver hair. He brought along a media contingent, including a TV crew and the government news agency, Tatoli. The resulting footage was unsettling. Big Brother wrapped the defrocked priest in a long embrace, fed him cake, poured wine into his mouth and sang Happy Birthday. Flanked by religious iconography, the pair posed with an illustrated card from the children of Topu Honis. It said they “continue to love Father Daschbach”.

The invited media failed to report Daschbach’s defrocking or the child-abuse charges, prompting the Press Council president, Virgilio Guterres, to denounce them as “messenger boys” who aimed to “whitewash” the disgraced former priest. Gusmão’s performance set off a social-media altercation among Timorese and divided his own family. His sons Alexandre, 21, Kay Olok, 18, and Daniel, 16, who live in Melbourne, sent handwritten letters to Daschbach’s accusers, praising their courage and apologising for their father’s stance.
Their Australian mother, Kirsty Sword Gusmão, whose 15-year marriage to Xanana ended in 2015, did pioneering work to combat abuse of women and girls in East Timor. She says her sons received “an avalanche of love and appreciation” after she posted the letters on Facebook with a warning that her ex-husband’s intervention had “big implications” for the “psychological wellbeing of the victims” and the outcome of the judicial process.

To Fundasaun Mahein, an NGO which works to strengthen the legal system, Gusmão’s intervention was “deeply damaging to the victims of this priest’s crimes and other victims of sexual abuse”. It would cause many to conclude that Daschbach is innocent and that “his victims must be lying or exaggerating”. (Gusmão’s media officer did not respond to Good Weekend’s request for comment.)

Swinburne University of Technology professor Michael Leach, a specialist in Timorese politics, notes a point of view in East Timor that Gusmão is supporting Daschbach in order to win the backing of conservative church figures at parliamentary elections due in 2023. “There appear to be powerful figures within the church who fear that if Daschbach is convicted, victims of other priests might come forward and open the floodgates for complaints,” Leach says.

Lately, Gusmão has put more than the justice system under strain by running what Leach calls “a very unhelpful line casting doubt on the gravity of COVID-19 and flouting the government’s social-distancing measures”. In late March, Dili went into lockdown to try to crush its first community transmission of COVID. Soon after, severe flooding made tens of thousands of residents homeless. As authorities struggled to respond, Gusmão led a rally of hundreds of people demanding the release of the body of Armindo Borges, 47, recorded as the nation’s second virus fatality.
Health Minister Odete Maria de Freitas Belo stood her ground as Gusmão told her he did not believe Borges was COVID-positive. Film of the protest showed him twice slapping a female member of Borges’s family hard in the face (he slapped a male relative of the dead man, too) and telling a female journalist to kneel and tie his shoelaces (she complied). The face-slapping sent “a very poor message in a country where domestic violence is another epidemic,” Leach says.

**Before Daschbach’s disgrace**, Topu Honis was an object of Western curiosity and altruism. Aid workers, academics, ambassadors and journalists negotiated the cratered dirt road from the coast or hiked through the forest to reach it. As word spread and support grew, Topu Honis opened a boarding house on the coast so highland children could attend secondary school.

Donors provided university scholarships and a former Topu Honis boy became the first Timorese to graduate from Duntroon Military College in Canberra. Australian and American families adopted several of its children.

Jan McColl and Tony Hamilton are among those who saw themselves as patrons of a worthy cause. McColl, who owns a real-estate agency in the central Victorian town of Kyneton, financed an extension to the Topu Honis boarding house and put orphans through university. She and Hamilton, who has a Brisbane manufacturing business and, unlike McColl, is Catholic, donated tens of thousands of dollars and raised additional funds in their communities.

“This is so embarrassing. We had so many generous people who helped,” says McColl. The enterprising 65-year-old spent several annual holidays in Oecusse, sometimes sleeping on the crowded deck of the overnight ferry from Dili and walking 16 kilometres up the mountain road after it was washed away by monsoon rain. On one visit, she and her husband Michael brought along their three adult children and partners, plus grandkids, to form a party of 12.

“Michael and I are ex-teachers and we thought Topu Honis was a lovely community,” she says. “We’ve shared lots of tears over this. It saddens us deeply to think that this abuse was going on and we didn’t pick it up.”

Household mementos now take on a sinister aspect. “Richard loved photography,” Jan says. “Every year, he sent us a calendar and each month had a picture of one of the kids on it.”

Hamilton, an affable 61-year-old with a goatee beard below a ragged moustache, says he and his wife Therese, a registered nurse, found Daschbach to be “very knowledgeable and personable, a great conversationalist”. He readily adopted Therese’s suggestions to improve orphanage meals. “Everything we saw and heard was fantastic,” says Hamilton, whose geniality can’t hide a lingering hurt.
In April 2018, McColl and Hamilton took a 90-minute Air North flight from Darwin to Dili to investigate rumours that Daschbach had been accused of child abuse. “I expected he would deny it, but at least we would get a feel for what was going on,” Hamilton says. They were unaware that a month earlier, Daschbach had scrawled a handwritten note to the SVD’s then Superior General in Rome, Heinz Kulüke, admitting he’d abused children at Topu Honis from 1991 to “about 2012”. “It’s impossible for me to remember the faces of many of them, let alone the names. Who the victims would be I haven’t the faintest idea,” he wrote. He promised to “comply fully with any measures (penalties) that will be imposed.”

McColl and Hamilton have given affidavits to Timorese prosecutors detailing their encounters with Daschbach. Over lunch, McColl asked him, “Are you a paedophile?” She noted: “Without showing any emotion or remorse, he said, ‘Yes’ … and he didn’t see it to be a problem. Tony and I got up from the table and left the restaurant. I was shaking.” Hamilton tells Good Weekend, “Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined he would sit there eating his chicken rice and admit to everything.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s freed and then, when he dies, they build a statue in his honour.”

Next day, in the seminary courtyard, Daschbach told the Australians he had engaged in mutual masturbation and oral sex but no vaginal penetration. To McColl’s question, “Do you realise what harm you’ve done to these girls?”, he replied, “Oh, kids are tough.” When he said, of his prepubescent wards, “I only did it with those who wanted it,” Hamilton walked out of the compound and vomited in the street.

Hamilton’s last words to Daschbach were, “Your legacy will be an evil one.” It was the only time, Hamilton remembers, that Daschbach seemed upset. But William Burt, the Melbourne missionary, observes that people kneeled on the road and cried as Daschbach was driven to Oecusse courthouse on the trial’s opening day. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s freed and then, when he dies, they build a statue in his honour,” Burt says.

Could Daschbach’s supporters bend the legal system to his advantage? Jan McColl says he told her he wasn’t worried because “the law moves very slowly in Timor-Leste”. After opening in February, the trial was postponed four times at the request of his defence or because of his failure to show up. These were deliberate delaying tactics amounting to “psychological torture” of the victims, says JU,S Jurídico Social, a human rights law firm representing the complainants pro bono. “They have to get mentally prepared and relive the whole trauma in their minds – and then the hearing doesn’t happen,” says JU,S partner Maria Agnes Bere. The latest hearing – a June 7 video-conference session – was halted by technical problems and is due to resume on July 5.

Gusmão is listed as a defence witness and was conspicuous in the courtroom on the trial’s opening day. For the Fundasaun Mahein NGO, the case “will determine whether the rule of law really exists in East Timor, or whether the justice process can simply be hijacked for political purposes by powerful leaders”. Swinburne University’s Michael Leach agrees that Gusmão’s involvement “represents a potential challenge to a fair trial and increases the difficulty of witnesses testifying”. Even if Daschbach escapes punishment, he is wanted in the US, for wire fraud linked to one of his US donors.

The scandal has prompted efforts to change community attitudes. Photos and video clips of women and men raising placards that condemn sexual abuse of children fill the timeline of a new Facebook page – the first shot in a national education campaign by community groups. Child abuse is “endemic and widespread” and “permeates every layer of Timorese society”, according to JU,S Jurídico Social.
“Richard grabbed her and put her on his knee, like he used to do with me and all the other girls. At that point, it just hit me that I needed to speak up for little girls like her.”

Nona hopes the trial will help victims of other abusers to “be brave enough to speak the truth. In the future, some girl will remember how we spoke up and it will give her confidence that maybe she will be believed.” She recalls her visit to Kutet more than three years ago, when she fell into conversation with Daschbach. He asked about her plans and sought advice about his new phone.

“After being away for years, I still felt like I owed this man who abused me an explanation of what I’m going to do with my life,” she says. Then a child ran past. “Richard grabbed her and put her on his knee, like he used to do with me and all the other girls. At that point, it just hit me that I needed to speak up for little girls like her.”