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A woman carries drinking water along railroad tracks Sept. 15 in a poor section of Dhaka, Bar

A woman carries drinking water along railroad tracks Sept. 15 in a poor section of Dhaka, Bangladesh. (CNS/Mohammad Ponir Hossain, Reuters)

by Fr. Bob McCahill

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Editor's note: *For many years, Maryknoll Fr. Bob McCahill has been sending an annual letter to friends at Christmastime, chronicling his experience living among the people of Bangladesh. Since 1984, NCR has published his annual letter in the Christmas issue. The following is an edited version of his 2020 letter.*

Dear Friends,

Last year, my first year in Chandpur District, I expected (due to previous experiences) to be held in suspicion by many Muslims who supposed I had come to convert them to my Christian faith. Thus, they merely tolerated my presence among them. Now has begun my second year amidst them. Trust is growing, being built. Many are cooperating with me in my efforts to heal and make better the lives of children. In all the 13 districts I have lived since coming to Bangladesh 45 years ago, the first two years are characterized by a movement of peoples' suspicion of me to trust in me and from toleration of me, to cooperation with me.

Jahangir, a poultry raiser (just 100 fowls; not quite on the scale of Iowa-Indiana) is glad to let me use his cell phone to make contact with parents of disabled children in

his area. He sometimes helps me during my conversations on his phone because, frequently, I cannot understand what Bengali villagers say because they speak excitedly and so rapidly. Jahangir also recommends that I visit kids he knows are in need of hospital treatment, the very benefit I wish to provide.

When rain forced pedestrians on Chandpur town's narrow sidewalk to seek dry refuge under shop awnings, I was invited into a store and given a stool to sit on. My benefactor was Shohidul Islam, a devout, prayer-cap wearing young man. As we conversed about religion, I emphasized the part played by prayer in the lives of both Muslims and Christians. Moreover, I pointed out that service to other persons is the fruit of true religion. I explained: "Shohidul, just as you have served me by giving me this stool to sit on, that too can be called a religious act." His act of charity to me illustrated a Bengali maxim: "Service is the best religion."

In a shoes store the red-bearded owner, Shams, was curious to learn why I work for children's better health. He listened carefully, but skeptically, while I explained the God-given inspiration (when I was 19 years old) to spend my life as a missionary — a lifestyle not restricted to preaching, but rather, freed to serve persons in need. Jesus, a prophet in Islam, is Jesus, my model in life.

After I had spent much time to reach an island in the Meghna River, I still had to walk a bit to find Quddus, an incapacitated child. Sahel, a fast-pacing teenager, led the way. A dozen men and women gathered to hear me. Ayub Ali, the group's spokesman, questioned me, and the group listened respectfully to my answers. The parents of Quddus feared going to the distant hospital I offered them. They know, however, they can call on me at any time if they decide to dare trusting in me. Was there any benefit in my visiting them? Perhaps they got a new idea about Christians and a bit more of trust in strangers.

We had agreed to meet by 9 a.m. at Block E of a hospital in Dhaka. They would come from a village six hours distant. After I had waited an extra hour for them, I was nervous. Farhad, a man unknown to me at that time, sensed my anxiety and volunteered to help me look for the absent ones. Without his help we may never have found one another. God blesses those who go out of their way to relieve others' anxiety.

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Although not much happens when I go there, I enjoy traveling an hour by bus to Shahrasti sub-district once a month. The government health complex personnel are attentive and supportive of what I am hoping to do for children. They cooperate whenever they can and steer me to needy children. One morning, I spent an hour searching for Fahim, age 5, whom I knew lived near the health complex, but I had forgotten the path to his home, so I lost some time. Correction: The time was not really lost. For people always notice when a stranger is genuinely solicitous for one of their own.

For several weeks, I had been unable to visit Shahebganj, the largest bazar on the "island" encircled by the Meghna River. A trawler delivered 30 of us there by 10 a.m. I walked to the homes of several children whom I had seen in previous months but found only one of them: Sumon. A teacher at the village school, Omar Farook, loaned us his loongi (sarong) so that Sumon could easily expose his crippled knees for a photograph. A generous man may give you the shirt off his back. Farook loaned us the loongi tied around his waist.

Two helpful teenagers, Ratool and Noori, helped me hunt for a home near village Dhali. Ratool is a recent high school graduate, and he was attracted to observe my dealing with a child's mother. He likes to practice his English, called me an "ideal man," and told me, "I want to follow you." Then he questioned me: "What are you, a Muslim?" My single word reply: "Christian." After a pause, Ratool admitted sadly: "But I thought you are a Muslim because you spoke the word. 'Allah.' " Slowly, Ratool began to smile at his own narrow reasoning that only a person who calls the Creator "Allah" should be called ideal. How odd it is for us to allow people's religious affiliation to influence our opinion of them.

I try to write about Bangladeshi Muslims (approximately 90% of the population) and Hindus (around 10%) in a manner that stresses their good traits and the values they live by — for example: hospitality, and the love they have for their children. An optimistic view of them is generally true, so I refrain most of the time from describing irritants. Perhaps describing simple events and my thoughts about them will lead me to greater appreciation of people and of life. When I acknowledge the goodness of the people God places me among, gratitude becomes even more deeply rooted in my heart.

Fraternally,

Bob

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 25, 2020-Jan 7, 2021** print issue under the headline: Act of charity, service is the best religion.