Opinion
Guest Voices



Maryknoll Fr. Bob McCahill walks his bike in May 2023 in Srinagar, Bangladesh, where he lives and serves the poor. (Paul Jeffrey)

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 near Christmas. The following is an edited version of his 2024 letter.

Dear friends,

One early morning as I walked toward the town's vegetable bazar, my attention was arrested by an elderly man sprawled at the roadside. By motorized rickshaw, I brought him 1 mile to the local hospital where he was given a bed. Several days later when I visited the hospital, a nurse informed me the old fellow had recovered enough to leave. They never learned his name.

That incident was strikingly unusual for me because my efforts to assist the disabled are almost entirely focused on challenged children 10 years of age or less. They can benefit from weeks of physiotherapy or by a surgical operation. While it is children I seek to help, it is their parents — usually mothers — with whom I deal. Numerous children have afflictions that are scarcely improvable. Besides, many parents are unwilling to attend a hospital even though it will be without cost for them. All I can offer those parents is encouragement to dare, that is, to give hospitals a try. Oftentimes then, I also give them a photo together with their precious child.

By bicycle, I travel to many villages but not all travels result in children's better health. Sometimes all I can do is show sincere concern and pronounce an Islamic blessing over them. Joshim, age 10, whose brain is deeply troubled, comes to my mind. His handshake is firm and adult-like; his smile blesses me.

Between my visits to villages surrounding Holudia Bazar, I stopped to drink tea at Jahurul Islam's tea stall. Sometimes he refuses my payment or returns the money to me. Jahurul likes what I am doing to help children. One time, along with the tea, he even gave me a hug.

In village Guchugram one day, I was shown three children ages 3, 6 and 10, all in need of expert treatment. When I returned two weeks later to follow up the invitations I had offered their parents they had all moved elsewhere. No one could explain to me where I might trace them. What then remains for me to do for Habib, Saiful and Rashid? Pray for them?

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Three brothers conversed with me, describing their foreign job experiences of yesteryear in Italy, Malaysia and Singapore for one-half, 10 and 20 years, respectively. Circumstances had forced them to search for employment abroad.

They were grateful the jobs had worked out to benefit their families back home in Srinagar. But they rejoice now to be back home and are determined to stay.

Nazmul, the fellow who introduced me in 2022 to Srinagar — the town in which I now live — belongs to the town's press club. He and his buddies are all supportive of my services to the families of needy children. Arif, another club member, interviewed me in order to understand the reasons for my presence among them. The club members furnish me with a cup of tea on my every visit.

In the town's bazaar men and women walk quickly on its crowded lanes. Even the women, covered with long black garbs — many of them carrying months-old children in their arms — must bump into others in the narrow ways. Apologies are rarely spoken because everyone expects to be shaken up while going through a town's bazar. (You get used to it.)

In gab sessions with men my claim to be celibate astounds them and causes them to smile or laugh. It is a subject seldom discussed. I handle the subject with good cheer, but seriously, too. For I consider celibacy a significant sign to illustrate "a life of service and uttermost simplicity." Much-revered Mahatma Gandhi reminded Christian missionaries that such a life of service and simplicity is "the best preaching" to people living in this part of the world.

Just before the Islamic Eid-ul-Fitr holiday, friend Suzon came to my room to present to me a nifty dress shirt. He announced: "I just gave an identical shirt to my father. My Eid wishes are for both of you." How pleasing it is to experience peoples' affection during this my third and final year in Srinagar.

At the convent of the Salesian Sisters in Dhaka, Sister Joseph presented to me a large jar of her delicious tomato jam, an annual Holy Week gift to me. Like most of the religious sisters, brothers and priests in Bangladesh, she inspires me to continue living with and for Muslim and Hindu "special children."

We all belong to God.

Fraternally, Bob

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