

## Just ask yourself: How can I be useful to the poor?

Bob McCahill | Dec. 23, 2009



Fr. Bob McCahill (CNS file photo)

*For many years, Fr. Bob McCahill, a Maryknoll missionary, has been sending an annual letter to NCR and other friends at Christmastime, chronicling his experience living among the people of Bangladesh since 1975. His 2009 letter is below.*

Dear Friends,

The best place in Bangladesh to find men for serious conversation is the tea stall. One day men at a tea stall in Narail town watched me as I oiled my bicycle. They sent someone to fetch me. Bike in hand I walked over to join them. There were 10 of them, all involved in trucking. Jahangir put questions to me supplied to him by Kamal and Ratan -- the usual questions about my source of income, my wife and children, and my country of birth. When I left them after 10 minutes I shook their hands. Jahangir's final comment was about how fortunate they felt to hear the reason for my living among them, that is, the life and teachings of Jesus.

In Bongram, another village, a farmer ran to the road from his rice field shouting for me to stop. Still panting but happy to have caught the "doctor," he informed me of a child in need of surgery, whose address I recorded. Then the farmer asked about my service. I explained briefly that I am a Christian missionary. Seconds later he asked: "You are a Muslim, no?" I repeated and expanded the previous explanation but he failed again to grasp it. For, he reasoned, "if you are a Christian, why would you help Muslims?"

As I rode through Chalito bazaar, a roadside tea stall operator called out: "Where have you been? The last time we saw you here was a month ago." I parked the bicycle and sat down to receive tea and questions. Several men, all curious, sat beside me. "Why do you stay in this country? Everyone knows Bangladeshis will do anything to go to your country." I spoke of things I like about their motherland: natural beauty, attractive people and tasty food. They smiled knowingly. Then I mentioned the deeper reason for staying. "In Bangladesh I have scope for helping more persons in need than in any other place I know." They became quiet and thoughtful. When I got up to leave I asked where I could rent a cell phone because I wanted to contact a doctor. One of the men whipped out his personal cell phone for my use. It was his way of participating in service to the poor as did his Prophet Isa, i.e., my model, Jesus.

Nahar, the 16-year-old daughter of Alom, my nearest neighbor, came to my door. "We have a guest. He is a crazy man," she giggled. I asked Nahar whether or not she had seen him before. "Oh, yes," she replied, "he has eaten here before. Abba [Daddy] likes to stand close by when he, or others like him, eat. Abba urges them to eat more. Abba says when you feed a crazy person it makes Allah happy." The irony of it is that Daddy, the enthusiastic feeder of crazies, is materially speaking the poorest man in the neighborhood. But so wise: a devout Muslim who offers hospitality to those who have no way of repaying him.

On the day after the Islamic celebration Korbani Eid, Nahar came to invite me to a meal that day at 2:30 p.m. Then she went about preparing a spicy meal. As fuel for their clay stove she started to dismantle the wall of the cooking shed in which she sat tending the stove. It was the only source of brittle jute sticks available. While Nahar was tossing pieces of the wall into the fire to make my meal, I experienced a lesson in hospitality.

On the Bengali New Year, 1416, Nahar returned home from her short-lived job in the garments industry in Dhaka. As evening approached, her mother, Jahanara, informed me: "Our daughter will be wedded this evening." When darkness fell, a Muslim judge came to Alom's house to record the marriage of Nahar and Babu. A lower-keyed wedding I had never seen. I kept thinking: What a heartache it must give the girl to be given away so simply. Months before when Jasmeen, a teenage neighbor, was married, I had noticed the longing in Nahar's eyes for just such an event to make her own wedding wonderful. Jasmeen, an only child, although poor, was afforded a simple banquet, tables and chairs, invitees, music and an amplifier. How disappointed Nahar must be, thought I, that her once-in-a-lifetime celebration had been canceled due to poverty. But, no, I must hand it to the lady. She was joyfully radiant on her wedding day.

One evening at 11 o'clock, I returned by bus from having admitted children in Dhaka hospitals. A light rain was falling as I set off on the final walk home in the dark. Minutes later I felt a bite on the top of my foot, flashed my light, and saw a 2-foot-long snake slithering away. "Uh-oh," thought I, "the whole town is asleep by now. What to do but pray for deliverance." Reaching home I disturbed Alom's sleep. He listened groggily to my problem and swung into wide-awake action. Over 6,000 people die from snakebites yearly in Bangladesh, so villagers treat the problem urgently. He called for Kobad, an exorcist. While awaiting him, Alom prayed aloud in Arabic, massaged my calf, and blew on my foot. Then, Kobad prayed to Allah and with his right hand put pressure on me, starting at the top of my head and working down to my foot. No stone was used nor incision made, they simply invoked the Almighty -- as did I, but silently. In the morning Alom came to check on me. "Still living," I assured him. "By the grace of the Almighty," he declared.

At the town library where I go to read a newspaper I asked the librarian, Topu, if there were any English books among the thousands in Bengali. He led me to a dark room and pointed out five short shelves. After squinting at 150 titles I chose two, dusted them, and brought them to the desk for checking out. Topu gave me a perplexed look. "We don't have a book-loaning system here," he explained. Others in the reading room were watching to see what would be my reaction as Topu declared apologetically: "All books must be read here." I bit my lip and left the books. Moments later, out of earshot of the crowd, Topu approached me. "For you we'll make an exception. But please don't tell anyone you borrowed a book from this library!" As Bangladeshis say, self-mockingly: "This is Bangladesh."

An educated, idealistic 22-year-old fellow bus passenger, Alameen by name, began our chat by asking about my service in Narail town and the surrounding district, which he had long observed: "Are you successful?" I replied: "I am able to do something for the poor, so I am at peace." He was skeptical, saying: "But I do not see you conversing much with people in the town." I could have explained my preference for going out to folks living far from town, but instead replied: "I don't measure success by how much I converse, but, rather, by my availability to serve disabled persons." After a pause Alameen asked, "What should I do?" I suggested, "Just ask yourself: How can I be useful to the poor?" May Alameen, also, enjoy inner peace.

Fraternally,

Bob McCahill

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