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Maryknoll missioner shares stories of 2010 in Bangladesh

Bob McCahill | Dec. 22, 2010

Children observe a Nativity scene outside the cathedral in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Dec. 22. (CNS photo/Andrew Biraj, Reuters)

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 2010 letter is below.*

Dear Friends,

Early every morning, neighbor Mira, a typically pretty 31-year-old Muslim grandmother, brings home the family bull. The animal is strong and well-fed, having been supplied with grass to chew all day long. Mira does more than merely lead the bull home by rope through a nose ring. Rather, she gathers a handful of tender leaves with which to entice the bull, and then runs home while holding the delicious morsel just before its nose, the bull fast on her heels. If she were to trip, she would be trampled. A couple of outsiders passing through observed Mira?s dash while barely ahead of the bull. ?What nerve! How daring!? they exclaimed with admiration. Sometimes it takes outsiders to notice and remind us how extraordinary our neighbors are.

While bicycling through Adompur?s bazaar on a narrow highway, I swerved to avoid hitting an old man, and instead smashed into an 8-year-old boy. I saw his scrawny leg twist beneath my front wheel and I feared I had broken it. The old man and I picked up the startled boy and took him to the bazaar?s only medicine shop. No soap, disinfectant, bandage or salve was available there for Roqibul?s abrasions. I rode away filled with wonder at how slight the injury was and gratitude that the Merciful One had saved me again. An hour later I brought from town the proper dressings and found Roqibul at home. The boy, his mother and sisters were happy for the attention, but even more so for peanuts and a chocolate bar it delighted me to award the spared one.

Nashiron, a neighbor girl, informed me one afternoon that I had initiated a spinach garden. ?How so?? I asked.

?You know the place behind our hut where you throw the stalks after detaching the spinach leaves? Well, the stalks have caught hold and are producing new spinach,? she explained. What was tossed out as garbage had

returned as healthy food. In a country having, arguably, the richest soil on earth, ?Throw a seed out the window and a bush will soon appear.? Sometimes we plant a seed without even being aware of it.

Yearly during January, the rector of the major seminary sends a theology student to accompany me. Besides our frequent jaunts by bicycle to villages, Sobuz was willing to do the shopping and cooking during the three weeks, freeing me to do some overdue writing. His stay was advantageous for all who saw him, for Sobuz is a Garo ?tribal? Bangladeshi, one of the less than 2 percent of the nation having Tibeto-Burmese facial features, unlike the features of the 98 percent majority Bengalis. So thanks to the Creator for exposing many people to a non-Bengali Bangladeshi, a tribal man of the Modhupur Forest who is educated, cheerful, outgoing and an exemplary follower of Jesus.

Fellow Maryknoll missioner and friend Fr. Doug Venne, with whom I worked closely during these past 36 years -- two years in the Philippines and 34 in Bangladesh -- died and was buried in Bangladesh just before this year began. Doug had been a great athlete; he became an outstanding missioner. Several months after his death, I visited again his village and house. Villagers described a storm that only 15 days previously had struck and ravaged the house. North and east bamboo walls lay destroyed and rotting. I asked what had happened to the foundation of the house. It had been dug up and the earth used to envelop the roots of hundreds of sapling trees that will soon be transplanted throughout the area. Doug?s memory will also survive in the trees of the village for years to come.

At midyear, I moved to Naogaon, a district town seven hours by bus from my former hometown, Narail. Actively assisted by Shaheen, a sympathetic, community-conscious businessman, I was able to locate a habitable room and begin to get acquainted in the vicinity. Close by my room is a tiny, cluttered store many of us patronize, where Kalu, its owner, sits 14 hours every day. One day I learned about his priorities. I wanted to buy a wrapped piece of bread, but Kalu was preoccupied reading an Islamic religious tract. He read in a forceful voice to get the full impact of the author?s wisdom. Kalu was so absorbed in reading he paid no attention to me, his prospective customer. Later, I chided him for ignoring a person in order to recite pious phrases. He did not deny his preference for holy reading over customer service, so I pointed out to him it is a matter on which we differ.

In the room next to mine lives Faeen, age 2. While his mother sat close by, he seized a small piece of broken cement to throw at me. I hoped she would restrain the happy hurler; she did not. Faeen threw and I deflected it. Later, he came forth beaming while carrying a kitchen knife and tapped its blade on my bare leg. Mother, inches away, again said nothing. I wondered if she was telling me: ?Do not expect me to discipline or speak harshly to my only son. He is my future. When I become a widow, Faeen?s two sisters will be unable to assist me. I need to be on his side now and always.?

Nowadays, banana seller Wahab is the one I go to daily when gathering foodstuffs from the bazaar. He gives me a better deal than the others. Wahab has dealt unselfishly with me ever since the day we first conversed and he learned I try to aid children needing surgery. He has said nothing explicit to inform me that I would regularly receive bananas from him at a good price, but that is what has happened. He participates in Allah?s work of compassion by assisting a servant of the poor.

In a distant bazaar, I took breakfast at a restaurant while Alom, the owner, and his friend sat near the entrance, gabbing and smoking. Minutes earlier, they had overheard me explain celibacy to a curious tablemate. On my way out, I grimaced at Alom?s smoking and quipped: ?Better to eat a banana than smoke a cigarette.? Grinning, Alom nodded agreement; they really should kick the harmful habit, he seemed to concede. His parting words to me were, however, a reprimand and a challenge: ?It is better to marry than to be celibate.? All of us chuckled. Teasing is a favorite Bengali pastime.

Though it is true people here easily fall into quarrels, it is also true during the month of fasting, Ramadan, many

Muslims make strenuous efforts, quietly, to overlook trespasses and slights. That is noticeable to me because I am so often biking and experiencing recklessness on roads and streets. Patience and generosity are emphasized during Ramadan. I observe these virtues being exercised during barely avoided accidents, averted because of one party?s adjustment to accommodate others? careless driving. Some days, even I hold my tongue and ride defensively in response to traffic indiscipline. Is the spirit of Islamic Ramadan rubbing off on me, or do Muslims merely remind me to practice my Christian faith?

Fraternally,
Bob

This week, *NCR* is posting a series of Christmas reflections. Look for these in the coming days:

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- Christmas in Beijing [2], by Edmund Chia and Gemma Cruz
- Maryknoll missioner shares stories of 2010 in Bangladesh [3], by Maryknoll Fr. Bob McCahill
- The Christmas Chariot [4] by Bill Zalot
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