

Brother Flavian Laplante, CSC: Apostle to the Fishermen**by Brother George Klawitter, CSC**

On July 27, 1907, a seventh child, Doria, was born to Honore and Marie-Louise Laplante on a farm near the Canadian village of St. Louis de Bonsecours. When he was six, his mother died at the age of 39 as a result of bearing her ninth child, Rosaire. That same year little Doria was crushed under a farm cart which snapped his leg in three places. It took two months for the leg to heal and for Doria to learn how to walk again. Early on he was sent to College Saint-Aime and lived with his grandmother who soon could not abide his raucous behavior as sometimes the aged have little tolerance for energetic young people. So Doria's father fetched his son, but the horse bolted and the boy fell out of the cart without his father's knowing it. After some time when M. Laplante thought his little passenger unduly quiet, he turned around to discover his son missing from the back of the cart. Heading back to the grandmother's, the farmer found his son by the side of the road exhausted from running after the cart.

Enrolled at the local parish school at age ten, Doria showed his talents for study, particularly in mathematics. He was also assiduous at his catechism and evidently showed an interest in the religious life. He had an uncle already in Holy Cross, Brother Conrad Ferron, so with the uncle as an inspiration, Doria went to the St. Cesaire Juniorate in the fall of 1919. He was twelve years old, one of sixty postulants that year. Four years later, at the age of sixteen, Doria entered the novitiate at Ste.-Genevieve-de-Pierrefonds, and on August 15, 1923, received the

religious habit and his new name, Brother Flavian. His work assignment was the chickens, but his energy was poured into handball, an activity that fueled his competitive spirit. On August 16, 1924, he professed his religious vows. In 1927, after four years of university study, he was allowed to visit his home and family for the first time in eight years. Most of his brothers and sisters had married since he left the farm.

Flavian's first teaching assignment was to Notre Dame College where he served from 1928 to 1932 as athletic director. His talent for sports was much appreciated by the four hundred boys who boarded at the school. He also ran one of the dormitories. One of his winter treats for his charges each of the five years he served at the school was the construction of a thirty-foot high ice slide, much enjoyed by the students on weekends. As one might expect, he was a highly popular teacher and prefect. Then when his assignment to the Bengal missions was announced in August, 1932, his loss was felt by the entire student population. Paying a final visit to Brother Andre Bessette, the miracle-worker of Montreal, Flavian was told by the saint, "I envy your going to the missions" (Houle 6-7).

Along with Father Eugene Poirier, Flavian left Canada on October 17, 1932, shepherded by veteran missionaries Brother Ambrose Diamond and Father Omer Desrochers who were returning to Bengal. A month and a half later, Flavian and his companions reached Chittagong. The first year in Bengal Flavian studied Bengali. The second year he became prefect, athletic director, and English teacher of Forms VII and VIII at a new high school, St. Alfred's, in Padrishibpur. In 1934 he was named headmaster of this school and by 1936 had added Forms IX and X to the

school as well as had constructed a new dormitory. After such success, he was transferred in 1937 to Noakhali, which had only a kindergarten, Form I and Form II. Without a question, he went there and immediately started a Form III with six students. By 1938 he had opened Form IV, but in December of that year he was sent to work at St. Placid's School in Chittagong. There all classes were taught in English, not Flavian's native language nor the language he had learned in the Bengal countryside. In spite of an exhausting schedule of teaching and perfecting, he earned a bachelor's of arts degree and a bachelor's degree in education from the University of Montreal, long before the days of satellite TV and long-distance-learning classes. By the age of thirty, Flavian had proven himself a valued member of the St. Placid faculty, yet in 1940, the local bishop engineered his transfer because of pressure from a customs officer who felt his son was not treated well by Flavian. Back to Padrishipur he went, as gradually World War II began to affect Bengal.

After Flavian had taken two new candidates to the novitiate at Noakhali, Chittagong was bombed, as Flavian discovered when he got off the train there. All Holy Cross priests, brothers, and sisters had moved with the boarding students to Padrishipur. The Japanese had invaded Burma and their arrival at Chittagong was imminent. The Japanese had already arrived one hundred miles away at Cox's Bazar. Living at St. Placid's, Flavian opened a small school six miles away in the village of Chandgon, which he reached every day by bicycle. In his sleeping quarters at St. Placid's, Flavian could feel the British artillery responding to the Japanese bombardments of Chittagong. Worse yet was the famine that hit the area as a result of the government's confiscation of boats from sixty-five thousand area fishermen

and the interruption of the rice trade from Burma, a valued staple for the Bengali people. The population sank into impoverished misery. Flavian distributed food to the fishermen, most of them Hindu, from a two story building the top floor of which served as living quarters for himself and three young men. Part of each day he nursed the sick from a make-shift dispensary on the ground floor. Nearly six million people died of famine in the year 1943-44 (Houle 18), but as liaison to local government officials, Flavian was able to find jobs for a thousand fishermen, keeping them and their families from starvation.

Although we may like to think that our Holy Cross missionaries are peaceful human beings, we must recognize that at times these enterprising men and women may be called upon to fight physically for what they believe in. So it was for Brother Flavian in the fall of 1944 when pirates harassed local fishermen. Accustomed to simply letting the pirates pillage boats returning from a day's catch, the fishermen were heartened when Flavian took it upon himself to confront the piratical bullies. On November 4, he borrowed a revolver and a few bullets, got into a boat with four rather reluctant young men, and settled behind a stone wall overlooking the north side of the river that serviced the village of Bandhar. When the pirates made their move to accost a fishing boat, Flavian directed his boat right at the pirates, brandished his gun and shouted as the fishermen fought off the pirates. The pirates who jumped into the water and attempted to swim away were in the worst position because Flavian threatened to shoot them. They surrendered, and the local fishermen took them to court where they were sentenced to six months in jail and fined fifty takas each. In January of the following year (1945) when piracy again

flared up, Flavian elicited the navy coast guard for help. This venture put eleven more pirates behind bars (Houle 23). No wonder the local people considered Flavian their hero.

After the war Flavian petitioned the government for funds to build an orphanage on eighty acres of land that he had purchased for 200 dollars. Local Muslims protested the enterprise saying that the property had been used as a graveyard for centuries. Flavian went ahead in spite of continuous harassment, and by the late summer of 1946 he oversaw the completion of the main building with eight classrooms on the ground level and a massive dormitory on the upper level. One year later, by the time of Bengal's independence from British rule (August 14, 1947), the compound was firmly established. Flavian, however, continued his ministry to 50,000 fishing families in villages along a seventy mile strip of coastland. Then exhausted at last, Flavian returned to Canada for an eight month home leave.

Once back at Diang in 1947, Flavian found new ventures primarily in farming and the settling of disputed between fishermen and local land holders. He was a man of indefatigable energy apparently and multiple skills. In addition to his work at the orphanage, over the years he spent four months a year (November to February) on fishing boats, learning the trade and ministering at far-flung villages. Unfortunately as government aid for the Diang high school dried up and as the bishop withdrew his support, the orphanage school closed in January, 1954. For the next three years Flavian worked tirelessly to get adequate fishing boats for the fishermen, and a few months leave in the spring of 1958 afforded him the chance to travel around Quebec and part of the United States soliciting funds. One can

imagine that his pleas for money would be hard to ignore, especially since the wellbeing of 50,000 human beings in coastal Bangladesh depended upon him for day-to-day living. On his return to Asia, however, he was transferred from Diang, where his work had prospered, to Noakhali where, after fifteen years of labor-organizing for fishermen, he found himself once again a teacher, this time at the Brother Andre School, which boasted 350 students primary to secondary, half of them Christian. Now 51, Flavian could return to his love of athletics, and he used his considerable strengths to start various teams at the school.

Noakhali was an area of East Pakistan not without its weather problems. Hurricanes often battered the area, and a particularly vehement one in October of 1960 left 30,000 people dead. The force of the storm was so great that it lifted a 10,000 ton cargo ship 300 feet long off its moorings and left it one mile inland. The devastation for the fishing villages was especially severe, and Flavian felt restless in his academic setting. He yearned to help his former charges. In fact, he considered asking for exclaustation if he were not allowed to return to them (Houle 58), a finality that may or may not have influenced his superiors to assign him once again to his beloved work at Diang. He arrived back there in the spring of 1962.

Life is rarely a bed of roses in the Asian area that Holy Cross has tended for over 150 years, and for Flavian life became a nest of thorns in November of 1970 when a cyclone of tremendous force left the coastal area devastated. With winds up to 120 miles per hour, the storm raged for sixteen hours and left half a million people dead. On the coast, 12,000 fishermen died. On Manpura Island only 8,000 survived out of 26,000 residents. The countryside was flattened, and Brother

Flavian's farm lost thousands of papaya and banana trees. There was no potable drinking water. Moreover, one of his prime fishing boats, boasting a motor from Germany, was accidentally rammed by the British steamer Sir Galahad and sank with loss of the entire fishing crew. Many of the Bengali people lapsed into despair, but Flavian set to work immediately, dispatching a boat to retrieve stranded people. He spent three days in Dhaka getting help for 12,000 island fishermen. Several letters survive to Flavian from Pierre-Elliott Trudeau, who remained for years one of the Canadian politicians vitally interested in Flavian's well-being. Trudeau had visited Flavian in Pakistan in 1950 and wrote to him after the disastrous 1970 cyclone: "Twenty-one years ago I spent Christmas at your place. I can never forget that Christmas. Peace, courage, love" (qtd. in Houle 77). Eventually Flavian met Trudeau in Canada. On February 14, 1972, Flavian was received by the prime minister for half an hour in Trudeau's Ottawa office. It is undoubtedly a trait of saintly people that they can interact with the great and the small alike since their values are anchored in a divinity that itself recognizes no hierarchy outside of relative goodness.

In the Asian area where Flavian lived and worked, he was rarely far from disease and death, so it is a wonder that he suffered so little from ill health during his decades in Bengal and East Pakistan. He did at one time suffer from both stomach ulcers and worms, and unfortunately at the time he swallowed five sleeping pills mistaking them for his anti-worm medication. It took a day of anxious concern on the part of his confreres to bring him back to full consciousness. In some ways, the holy impetuosity with which he often faced situations may have

contributed to this setback. He had, in some ways become over the years as genuinely naïve as the people he himself characterized as sweetly child-like:

...to that extent they have remained like children and do not mature at all with time. They are childish in their reasonings and they understand what they want the way it suits them best...I would like to share the profits but they want only their salaries: as for profits and losses, it is not their concern. They are happy if they receive full salary even if they have nothing left at the end of the fishing season.

(Letter to his sister Eva, qtd. in Houle 95)

His was a great heart that appreciated the Bengali people as they were, and if he came to live and think as they did, it was a sign that he had found great beauty in their lives and their attitudes, their appreciation of the simple things around them and satisfaction with what was visited upon them, good as well as bad.

By the winter of 1975, on a home visit to Canada, Flavian began to think about a major change in his lifestyle. In early 1976 back in Diang, he confided in letters to his sister Eva that he was intent on withdrawing from his life's work among the fishermen in order to live as a hermit in Dhaka:

No more errands, no more visits to Dhaka to meet with officers, nothing but prayer and manual work in the orchards of Diang, in the gardens around the hills that I climbed so often and came down as often...I am on the move the whole day and in the evening I enjoy good rest; at night I wake up and pray for you all; how light is my sleep since I think of withdrawing from active life; really the Lord fills

me with great interior peace and I spend long moments meditating on the beatific vision...It is not that I do not feel able to move about. On the contrary. I do it more and more and it is precisely to stop this running here and there and strike deeper roots in life that I shall stop for a heart to heart exchange with Christ. Therefore I shall spend the last years of my life at the feet of the Master. (Letter to Eva, qtd. in Houle 100)

It is not uncommon that a person who had worn himself out in forty-four years of missionary work as strenuously as Flavian had for that person to settle down, to “retire” as it were, into a daily routine centered in quiet and prayer. After visiting ashrams in India, Flavian settled in Dhaka on December 12, 1976, in a small hut eight feet by eight feet furnished with a bed, a table, a chair, two bookshelves, and a typewriter. As much as a hermit as he intended to become, he was not about to give up his correspondence or his typewriter. In one day he wrote fifty letters. His hut was located in the Miriam Ashram fifteen hundred feet from the Holy Cross Brothers’ house. His meals were brought to him by locals of many faiths.

What was the life of this hermit like in early 1977? He rose at midnight to pray until 3:30 AM. Then he slept for a few hours and got up again at 6 AM for Divine Office and Mass with the Brothers. He read and wrote until dinner at 1 PM. At 2 PM he greeted visitors who swarmed to see him until 5 PM, and then he rested until supper at 7:30. After an hour of prayer he went to bed at 9 PM and slept until his new day began at midnight. The routine suited him, as strange as it may have

seemed to those who knew his active and erratic schedule among the coastal fishermen. Flavian, of course, had set his sights on heaven.

It is tempting to contrast this holy Canadian with our Canadian saint, Andre Bessette, but such a contrast would prove of little value. Andre spent long swatches of each day in prayer throughout his religious life, sometimes praying in the chapel all night long after a full day of duty as doorkeeper at the Holy Cross boarding school in Montreal. Andre was not illiterate, but he left precious little in writing for various Vatican committees to evaluate after his death—a few letters. Flavian, on the other hand, was a strong classroom teacher and an inveterate writer: convincing government agents to earmark thousands of takas for impoverished fishermen takes eloquence and political savvy as well as solid writing skills. The two men were simply cut from different bolts of cloth, and one would be hard pressed to find much in common between them beyond their love of God and their shared brotherhood in Holy Cross. The Miracle Man of Montreal has thousands of individual physical cures to his credit, whereas the holy man of the Bengali fishermen worked in broader strokes, eliciting government and charitable agencies to fund his projects to benefit hundreds of thousands of needy Bengali people. To compare the two men or their respective charisms would be pointless.

After four years in his hermitage, the end came quickly for Flavian. In 1981 he developed stomach cancer. There was no hope. By March the doctors had given up any attempt at a cure. Finally on June 19, at 9:20 PM, Flavian breathed his last breath. On Sunday, June 21, the bishop of Chittagong said the funeral Mass, and Flavian was buried in a simple wooden coffin in the rain. Hundreds had come from

Noakhali, Chittagong, and Dhaka to pay their respects to a man who had promised never to leave his beloved fishermen. In his own words, “Physically you will not see me any more: invisibly I shall always remain with you” (Houle 125).

When we look for accounts of Flavian’s life, we find the most available to be *The Great Flavian* by Brother Alberic Houle, CSC, but this book is a poor translation of a rudimentary book. Judging from the English, one senses that the translator was comfortable with only the most basic of sentence constructions as most of the sentences begin with the subject and many read clumsily. Transitions are often ignored. There is some attempt to use primary sources, but their inclusion often does little to advance the narrative. Idioms are rendered verbatim with a halting effect in English. For example, from a Flavian letter dated January 30, 1957, to his sister Eva, we are given, “The other day, I was explaining to the fishermen with tears in my eyes that I would make penance, would suffer for them and expiate their faults” (Houle 53). The merit of the little book is that it was written by someone who worked alongside Flaivan in Bangladesh, and the fervor of Brother Alberic’s regard for Flavian makes up for many of the shortcomings in the book. We are still waiting for an adequate biography of the man.

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Appendix I

Some Reminiscences of Brother Flavian Laplante in Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan

Just after Christmas in 1955 and 1956 several Holy Cross brothers and priests in Dhaka, joined Brother Flavian Laplante, a Canadian Holy Cross brother, on his fishing boat, the Diamond Jubilee, in Chittigong, East Pakistan. Father Dick Timm, professor of biology at Notre Dame College in Dhaka, Father Gene Burke, a math professor at the same college, Brother Charles Hill from the trade school in Dhaka, another brother from Dhaka, and Brother Donald Allen, teacher of English at St. Gregory's High School. Father Timm wanted to collect new species of nematodes found living among the marine algae in the Bay of Bengal. Father Gene Burke and Brother Charles Hill were interested in photographing life in and on the Bay of Bengal, an extension of the Indian Ocean. Brother Donald Allen was interested in collecting several species of poisonous marine snakes for the collection of specimens at St. Gregory's High School.

Our kind and very gracious host, Brother Flavian, was a protector, helper, guide, and advisor for the low caste Hindu fishermen plying their trade, catching marine fish found in the Bay of Bengal and selling the fish in Chittagong. Before Brother Flavian joined the fishermen and befriended them, the fishermen sold their catches to the businessmen in the Port of Chittagong, having been assured that they would receive a good return for selling their fish to them. The fishermen at the time had no refrigeration facilities so the fishermen having returned from the Bay of

Bengal some distance away had to sell their fish immediately or the fish would decompose. The fishermen were consistently cheated as they were given far less than promised them. Brother Flavian befriended the fishermen. He received financial help from friends and from the Canadian Government enabling him to buy and maintain the Diamond Jubilee equipped with refrigeration facilities and to get refrigeration equipment in Chittagong itself. This allowed Brother Flavian and the fishermen to control the cost of the fish they received from those who purchased their fish. This was a great help for the fishermen and their families. Brother Flavian was the fishermen's great friend and helper. He often lived with and among the fishermen.

The CSC priests and brothers went with Brother Flavian on the Diamond Jubilee to the fishing grounds in the Bay of Bengal. Brother Flavian would circulate among the fishing boats and collect their fish and put them in the refrigeration compartments. When enough had been collected, the ship would head for Chittagong and off-load the fish into the refrigeration units there, then sold by the fishermen's cooperative.

The brothers and priests would remain on the Diamond Jubilee while the ship weaved among the canoe-like fishermen's boats collecting the fish, except at times when Father Timm and Brother Donald went into their boats and went with the fishermen when they collected fish from their nets. Fish were off-loaded into the boats. Sea snakes would often be found in the nets along with fish. The fish being sluggish and heavy, the fishermen skillfully removed the snakes and threw them back into the sea. Father Richard Timm would collect masses of seaweed,

mostly brown, red, or green algae to bring back to Notre Dame College for examination for marine nematodes. Brother Donald would get sea snakes of several different species and put them into four to five gallon containers filled with formalin and brought them back to St. Gregory's High School.

At night Brother Flavian would take the Diamond Jubilee to one of the sandy, very small islands in the Bay of Bengal. There we would spend the night on the sandy beach just a few feet from the water's edge, the tide being negligible. Meals, either on the beach or on board the Diamond Jubilee, were simple and Spartan. Each trip with Brother Flavian would last only four or five days. Once back in Chittigong we would spend a day or so there before heading back to Dhaka by train.

My impression of Brother Flavian, and that of the others I was with, was that he was a very holy and kind, compassionate, down to earth man.

Brother Donald Allen, CSC

June 19, 2012

Appendix II

Remembrance

Brother Flavian was a very agile, healthy, and robust man. He was never overweight. The poor were his friends and took up most of his apostolic endeavors.

He especially worked for the welfare of the Hindu fishermen in the Bay of Bengal. He built a village for them with homes up on stilts to avoid the flood waters. A school was built there also. The builders made bricks from the clay in the area. Brother encouraged the villagers to grow crops for sustenance, especially rice. Many times the fishermen would lose their boats, because of storms in the Bay. They would fish for a month or more and then bring their catch to the river port.

Brother was able to get funds from various international organizations to replace their boats and keep up with their equipment needs, as well as their housing. Better marketing methods were offered to them to help avoid paying fees to middlemen.

Not everyone agreed with him, for “they” would not want to live his life of simplicity. “They” would not even think of going out to sea for a month at a time to experience the hardships of the fishermen. However, Brother Flavian had permission for all of his work. He was attached to the Brothers’ community at St. Placid High School in Chittagong, and I believe he was also a member of their house council. The Brothers had a common dining room, which they shared with the priests of the cathedral which was adjacent to the school. So often the bishop would be seen at the same dining facility.

This man was active and full of zeal for all of his projects.

Then, when he mentioned about becoming a recluse (guru, holy man, anchorite, monk, or what-have-you) in that same village, everyone was flabbergasted. How would he slow down to that stage? Someone in France gave him a multi-colored shirt (in contrast with his new white-habit-to-be?).

He dedicated his ashram to Mary (Miriam Ashram) and had a small living space with a chapel on a hill. There he prayed, attended Mass, and received his visitors. What a contrast to his active life!

After his death his ashram became a place of annual pilgrimage.

Brother Ronald Christenson, CSC

June 21, 2012