

CHAMPION OF THE PARIAHS

BROTHER FLAVIAN LAPLANTE,
THE BROTHER ANDRE OF BANGLADESH

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by

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To attempt to sketch even a quickie portrait of such a towering figure as the late Brother Flavian Laplante of the French Canadian Society of the Brothers of Holy Cross is a challenge which, I fear, proves far beyond my humble means as an amateur biographer. True, in writing a book shortly to be released and tentatively titled Champion of the Pariahs, I did spend several months delving into the one thousand and more letters Brother Flavian wrote to his sister in Canada during the 49 years he spent in Bangladesh. In addition, there were hundreds of other items of correspondence and a wealth of published material here and there referring to Brother Flavian's achievements, to say nothing of the several chapters of his unfinished Memoirs. I further spent a month in Bangladesh interviewing people who lived and worked with him over the years. Of course, I previously had had a minimal personal acquaintance with Brother Flavian for having met him on occasion in Canada and Rome.

Today, my purpose is nowise to summarize Brother Flavian's whole bio story. How could one expect to cram close to 74 years of an extremely active life into a half-hour paper? Within the parameters of this lecture, at least I shall endeavor to list the major fields of Brother Flavian's activity, to point out the salient features of his personality and to single out the spiritual and humanitarian motivations that powered his energy.

For the sake of reference however, be it sufficient to mention that Brother Flavian was christened Doria Laplante in 1907, the seventh child of a family of nine born to a French-Canadian couple, in the lush Quebec countryside southeast of Montreal. He took the habit of Holy Cross in 1923; then in August 1924, he made his vows which he was solemnly to renew for life — further adding the mission vow — in the late Summer of 1928 at the outset of his active life. From 1928 to 1932 he was stationed at Notre Dame College in Montreal. In mid-October 1932, he was off to Bengal.

It must be said that already, at age 25, before setting foot in the Far East, Brother Flavian in his previous assignments as sports director, hockey coach of

the varsity team, teacher and dormitory prefect at Notre Dame College had accumulated an uncommon store of human and spiritual experience running the gamut from self-denial to a profound religious commitment.

The practice of a goodly measure of sacrifice inherent in a childhood amidst a family of eleven members becomes part and parcel of the learning process. The constant mingling of the individuals in such a large household perforce compels the sharing of the limited means and facilities available, thereby rendering imperative permanent reference to others.

Brother Flavian's initiation to farming and cattle-raising from his early years on the farm would be useful to him when promoting agricultural development in Bengal.

Not the least of his human assets, Brother Flavian's proclivity to seek and accept challenges of all kinds would urge him to stand up in defense of what otherwise might become causes lost to insensitivity, misunderstanding, dishonesty or plain greed.

His manual dexterity would serve multiple purposes in a country of limited technological knowhow and equipment where a person has to make do with what means are at hand.

His sporting spirit too would permit him to blank out of his mind whatever ill-success he might encounter and to concentrate exclusively on the bright side of things and happenings.

But without the shadow of a doubt, and by far, his main promise of a fruitful missionary apostolate as he reached Bengal lay in the solid foundation of his spiritual life. In the very first year of his active life, in spite of the ever increasing demands upon his time at Notre Dame College, he had set aside the late evening hours to perform his religious exercises and to indulge in protracted prayer and meditation as the basis of his apostolic activities. This habit of prayer in the quiet of night was to be his lifelong insurance against the superficial activism that his availability on behalf of any worthwhile cause might have otherwise entailed.

An untiring educator

Upon his arrival in Chittagong, Brother Flavian learned that he was to proceed to Padrishibpur where he and Brother Godfrey, a six-year veteran of the Bengal mission, were to open a high school.. He quickly acquired a working knowledge of the Bengali language, then immediately took on both the high school freshman and sophomore classes in English, taught catechetics at the elementary level, besides remaining in charge of the boarding annex; in this last capacity he was further expected to coach the school's senior soccer team. When Brother Godfrey unexpectedly was reappointed to St. Placid's in Chittagong, Brother Flavian became headmaster in Shibpur till he was transferred to Noakhali much in the manner of a bolt from the blue. There, regardless of his appointment as headmaster of the mission school, it turned out that the pastor seemed in no hurry to instruct the former lay director of school to pass on his powers to the newly arrived principal.

The following academic year, 1939, Brother Flavian found himself again adjusting, as best he could, to another post, this time in Chittagong with ^{it} myriad inner city problems; up until then, Brother Flavian had worked and taught in a definitely Bengali environment, but Chittagong, boasting a substantial Anglo-Indian ethnic population, sported a mentality very different from that of Shibpur and Noakhali. Meanwhile, throughout the span from 1932 to 1939, whatever spare moments Brother Flavian could find he put to good use to complete his B. Lit., B. Ed. and B.A. degrees effectively awarded him by the University of Montreal, thanks to a fully authorized tutorial program which he scrupulously followed in Bengal.

Towards the end of the Summer in 1940, Brother Flavian became the target of an unfounded accusation of bribery. The matter was quickly fanned out of proportion and brought to the attention of Bishop Lepailleur; the latter summoned Brother Flavian who had no trouble in disproving the charge. But to avoid any possibility of criticism in the parish, the Bishop ordered Brother Flavian's removal. And so that very same day, the Brother was on his way to Padrishibpur for a second tour of duty

at St Alfred's. This would turn out to be his last teaching assignment except for a five-year second stint, 15 years later, in Noakhali where he would be sent into exile, so to speak, in an effort to squash some of his more controversial initiatives in Diang.

But as 1942 was coming to a close, World War II was heating up in the Far East and Chittagong would bear its share of strafing and bombing by the Japanese Air Force. And this turn of events would send Brother Flavian soaring to new heights of apostolic initiatives. Though the next forty odd years of Brother Flavian's life were to highlight an exceptional number of the personality traits of this gifted individual, his hallmark as an educator at heart are not to be underestimated.

There can be little doubt that educating the youth of a country stands out as probably the greatest social service to be rendered. *to a developing country* The daily grind of transmitting knowledge, values and attitudes before a classroom may not be as flashy as alleviating an urgent and crying need while a gaping crowd applauds. Nonetheless, the teacher's task remains indispensable if a society is to reach a certain level of civilization and freedom, the primary freedom being that of the mind through the acquisition of knowledge.

As is the case with any true educator, the challenge of learning summoned Brother Flavian's highest regard which he constantly tried to instill in the mind of his pupils, so convinced was he that the progress of his adopted homeland depended upon the emergence of a scholarly elite who would then be in a position to assume the country's leadership exercised in those days by foreign colonialists. Yet, his preoccupation with the education of future leaders never enticed him into an exclusively elitist vision of education. If at all with a leaning, his heart was rather bent upon making schooling available to the poor and the destitute as a means for them to overcome their sad plight.

Rapid scan of achievements

In late 1942, the Japanese Air Force was carrying out bombing raids over

the port of Chittagong. Brother Flavian's insistence on remaining in that beleaguered city when all the foreign priests, brothers and sisters had been evacuated either to Padrishibpur or Dhaka, would mark the opening of the forty-year humanitarian and social crusade he waged, taking up the banner of the low caste fisherfolk of Bengal. His every waking hour from then on was to prove an unending struggle to lick the human greed denying the fishermen their rights, to settle clanish rivalries splitting fishing villages apart, to arbitrate familial haggling and quarrels, to overcome bureaucratic procrastination and meddlesomeness, to offset the Hindu fatalism engendering a childish fear of nature, to claim, beg and wheedle funds and supplies from friends and agencies abroad, to wrest equitable hearings for outcast plaintiffs before the courts of law, to alleviate the dire aftermath of the recurrent natural catastrophies that annually beset Bengal.

These numerous fields of social endeavor were to enlist Brother Flavian in challenging the pirates prying upon the fishermen up and down the inland waterways as well as on the open and treacherous waters of the Bay of Bengal. Time and again, in and around Diang, he also had to outmaneuver and outwit thieves and goondas, not to mention at least two face-to-face confrontations with would-be assassins.

At the very outset of his interest in the rehabilitation of the fishermen, even during the darkest days of the famine brought on by the wartime restrictions in the early forties — all the fishing boats had been requisitioned and left to rot by the British, lest these dories become spoils of an expected Japanese invasion — Brother Flavian was already tinkering with the idea of implanting the cooperative movement among the fisherfolk. His insight convinced him that coops were the key to a fair shake for the men who sought their livelihood in the fishing trade.

The first step however consisted in ~~trying~~ [✕] to solder the two feuding groups of the Koibārtha Das and of the Jaladas fishermen. At the local level, the villages were rife with chieftains at odds with one another. And so Brother Flavian embarked on endless travels afoot, by pedal or motor bike, aboard frail dugouts

or chugging steam launches; over the years, he toured thousands of villages to spread the coop message and to convince the fishermen that in banding together they could improve their lot considerably. Thanks to Brother Flavian's connections in England and Germany, he managed to equip a flotilla of ten motorized fishing vessels which were serviced in his coop's own Kalidaha dockyard close to Diang, several miles south of Chittagong. The Kalidaha maintenance facilities have since become a training center for future fishermen and sailors.

Brother Flavian's accomplishments in themselves would warrant an entire book. The wide range of his activities defies any attempt to condense in a single paper even the minimal substance of his achievements. For an approximation of his action-packed career and far-flung deeds, one will have to read my forthcoming paperback on Brother Flavian.

Brickbats and bouquets

No one expects such a variety of pursuits to go unchallenged, and so Brother Flavian was compelled to bear the brunt of criticism coming from the least expected quarters, including the very beneficiaries of his efforts. Fortunately his dogged perseverance seldom let him down; when some particularly harsh opposition would tear him apart, his determination would bob right back up like his fishing-line floats. He was not one to dwell upon mishaps or even upon the misgivings coming from the authorities whether religious or civil. On occasions, he was taken to task by his superiors who did not always agree with certain initiatives of his, because he tended to remain somewhat secretive as to the sources of his obviously substantial funding. However, not a single one of his critics has even hinted that Brother Flavian's financial resources ever went to anyone but the neediest of the needy, the Brother never spending an anna on himself.

Besides being the target of sometimes exceedingly painful criticisms, Brother Flavian's courage was occasionally tried by the apparent failure of his pet projects such as that of getting his fishermen to stand up and resist the exactions of the

loan sharks who held them in bondage. To a few intimate friends he also revealed the deep sadness he felt whenever the one or the other of his protégés betrayed his expectations and trust. And of course being human, Brother Flavian also experienced his fair share of physical ailments and mental anguish. He is known to have been moved to tears on his rescue missions, when faced with the devastation wrought by cataclysmic storms or with the untimely death of some innocent child.

As one may suspect from the criticism levelled on and off at Brother Flavian, a case probably can be made either for or against certain of his attitudes, decisions and doings, which is why, as an afterthought, I have added an extra chapter to my life story of Brother Flavian in order to assess the more current bones of contention, in the light of the thirty or so interviews I conducted in Bangladesh with confreres, lay associates and friends of Brother Flavian. My research in the matter, for whatever it is worth, tends to show that though some of Brother Flavian's social and apostolic orientations could be questioned — and were by the few — they nonetheless could not be labeled wrong or harmful. To the many, whatever blame was directed at Brother Flavian sprang mainly from a misunderstanding of his charismatic approach to problematic situations. And to be sure, it is always rather risky to apply the standard rules of behavior to an individual fired with the urgings of an unlimited faith.

My analysis of Brother Flavian's voluminous correspondence has convinced me that his most irksome vicissitude arose from the inbred habits and lifestyle of the Bengali fishermen themselves. Repeatedly he expressed his annoyance at the listlessness and the devil-may-care attitude of the Bengali. In spite of his efforts to instill among his fishermen a sense of foresight and purpose, it seems he remained forever a voice crying in the desert, which probably explains why, with Brother Flavian's retirement and demise, many of his projects on behalf of the fishermen fell through, with the notable exceptions of the afore-mentioned Kalidaha training center and of the Diang settlement.

Yet somehow, on to this day, the simple mention of Brother Flavian's name remains a password of sorts and throws open the door of thousands of Bengali homes; time apparently has not dulled the remembrance of his labors in favor of the destitute to wit the scores of men and women who proudly claim to be his foster sons and daughters for the fact that he snatched them away from the gutters of Chittagong and from the ruins left in the wake of tidal bores and cyclones; to wit also, the thousands of Christians, Muslims and Hindus who annually rally in Diang on Brother Flavian's birthday anniversary in July, and again at the late Brother's ashram for the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes.

This second yearly event, which includes a candlelight procession and an all-night prayer vigil, commemorates an evening in 1950 when the fishermen of the area with Brother Flavian in the lead, marched in a first torchlight procession around the hills of Diang to pray to Our Lady for the success of the fishing season. And so, since Brother Flavian's death, every year on February 11, shortly after 8:30 p.m., thousands of pilgrims join in a candlelight procession winding its way along the jungle paths around the hills. Hymns and prayers punctuated by the rhythm of the drums and the tingaling of brass cups echo throughout the dales. At one point, just around a sharp bend in the trail, the marchers start negotiating a steep incline to the summit of one of the hills. As their tightly knit ranks cut an undulating path of flickering lights against the star-speckled evening, the procession, as if on impulse, suddenly comes to a halt. The marchers, then overlooking a small, well-groomed cemetery carved out of the opposite hillside, fall reverently silent and raise their candlelights at arm's length in tribute to the Diang mission's Founder who now lies at rest amid the grandeur and beauty of these hills and the grateful memory of a people he loved and served for almost a half-century. No more fitting tribute can be paid to a man whose life bore the seal of total dedication.

Salient personality features

"Dedication" is possibly the key word explaining the salient features of

Brother Flavian's exceptional personality. In the Fall of 1987, when the Provincial of the Brothers' Society in Canada commissioned me to write a specifically pocket-book-format life story of Brother Flavian, I immediately set out to collect the available data. Within days I had heaped a treasure trove of anecdotes and facts that sent my mind reeling with an overabundance of possible headings to as many chapters.

As I write this paper, I still have in my files an original listing of the salient traits my mind's eye had already detected in Brother Flavian following a cursory perusal of the documents obtained from the archives of the Brothers' Society. This listing reads as follows: a visionary - a charismatic organizer - a decisive and dynamic leader - an ingenious problem-solver - a promoter of cooperation - a gutsy achiever - a man of purpose and singlemindedness - a tireless agent of the needy - a protector of the underdog - a champion of a fair shake for all - a public relations expert - and unbiased and level-headed arbitrator - a Bengali at heart - a humorous observer of human weaknesses and foibles - a man of his times - a quiet ecumenist - a religious content with the bare necessities of life - a man of prayer and a devotee of Mary.

These and other features crowded my mind and at first gave me the impression of having accepted a Mission Impossible, given the restrictions under which I was to write. A few prayers at Brother Flavian's grave in Diang, in February last year, soon had me sorting out the material at hand, analyzing, condensing and piecing it into a reasonable draft of the contents of a life story.

Spiritual life in full bloom

No man could be blessed with so much humanitarian and apostolic energy as Brother Flavian displayed without this energy being constantly replenished from the wellspring of a deep-seated spirituality and an intense prayer life. To anyone closely associated with Brother Flavian his decision to retire and to become a shadu at age 70 did not come as that big a surprise or as the whim of a declining

and disappointed individual seeking solace for unrequited dreams of achievements, as a few shallow critics have suggested. Fully taken into account the complexity of human motivations, I still feel that Brother Flavian himself is probably the best source of information as to his purpose in donning the loin cloth of a shadu in his later years.

Shortly after entering his ashram, he wrote: "After 44 years of an active life in which I sought, often distractedly and superficially, to meet Christ in his poorer brethren, the oppressed, the orphans, the widows and the sick, I have become a shadu to signify that the spiritual life takes precedence over material pursuits." Whatever secondary motives a psychoanalytic mind might try to interlock with this decisive factor, there is little doubt in my mind that Brother Flavian's decision sprang primarily, if not exclusively, from his desire to give full-time witness to the importance of the spiritual life. Mind you, not that he had neglected prayer in the years past; in fact, throughout his active life, regardless of the urgency of his activities and errands at hand, he had never failed to seek repeated recourse to prayer in one form or another every day.

Most resource persons, both lay and religious, whom I interviewed on location in Bangladesh, spontaneously spoke of Brother Flavian's prayer life, insisting that to Brother Flavian no time or place seemed unsuited to prayer. He was seen saying his Rosary and praying in the oddest circumstances: curled up in the overhead luggage rack of an overcrowded railway coach, cycling atop the embankments of paddy fields, assuming the night watch aboard a storm-tossed fishing boat, trekking afoot along a jungle path in the middle of the night, spending nerve-racking hours in the waiting room of some obscure government official. Of course, his day's work done late at night, one was apt to find him lost in endless, silent prayer in the community chapel, whether in Diang or Chittagong. Accordingly, there was nothing peculiar in that Brother Flavian's commitment to prayer should have intensified to the point where he opted for the lifestyle of a shadu.

The compass of his prayer intentions impart an excellent idea of Brother Flavian's thoughtfulness and so vivid for him was God's presence, that oftentimes, in the middle of the night, he would pour out his heart in vocal prayer loud enough for his sleepless and indiscreet confreres to overhear his colloquies with God. Owing up to their indiscretion, these confreres reveal how Brother Flavian used to spend long hours begging God to bless scores of people individually mentioned. The welfare and salvation of his beloved fisherfolk were always high on the list of intentions. The one group of people whom he apparently never omitted from his prayers was that legion of benefactors who had never ceased to support his endeavors.

Brother Flavian's spirituality evidently was imbedded in a sound, simple faith that some might be tempted to belittle as pre-Vatican II. But if its sustaining effect upon the half-century of Brother Flavian's apostolate is any indication of its merit, then one must allow that said spirituality does have a lot to be said for it.

Then of course, an idealist might wish that Brother Flavian could have conformed a little better to the new liturgy, theology and ecclesiology born of Vatican II. Still, one is not to forget that Brother Flavian had received his religious training in the second and third decades of the century; the spirituality of that era was unsophisticated and rested on simplified — oversimplified, some would say — basic truths and devotions with a popular appeal. Brother Flavian, in fidelity to himself, remained true to his early training. In this, as in any matter, care must be taken to avoid any rash judgment that would slight the cultural factors of bygone days and apply to the past the present-day standards and criteria. Does not Chinese wisdom warn us that today is after all but tomorrow's past?

In spite of his resolve to dedicate himself wholly to prayer and meditation in his ashram, Shadu Flavian met with some difficulty in trying to escape the daily problems of the Diang settlement nearby and of the fishermen's cooperatives. Now

and then delegations of fisherfolk rendezvoused at the Diang ashram for a friendly exchange with the one shaheb they had always trusted as their outspoken vindicator. Hundreds of individuals also walked a well beaten path to Shadu Flavian's ashram, either to seek advice or to join in prayer with their favorite Bhagoban.

The Lord beckoneth

As the year 1981 was ushered in, and with Shadu Flavian now well into his 73rd year, nothing seemed to portend any major change in Flavian's routine of prayer, meditation and counselling. But in early March, a high level of stomach acidity forced Shadu Flavian to consult a doctor who diagnosed a cancer of the stomach in its terminal stage, with a survival expectancy of only two or three months.

Come Friday, June 19, Brother Flavian, now in the last stage of weakness, inquired in a whisper at what time his District Superior, Brother Lawrence Dias, was to come on his daily visit. That evening, upon arriving at the ashram, Brother Dias found Flavian perfectly conscious and willing to repeat as his Superior was suggesting, "Come, Lord Jesus". Within a matter of minutes, his head cradled in the crook of his Superior's arm, Brother Flavian quietly breathed his last and entered our heavenly Father's mansion. It was 9:20 p.m.

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