

Brother Ronald Drahozal: An appreciation

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Brother Ronald, or just Brother as he was popularly known, was born to Frank and Mary Drahozal in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1937. How this "corn country" farm boy made his way to this part of the world is a story that is intriguing and a compelling testimony to his dedication, compassion, and spirituality.

After graduating from high school in 1955, he enrolled at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. Following his participation in a retreat with Brothers who worked in Foreign Missions, he was inspired to join the novitiate program of the Holy Cross Brothers. He was ordained in 1958 which entailed a vow of chastity, poverty and loyalty. This indicated his readiness to make a serious commitment to a life dedicated to the service of the poor, and his submission to the Lord.

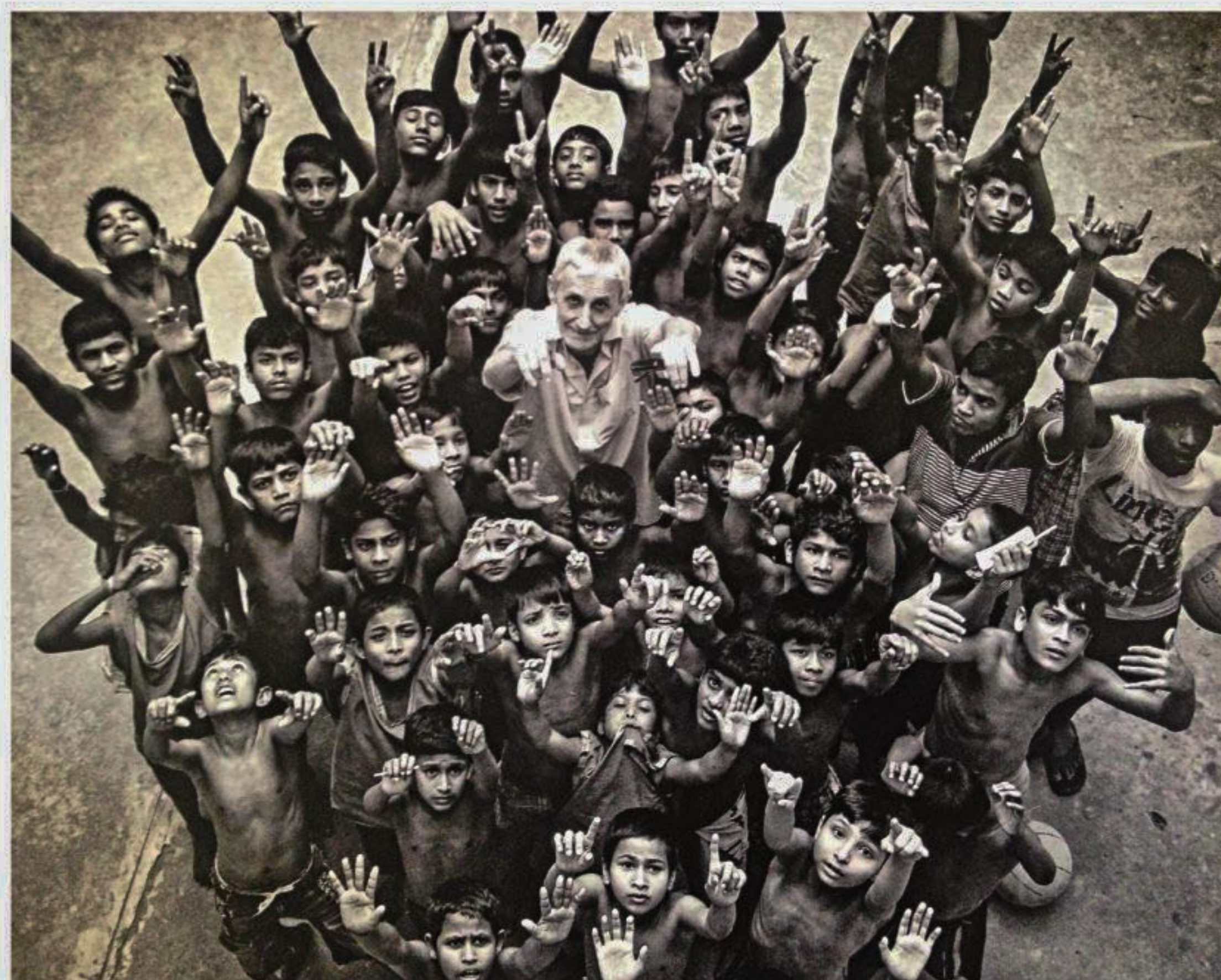


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Brother Ronald was fascinated with the lure of being a missionary teacher in some far-away land. This desire was sparked by a birthday card from a relative which said: "Do not go where the path may lead, but go instead where there is no path, and leave a trail." In 1962, when he was only 25, he was excited to receive his much-awaited instructions to go to what was then East Pakistan. From the farmlands of Iowa the young man found himself in an impoverished, densely populated land, both religiously and culturally very far from his own upbringing.

His fore fathers were immigrants from Czechoslovakia, and had to go through the difficult path of assimilation in America, the Promised Land. He knew the adjustment to this new environment

would be a challenge, particularly the fact that he would have to be sensitive to the culture and religion of the people. But he felt ready and eager for it. His Order did not believe in proselytising but in education; and helping the poor. Mother Teresa was his guiding light. For the first 10 years of his life in East Pakistan he taught at St. Gregory's High School and other Diocese run schools in different provinces.

Young, vibrant, lean and tall, he and his fellow Brother/friend, Br. Donald Becker, roamed the countryside in bikes. They were more teachers of science, art, and technical skills, than preachers of the faith. They had starkly different personalities: Ronald, the assertive leader and Donald, the technician and disciplinarian. Between the two of them they started technical schools all over North Bengal, where they tried to teach the young a trade: welding, carpentry, electrical wiring, house building, etc.

During the War of Independence in 1971, Brother Ronald and other Brothers of the Holy Cross found themselves in a difficult situation. Though they themselves were spared, they witnessed the unimaginable atrocities that the Pakistan Army was committing. The Brothers decided to help all those who were being pursued and killed by the Occupation Forces. They ended up giving shelter and support to those (particularly the minorities) targeted by the military, and at times a *Muktijoddha* or two, even though they knew full well the risks involved.

In 1988 Brother Ronald became the first Director of Bangladesh Rehabilitation/ Assistance Program Center for Drug Addicts. Though he had no formal training in Drug Rehab, he quickly educated himself in the rudiments of the subject. He could see the ravages of addiction on the young and poor, some as young as 10-12, who were flooding in to the cities, had no work, and nowhere to go. Petty crimes and drugs engulfed them. Brother found an easy kinship with this lonely, vulnerable and desperate lot.

In October 1994 Brother started APON (Ashokti Punarbashan Nibash), again under the affiliation of the Catholic Archdiocese. This residence for recovering addicts was initially started in Mohammadpur and later moved to Singhair, Manikganj. From money donated by his extended family in Iowa, he was able to buy a three acre property of land. Starting with just one or two addicts, APON now cares for hundreds, has tended to thousands since its inception, and has a separate building for females. The format at APON follows the TC

(Therapeutic Community) guidelines about focusing on the whole person emphasising a change in life style rather than simply abstinence from drugs. Most of the staff and volunteers are former addicts. Brother has also welcomed street children (affectionately called *Bahini* by him), who are given shelter, food, and primary education.

Though APON has grown and is well known in Bangladesh and throughout South and South-East Asia, Brother remained concerned about the financial viability of the organisation. Eighty percent of the members at APON are unable to pay for the services there. Therefore APON depends heavily on National, International, and local donors for funding. Many have helped but the need remains great, and donor sources are neither steady nor permanent.

Health issues forced him to go to the US several times over the last few years. But his heart remained in Bangladesh, and he was always eager, and managed, to return. Finally, this year he was instructed to return to the US and the capable Brother Binoy Gomes took over the reins of APON. Brother Ronald could not come back again to his beloved Bangladesh, and passed away at South Bend, Indiana, on October 16, 2018.

There are few people who stand out as champions of humanity but who toil in relative obscurity. Brother Ronald remains such a person, who was firm in his faith, and was unwavering in his commitment to the poor and the neglected. Living far away from the environment and country where he was born, he made Bangladesh his home, and created his own family here consisting of care-seekers and care-givers. His simple message was that addicts are not to be hated, they are misunderstood people, and they need assistance in coping with their problems. He touched the lives of many people that he had directly helped, but he inspired many more by his indomitable spirit, his personal courage, and his willingness to sacrifice. He lived out his life fully convinced that all human beings are the same, we all need love, and that we can all care for each other.

For all his efforts, he never sought anything in return, and had no possessions. He was rewarded by the adoration of those around him. But his greatest treasure was a copy of the Bangladesh citizenship that he had received. Thank you dear Brother for making Bangladesh your home, may you rest in Peace.

The writer is a retired surgeon in the US, had studied at St. Gregory's, and has supported APON for many years.