

Franciscans continue to serve central city

From meal programs to education, Capuchin presence is felt

By Amy Guckeen
Catholic Herald Staff

MILWAUKEE — It is only 9 a.m. but the line already stretches half a block. What brings them on an early Monday morning is not Packers or concert tickets, but rather, the chance to eat Thanksgiving dinner in their own homes. What brings them is the work of the Capuchins.

When it comes to the poor in Milwaukee, the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph is a quiet undercurrent working to eradicate poverty. Formed in 1528, the order is modeled after the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi. Their mission, and way of life is based on the Beatitudes. Through the touching of people's spirits through faith, the Capuchins believe changes among Milwaukee's poor can be made.

"I don't know what the motivation would be if it weren't for faith," said Br. Mark Carrico, director of the House of Peace, a place of ministry for the Capuchins in Milwaukee. "That's where love comes from. Faith calls us to care for everyone. It'd be every man and woman for themselves without it."

"The essence of trying to live the Gospel life and to witness the activity of the Holy Spirit is directed toward those human beings who are left out, who are forgotten, who are misjudged or mistreated, who fall through the cracks—and to do it out of a spirit of faith," said Fr. Jerry Schroeder, part-time pastor of St. Benedict the Moor and minister at Dwelling Place Spirituality Center for the Poor.

Both Capuchin ministries "If



Volunteers Frances Jackson, left, and Erma Cooper sort and hang T-shirts in the clothing center at the House of Peace in Milwaukee in mid October. (Catholic Herald photo by Jim Bovin)

House of Peace feeds hungry, clothes naked

House of Peace, 1702 W. Walnut St., finds its mission every day in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me."

"We're a point of contact when someone is in crisis," Br. Mark said. "We try to help families stay together. We try to help self-sufficiency be achieved."

The house provides an emergency food pantry, clothing center, spiritual care, nursing clinic, legal clinic, social worker, meeting space, teen leadership

In addition to physical nutrition, the Capuchins feed the poor and homeless spiritually as well through retreats, faith sharing groups and spiritual direction.

"We do a lot of listening to people of all faiths, helping people work out their path in life," Fr. Schroeder said. "In some ways, it is an antidote to violence."

"Sometimes it's just a matter of being with the person and letting them know somebody cares," Br. Mark said.

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That spiritual nourishment includes retreats at the high school level and a pilgrimage to Assisi, Italy every other year.

"Everything we do is faith based," Br. Bob said. "Whether it be athletics or academics. When we talk about the poor it's not just feeding them with food, it's spiritual food, it's hope. So many of our kids are the first in the family to go to college and it's helping our society."

The bulk of students attending Messmer are covered by the Milwaukee parental choice voucher system, while some receive scholarships.

"The variety and diversity of students that we have — there are kids here who are literally below the poverty level. There are kids who have experienced violence where a parent or guardian has been killed or raped. There are students from the south side as well as the west side. You've got Latino, Asian, African American and Caucasian. When you see high school students who can go to school without metal detectors or armed guards, it tells you there's hope for the rest of the community," Br. Bob said.

New ministry will teach Franciscan ways

In addition to the work they are already doing, the Capuchins are starting a new venture in Milwaukee that will reach out to those that want to or are already ministering in the community.

The St. Francis Institute Milwaukee, 1927 N. Fourth St., will provide classes, workshops and seminars in the Franciscan vision, a meeting place for those looking to transform Milwaukee, a cen-

tures. Through the teaching of people's spirits through faith, the Capuchins believe changes among Milwaukee's poor can be made.

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"The essence of trying to live the Gospel life and to witness the activity of the Holy Spirit is directed toward those human beings who are left out, who are forgotten, who are misjudged or mistreated, who fall through the cracks—and to do it out of a spirit of faith," said Fr. Jerry Schroeder, part-time pastor of St. Benedict the Moor and minister at Dwelling Place Spirituality Center for the Poor, both Capuchin ministries. "If you come out of a faith vision of reality of serving the poor, you don't sell the human person short or reduce them to an object, function or client."

Celebrating 150 years in Milwaukee, the motto of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, which stretches from Michigan into Montana and into Central America, in its jubilee year is, "Transforming the World through Reverence."

"In the Franciscan tradition we're brothers and sisters," Fr. Schroeder said. "It's profound respect for the reverence of the human person."

Fr. Schroeder and Br. Mark's ministries in Milwaukee are cognizant of the fact that that reverence includes persons who are poor and broken.

"There is a misconception out there that the poor are lazy and shiftless," Br. Mark said. "They're good people, solid to the core. We're blest by them more than they'll ever know. God chose to have Jesus born among the poor — that speaks of the gifts they bring to our world. The poor need a voice."

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For the holidays, 1,000 households receive a food box that allows them to have a holiday meal at home with their families, in exchange for one adult representative enrolling in a class at the house. Topics of classes include problem solving to breast health. Those that complete a class receive a similar food basket for Christmas and new toys for children in the home. Between 2,000 and 3,000 children every year benefit from the program.

"It's not just a handout," Br. Mark said. "It makes it better for them, gives them a sense of accomplishment."

Meal program serves six nights a week

For the everyday needs, the Capuchins provide food to the hungry through their meal program at St. Benedict the Moor. Eighty-five sponsor groups provide the meals that more than 300 people receive six nights a week, Sunday through Friday, from 5:15 to 6:30.

In addition to physical nutrition, the Capuchins feed the poor and homeless spiritually as well through retreats, faith sharing groups and spiritual direction.

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Education breaks cycle of poverty, says Capuchin

Part of the work Capuchin Br. Bob Smith does in his role as president of Messmer Catholic Schools — Messmer High School, Messmer Prep, St. Leo and St. Rose urban academies, is to break the cycle of poverty through the children he works with on a daily basis.

"When Messmer was started, our interest and role was in serving the poor and working class families," Br. Bob said. "While ethnically you may have some changes, our mission is the same. It's number one making sure every child who wants to have a Catholic education receives it."

Part of that Catholic education is Br. Bob's role as spiritual leader of all the schools. While Messmer is not a Capuchin school, the Capuchin tradition plays a role.

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violence where a parent or guardian has been killed or raped. There are students from the south side as well as the west side. You've got Latino, Asian, African American and Caucasian. When you see high school students who can go to school without metal detectors or armed guards, it tells you there's hope for the rest of the community," Br. Bob said.

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The St. Francis Institute Milwaukee, 1927 N. Fourth St., will provide classes, workshops and seminars in the Franciscan vision, a meeting place for those looking to transform Milwaukee, a center for leadership training and a sacred space to gather.

"It is an exciting new ministry to help Milwaukee," said Colleen Crane, of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph's public relations office. "People gathered can be refreshed and rejuvenated. We hope it will become a spiritual oasis for Milwaukee where people can gather and leave boundaries at the door."

The institute is targeted toward persons who want to make Milwaukee a more peaceful place, those that want to serve the poor or are already doing so, and those who are Franciscan or interested in being Franciscan, said Fr. Schroeder, interim director.

"In order to minister to the poor, people need to reflect on their experiences and deepen their ministry to their brothers and sisters in a better way," Fr. Schroeder said. "It's a process. Unless we reflect and learn and keep growing, we can enter into danger. In order to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit you have to keep tuning that instrument."