

Serving the poor has become 'addiction'

St. Ben's volunteer shares in Capuchin outreach

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MILWAUKEE — When all the hungry have been fed, Mike Froemming, exhausted, will take a moment for himself.

Sitting in a room that only minutes ago was filled with homeless men, women and children looking for refuge in the St. Benedict the Moor Community meal program, Froemming will take care of his own needs, and eat dinner, alone.

"It's not about me or what I do, it's about them," Froemming said of his role as the maitre d' at St. Ben's. "I have to put my needs aside. I don't know where my interest came with the homeless. I've never been, but I've come close. I saw what was happening out there and I wanted to help out in some way."

What started as something his roommate did, became a lifestyle for Froemming. Giving out foil, bags, milk and coffee on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays evolved into a six-day-a-week volunteer opportunity, from 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., seating people and making sure the program, which serves hundreds of guests a night, runs smoothly.

"Spiritually and emotionally,

I've become addicted to the place," Froemming said. "If I wasn't down there on a nightly basis, my head and heart would still be down there, even though my body physically wouldn't be."

A self-described spiritual man, Froemming finds that there is "a way to worship God from within me and out here," in his Riverwest neighborhood that he's called home for 25 years.

"People think that I'm a Capuchin or related to Br. Bob," Froemming said of his work with the meal program. "No. I'm not related in the biological or human sense. I'm not a Capuchin in the sense that I've taken a vow of poverty. Poverty has forced itself on me and is a part of my life right now, being a member of the unskilled labor market."

"We get so caught up in taking care of ourselves we lose track of that world outside us. We can't afford to turn our backs on those we've served that evening because then we turn our backs on the best side of who we are as human beings."

The St. Ben's Community Meal is an outreach of the Capuchin community at St. Benedict the Moor Parish, which celebrated its 100th jubilee this year. In 1908, Captain Lincoln Charles Valle and



Mike Froemming helps seat people during St. Ben's meal program in Milwaukee earlier this year. The St. Ben volunteer said he's become spiritually and emotionally addicted to serving at the program. (Catholic Herald photo by Jim Bovin)

his wife came to Milwaukee in hopes of evangelizing the black community, as part of the Black Catholic Lay Congresses of the 1890s. In 1911, the Capuchin Franciscans took full-time responsibility for the parish. The present church was constructed in 1923.

The development of the expressway during the 1960s changed the face of the parish, closing the high school in 1964 and grade school in 1967. In 1970, parishioners met to discuss whether or not to close the parish. Recognizing St. Ben's was in the middle of hundreds of people on State Street —

homeless, in jail, at MATC — Fr. Alex Luzi knew the parish was destined for a special mission. That mission started with the meal program, brought to St. Ben by Mike and Nettie Cullen, Irish immigrants living out the ideals of the Catholic Worker Movement, who had begun a meal program in their kitchen. Today, parishioners serve the surrounding community through the meal, a clinic, jail ministry and parish ministry.

"The Capuchins have a way of bringing out the best side of us as human beings," Froemming said.