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to be Simon of Cyrene

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Men and women gather outside of St. Benedict the Moor Church, Milwaukee, March 19, waiting for the doors to open at St. Ben's Community Meal. The parish, run by the Capuchin religious order, has sponsored the meal program for 35 years. The parish also sponsors an on-site health clinic managed by Columbia St. Mary's Hospital and Health Care, which serves Milwaukee's homeless community.

St. Ben's 35-year miracle more than loaves, fishes

"The miracle of the Loaves and Fishes is not in the multiplication of food, but in the willingness of people to share." — Ernesto Cardenal, "The Gospel in Solentiname," from a brochure for St. Ben's Community Meal.

Since 1970, St. Benedict the Moor Parish in Milwaukee's central city has sponsored a meal program that has grown, both in the number of people who are served and those who prepare and serve the meals. Last November the Franciscan Capuchins, who administer the parish and oversee its outreach programs, celebrated the meal program's 35th anniversary.

According to Capuchin Br. Dave Schwab, meal program director, St. Ben's Community Meal relies on volunteers to serve the hungry. The community meal is served every evening but Saturday, and in 2005, 290 meals fed 106,943 people.

A bulletin board in the kitchen of the meal site, located at 1015 N. Ninth St., lists the schedule of volunteer groups by day for each month. Most of the volunteers are from church groups, with a majority of them Catholic parishes. Seventy-five groups prepare meals, transport them to St. Ben's and serve the meals. About 10 to 15 people volunteer each day, dishing out food, serving beverages, working in the kitchen, and cleaning up.

Br. Dave said that more people take advantage of the community meal near each month's end.

"At the beginning of the month, some folks have discretionary income," such as food stamps or Social Security, he explained. "By the middle of the month, most of the money is gone, so they rely on St. Ben's to sustain them for the rest of the month."

Some of the volunteer groups have been serving meals for all 35 years, said Br. Dave. He noted that in a Christmas card he received from a longtime volunteer last December, the volunteer stated that his wife had baked a 10-pound meat loaf every month for 35 years.

"Think about all those meat loafs stretched from end to end," he said.

While the community meal program has successfully addressed a need, Br. Dave and those affiliated with St. Ben's Community Meal say that the real success story will be written when there is no longer a need for a community meal program.

To learn more about St. Ben's Meal Program and the other ministries offered at St. Benedict the Moor Parish, visit <www.stbensmilwaukee.org>. To volunteer or to donate funds, contact Br. Dave Schwab at (414) 271-0135 or e-mail him at <brdaveschwab@juno.com>.



Guests at St. Ben's Community Meal line up for dinner March 8, which was prepared and served by members of St. Mary Parish, Hales Corners. Many Catholic churches in southeastern Wisconsin participate in the meal program, which serves hundreds of people every day except Saturday. Right, Anna Salvera, a member of Our

Lady of Lourdes Parish, Milwaukee, shares a laugh with a St. Ben's Community Meal guest while handing out food trays March 8. Our Lady of Lourdes is among the 75 church and civic groups that provide the food and volunteers that make the meal program a success.





Joe Gregory takes advantage of a free haircut by Capuchin Br. Dave Schwab, director of the St. Ben's Community Meal, who also doubles as the community barber. Free haircuts were recently added to the list of services offered through St. Benedict the Moor Parish's outreach programs.



Volunteers from St. Mary Parish, Hales Corners bow their heads in prayer before serving food at St. Ben's Community Meal March 9. Each evening meal begins with a prayer offered by a visiting volunteer.



Matthew Mealey washes a cookie sheet while his brother Nick looks on. The brothers volunteer at St. Ben's Community Meal every month. Below, Jeanne Bieser and her daughter Mary, members of St. Mary Parish, Hales Corners, join guests at St. Ben's Community Meal for dinner March 9. Volunteers are encouraged to join guests for meals and conversation.



Allison Wedeward, a student at Arrowhead Union High School in Hartland, pours a cup of coffee for a guest at St. Ben's Community Meal. Members of Arrowhead's National Honor Society volunteered at the meal site March 9.

*Catholic Herald
story and photos
by Sam Lucero*