

From Gospel to Life, Life to the Gospel



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Fr. Sam Fuller, OFM Cap, "From Gospel to Life, Life to the Gospel: Seeking Unity in the Streets of Boston."

The Capuchin friars of Jamaica Plain were hosting the area priests in the late spring of 2023 for dinner and a presentation of our Capuchin Mobile Ministries, our outreach to the unhoused in the streets of Boston. After completing the meal, we had gathered in the chapel of our San Lorenzo friary. As our gathering would not be liturgical, we had considered taking the Blessed Sacrament out of the tabernacle. Yet, we decided to keep it there reflecting on how could a gathering of priests for the sake of sharing our ministry to the homeless be less than reverential? There were at least a dozen priests seated at one end of the chapel. At the other end, the three of us assigned to the ministry set up a TV monitor that played a brief video on our ministry. After the video, each of us offered a few words. For my part, I mentioned briefly our fraternal life, our communal prayer and daily Eucharist. I went on to say how the ministry was embraced by this rhythm of prayer and life with the reading of the names of those we had encountered included in the intercessions of our morning prayer, and how a Mass each week was offered for their intentions. It was wonderful to say with full-hearted passion and with hands gesturing to take in the chapel, “*This is the heart of the ministry*”.

Yes, the chapel as the heart of our fraternal life was also the heart of the ministry. Yet the ministry was hardly contained within the walls of the chapel as it was based on encountering those on the street, which in turned enriched our liturgy and our lives. There was a continual reciprocity of unity succinctly described by a principle taken from the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, *From Gospel to Life, Life to the Gospel (Article 4)*. It is through this lens of a dynamic unity embracing both of these two poles that I want to describe and reflect on my two years with Capuchin Mobile Ministries (CMM).

There were many memorable encounters on the streets of Boston. Not all occurred while on the van of CMM but rather as a natural extension of the ministry.

I was walking away from Arch Street where I had gone for confession and was in the area of Downtown Crossing on the pedestrian walkway just beyond Macy's. I could see someone up ahead on an elevated automated wheel chair and noticed that the person was unattended. I was concerned, as it seemed that there should be a care attendant, a family member or someone by his side. I went up to the man who was strapped into the elevated chair. His hands were disfigured and his head somewhat propped up and on its side. He was wearing a stylish cap, which suggested someone's care for him. I bent down, as I was not sure if he was able to speak and to make sure that he could see me. I asked him, "Is there anyone with you"? I figured that someone must have dashed into one of the stores and I would wait until that person came out. He started to say something and I drew closer to him to make sure I could hear. What did he say in answer to my question? He simply replied, "The Holy Spirit" -- I was blown away. Then he said, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior." He asked if I was a priest or a brother as I was wearing my habit. I answered that I was a priest. He asked for a blessing, which I was happy to give. Then he moved the driving stick on the controls, spun the wheelchair around and off he went. He definitely did not need me! I was not sure what I had witnessed but I knew it was powerful and compelling. Not only had it all happened quickly but it also undercut all of my assumptions of who he was and of his situation. I was left solely with the clear and unequivocal statement of his faith.

Prior to moving to Boston, I was part of a provincial effort (The Capuchin Province of St. Mary) to collaborate with another Franciscan community. Despite best intentions over the year, it did not work. However, the three of us who were part of the effort came away with a deeper appreciation of our Capuchin charism. We had decided early on that we would 'claim' our charism by grounding ourselves in our sense of fraternity, maintaining a consistent prayer schedule of not only morning, evening and night prayer but also daily Eucharist with a mutually shared reflection on the readings in terms of what we were undergoing with all our hopes and struggles. I also recall that we decided to name the kitchen, 'The Clubhouse'. It was a term of comradery and was where we made breakfast for ourselves, posted cards and messages on the walls, occasionally hung out, and played cards and board games at night. It was telling that after a month or two, even the kitchen crew of the dining room downstairs commented on our bonding and esprit de corps.

When I moved to Boston, I wanted to build on this sense of intentional living and so decided to move into our house of studies with our formation team and student friars. At San Lorenzo friary there is a set daily schedule of prayer, with silence and with the breviary, in the morning and evening along with night prayer. Mass is celebrated each morning. With a contemplative bent, I have always been an early riser and enjoy an hour of silence and a rosary beforehand. We share a cooking schedule and a list of chores of 'all the above' within the friary and on the grounds. With different ministerial commitments, there is a full sense of engagements, experiences and demands outside the friary. Nevertheless, as Franciscans, the point is made that ministry serves as a witness to fraternity, to a faith-infused rhythm of communal self-giving and sharing. In writing this during the Christmas season and reflecting on the nativity scene, it is moving to see the essential nature of our faith as relational and commonly shared. As so wonderfully manifested in the babe born in Bethlehem, the Franciscan charism of fraternity is grounded in God's humility and generosity.

Capuchin Mobile Ministries itself was an intentional effort on our Province 'to think outside the box', to get beyond buildings, to meet people where they were at and in effect, to claim our charism. I had my first meeting with my two other brothers who had started the ministry and was impressed with the discernment and planning that had already gone into it. It was clear that this was not to be a food truck but rather a ministry van engaged in accompaniment and establishing a sense of belonging along with the affirmation of the spiritual needs and hopes of those encountered. I recall at the end of the meeting saying somewhat in jest, but with an underlying truth, "Maybe, I will yet discover what it means to be Franciscan."

To become Franciscan is always a work in progress. Yet each of us through our involvement with CMM had a sense of 'coming home', and 'that we were doing what we were meant to be doing'. There was a galvanizing and unifying energy about this. We had our individual differences and disagreements but sensed that we were engaged in something larger than ourselves-- something authentically and tangibly Franciscan. It was not just simply doing 'the right thing' but also a freedom to let go of anything that might pull our attention away, and to be fully present to the particular task at hand or to the specific person encountered. What was before one, was not simply one more thing in the landscape-- it *was* the landscape. This face, this name, this gesture; the specific becomes infused with intention and with hope. The specific becomes poetic before which, through submittal and surrender, a portal to the depths of heartfelt and faith-filled human relationship opens. There is a curious and galvanizing relationship between intention and attention. From faith-filled intention arrives a different lens of attention, in this case, an attention to people and communities often overlooked and perceived in a perfunctory and distant manner. With intention, the specific comes into relief, calling for and deserving of one's full and undivided attention.

Once Capuchin Mobile Ministries was established as a ministry of accompaniment, similar to Pope Francis's notion of the church as a field hospital, a van was purchased and outfitted accordingly. The backdoors opened up to a dropdown 'barista table' around which a community formed with the giving out of coffee, hot chocolate (or lemonade, depending on the season) along with sandwiches, cereal bars and bottled water. There were also cubbyholes for hats, socks, gloves and care bags. The care bags contained both practical (such as hygiene items, a thermal blanket, a poncho) and spiritual items (whether prayer cards, a rosary, a prayer medal, or prayer book). However, it was emphasized that whatever was given out was done so in terms of relationship building and empowerment. Though it was always a continual effort, the vision of a ministry of accompaniment was to move beyond 'a give and take' mentality. Such a framework only reinforces a power dynamic of 'I have' and 'you need' in contrast to one of mutual sharing. Pope Francis articulated this well in his '*Message on the Fifth World Day of the Poor, 2021*':

"The poor will always be with us, yet that should not make us indifferent, but summon us instead to a mutual sharing of life that does not allow proxies. The poor are not people "outside" our communities, but brothers and sisters whose sufferings we should share, in an effort to alleviate their difficulties and marginalization, restore their lost dignity and ensure their necessary social inclusion. On the other hand, as we know, acts of charity presuppose a giver and a receiver, whereas mutual sharing generates fraternity. Almsgiving is occasional; mutual sharing, on the other hand, is enduring. The former risks gratifying those who perform it and can prove demeaning for those who receive it; the latter strengthens solidarity and lays the necessary foundations for achieving justice."

The sense of mutual sharing allows for the possibility of encounter and takes to heart what St. Francis said in his Testament. In looking back on his life, he wrote, "We were simple and subject to all". 'We were simple'--meaning not so much without education but more to the point, without affectation. 'Subject to all'-- meaning nothing less than responding to each person as being made in the image of God and holding up that image of God before which one humbles oneself no matter what choices that person has made, whether in the past or at the present moment. At times, the best one can do is simply hold a space of hospitality for the other person, knowing that everyone has the potential for redemption. With this, listening comes to the fore; listening wholeheartedly to the person, listening to one's own responses to the person before one, and knowing listening as an act of healing so that the person being listened to can have the confidence of being fully heard and acknowledged.

In the early afternoon, before going out in the van, I would pray a rosary in the chapel. It was not only a way to clear my mind of the morning's business but also to empty myself to be more fully prepared for the journey into the ocean of mercy. Once everyone was outside, we would pray as a group, usually two friars and two or three volunteers, before departing. Out in the streets, each encounter had its own integrity whether marked by a smile, a welcoming gesture, a tone of voice or by a sustained conversation engaging the pastoral sensibilities of hospitality and presence. Some engagements happened right at the 'barista table' and with a line of four or five people, were as brief as handing someone a sandwich. The work of the volunteers was critical here as their attentiveness to those at the back of the van allowed the friars to be more available to others and to have deeper conversations, letting the other person determine its unfolding. At some point, whenever deemed appropriate, it was always good to introduce one's own name with the hope that the person would offer their name and allow for a more personal exchange. Sometimes, this could be a nuanced endeavor. Other times, it could be as informal as part of the exchange of giving out coffee. The range of responses varied from a first name, a full name, an alias, a street name or even "anonymous". It was not as momentous as the revealing of a name in the baptismal rite; nevertheless, for the first encounter, it was a threshold moment of establishing a relationship. Wearing the brown Franciscan habit helped to engender trust. We would have pocket-sized notebooks in hand to write down the name, explaining that we would be praying for each person in our community morning prayer. Sometimes, the person would mention a specific prayer request, which we would also write down. Sometimes the person asked to be prayed over right there. Others might request a rosary, a bible, a devotional medal. It did not happen often, but it was always moving when someone asked for confession. It was telling that one volunteer, observing friars engage those on the street, say, "What you do, you do as if it is not special which allows us (the volunteers) to experience it as special".

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discovered that with all the logistics for each outing, three was sufficient. Though we would occasionally alter the route, we would let everyone know our schedule so people could know when to expect us. Once back in the friary, community night prayer in the chapel was a fitting way to conclude such an emotionally charged afternoon and evening.

There was continual community building and interweaving throughout the ministry, all as a natural extension of fraternity, whether for those on the street or among the volunteers. For our volunteers it might have started with an individual conversation over the phone with a first time van volunteer to lay out the parameters of the ministry, or travelling together as a group in the van and experiencing the different nature of each stop. The volunteers themselves would also discover their own community through their conversations in the van between stops. The barista table through the giving and sharing around it served as a center for each of our stops. Those on the streets came to expect us and know us. We would print up and hand out the schedule of our outreach and if there was to be a change, they would be informed beforehand. As if acknowledging our beneficial presence, it was always moving when a police officer or construction worker volunteered to move their vehicle to make room for our van. We also held reflective Zooms for our volunteers over Advent and Lent, and we hosted events– whether potlucks or even a group walk thru the local Arboretum. We went out to the greater area before faith communities and school groups to share our ministry and to engage those who might consider volunteering or supporting the ministry.

Almost from the outset, after a day or two after each outreach trip, I would write in a full-sized notebook a journal entry of the trip. It was not about journaling per se as it was somewhat of an inventory of the ministry itself– listing the team, the resources we used, whether we had enough, the weather, the tone of the outreach, perhaps making a few comments or observations, and then, listing by stop the names of the individuals I had encountered. I discovered that the very act of writing was a way to process it all. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by a sea of faces and difficult situations, the entry impressed their faces on me, their encounters, hopes, loss of hope– and their prayers. Some people touched me in a particular way and I would make note of that. One time, an actively using man came up to me, and as it turns out, I knew his brother. Others were filled with gratitude as they shared how they had found housing. The writing became a way of honoring those whom I had met by ‘carrying’ and ‘holding’ them– not simply moving on to the ‘next thing’. I was aware that for the most part, behind each face encountered was an untold story of an interrupted life and drastically altered horizons. There is tremendous suffering on the streets and it is difficult to see. The nature of the opioid crisis and other drug usage has dramatically changed the nature of homelessness since I first worked in a residence some twenty-five years ago. After completing the journal entry, I would type up the names and forward them to be collected into the liturgical notebook. After all of this, I would pray a rosary in the chapel as a way of offering everyone up to God. This became an integral part of my involvement with Capuchin Mobile Ministry.

From the liturgical notebook in the chapel, names were read as part of our intercessions for Morning Prayer. Eventually, upon hearing the name read, a visual image of that person would come to the fore adding to the richness of the name mentioned. A weekly Mass was offered for the intentions of all those we had encountered with the notebook placed in front of the altar. The ministry was an integral part of our liturgies.

Fall 2022

Last year, Clare, a Secular Franciscan introduced me to the ministry of a priest who for some twenty-five years has been leading a group of people on Saturdays to give out food to those in the streets of Boston and to pray with them. I decided to join them one Saturday. Our final stop that day was at the center of Boston’s homelessness– the area of ‘Mass/Cass’– the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue with Melnea Cass Boulevard and including Atkinson Street. Clare and I had paired off and we came across a potentially dangerous situation of an angry man wielding the end of a 2x4 , shouting and scattering those around him as he swung the piece of wood. He seemed to be challenging others to engage him, almost as if crying for help. He was shouting about the losses he had recently experienced. Fortunately, the situation did not escalate. We watched and waited. The man calmed down, saw us and walked toward us, dropping his stick. To hear him tell us through tears that he did not know where to put his grief was heart wrenching. We introduced ourselves and listened. He mentioned the name of his nephew who had just graduated and then died in tragic circumstances at a graduation party. I recalled reading of the tragedy in the local newspaper. To hear him then describe our presence there as “beautiful” was somewhat jarring given the human misery that surrounded us. Before parting, he extended his arms. To be able to embrace him was a gift.

Late Fall 2022

Another encounter unfolded over two meetings. The first was as I was travelling the subway-or the ‘T’. I was going to Downtown Crossing to meet a colleague at St. Francis House. After several stops, a man entered in a wheelchair. The car was not full so there was plenty of space for him. He was by himself, wearing a white wool vest. Other than seeming weary and stressed, he did not particularly attract my attention. I got off at my stop to meet my friend who was getting ready to leave her job. She was meeting someone on Tremont St, so we talked along the way and while we waited for her friend. Once he came, I said my farewell and headed for a café– but then decided to go to the Food Court. Inside, there was the man in the wheelchair I had seen previously on the ‘T’. It wasn’t as if he was begging. Nevertheless, he was holding a five dollar bill and had positioned himself a bit back from a food establishment while at the same time facing the counter as if wanting to order some food. I went up to him and extended my hand to greet him. His English was hard to understand but clearly, he wanted to order something. I brought him closer to the counter and asked him what he wanted. He gave me the five dollars and mentioned the dish. I looked at the person behind the counter and she knew what he wanted, as he seemed to be somewhat of a regular customer. As the food was being prepared, we exchanged a few words. He knew some English and mentioned ‘bad people’ as if he had had some troubling experiences, either with this visit or past ones. Once the food was ready, I paid for it, and was happy to give it to him along with his five dollars. I bent down so we could be at the same level. As I realized we had not exchanged names, we proceeded to do so. Then we parted ways and I left him to enjoy his meal. I am not sure why but it was as if for that day, I was meant to be of service to this man in particular. Whereas initially, I had not really seen him, with our meeting at the Food Court; I had.

To be part of a ministry that is intentional in claiming one’s charism, embraced in fraternity, prayer, and liturgy while focused on encounters and accompaniment with those on the street is a blessing and a privilege. Scripture comes alive in unexpected ways in speaking directly to the situation at hand– *Your words are Spirit and Life* (John 6:63). There are specific texts that resonate richly such as Matthew 25:31-46 with the separation of those who tended to Christ by feeding the hungry and giving water to the thirsty from those who did not. Yet, it is not as if there is an A to B relationship. Yes, one is placed in the ballpark and it is good if because of this text, one goes out to do exactly as described. However, there is also a spatial dimension. Again, as Pope Francis wrote in his *Message on the Fifth World Day of the Poor*, it is a question of entering into a mutual sharing. I think that in effect, what one is given with daily scripture is an invitation to enter into a space. How one does so and what one experiences or discovers is the very nature of the unfolding of grace. It is as if one enters into an intimacy with scripture, as if entering an arena? Going through a door? Discovering a cleft in a rock? All of these metaphors apply. But to go deeper, taking the scripture of Matthew 12:48-50 as to who are Jesus’ brother and sister, it is not enough to go out into the street assuming that everyone is one’s brother and sister. Rather, first through having established a relationship with one of God’s own, and having that person address *you* as a brother or sister. This is where scripture is manifested, not through assumption but through the opportunity embraced and the integrity of the encounter that unfolds. This makes all of the difference.

Preaching the Gospel in our daily Mass in our chapel also took on a dimension of immediacy and encounter as scripture took on a new dimension of continuing to reveal insights into the situation at hand. Underneath it all was the sense of a unity between prayer and action, liturgy and the world. Just as with the encounters on the street entering into spaces of mutual sharing and reciprocity, so with liturgy there was a reciprocity between the liturgy and the world as experienced through the ministry.

Fall 2021-Summer 2023

The last encounter ultimately is with Julia and has its own unfolding and resolution. However, it is prefaced by two other encounters; one, oddly enough in absence, the other as an initial rebuke.

found; one item was a beautiful poem about Michael, the other was an eloquent passage about Michael signed by Denise Jillson, the Executive Director of the Harvard Square Business Association. I reached out to Denise. We agreed to meet at our next day of outreach to provide for an impromptu memorial for ‘Michael’-- four of us gathered around the tree with a bouquet of roses, some prayers, Psalm 139, and intercessions to lift up the dignity of a homeless man known only to us as ‘Michael’. Over the course of several months, a group of faith and community leaders continued to petition for the release of the body. Finally, in the early summer, their wishes were granted which allowed for a more formal service with a casket and proper burial. Then in the fall, of 2022, we at CMM, received a call from the funeral home which had been involved saying a woman from the West Coast had inquired about her brother who was known to have been homeless in the Cambridge area. Discussions followed between the sister and Denise, and through a photo provided, it was confirmed that this man was indeed her brother and with a proper name other than Michael. Notes of gratitude and generosity followed from the sister who in spite of the tragic circumstances was grateful for the closure that all of this brought to the family. Solidarity in a minor key.

From all of this, it became clear that to engage effectively the issue of homelessness required knowing the communities of our scheduled stops-- in effect, of establishing ‘circles of care’.

One community with which we were not familiar was that of Nubian Sq., known as the ‘heart and soul’ of Roxbury, the black community of Boston. This was about to change as during one of our scheduled afternoon stops at Nubian Sq. during the late summer of 2022, a community leader came up to me and politely suggested that we not be there. At the same time, he invited me to the community group, the Nubian Sq. Task Force, which he had formed. We exchanged cell phone numbers and over the course of several texts, it was clear that he saw us as undercutting the efforts of the task force and the life of seniors and schoolchildren passing through at that time of day. As we did not know the community, we suspended going to Nubian Sq. for three months. Then with a change of schedule, we returned to Nubian Sq., now arriving in the evening. In the meantime, I did join the task force, which became a lesson in itself not only in community action but also in the issues of equity and structural racism. And an ongoing, fruitful relationship developed between the community leader and myself. Eager to know the community more, I participated, wearing my Franciscan habit, in several of the Friday afternoon ‘peace walks’ through the neighborhood. It was during one of these walks, in the spring of 2023, while walking through Nubian Sq. with its bus station and benches, that I heard someone cry out in distress, “Father, Father!”. I turned around and went to the woman who was sitting on a bench and was now standing; it was clear she was desperate to talk to me. Her name was Julia.

I did not know what to make of this woman. She was clearly distressed. She poured out her concerns of her residence and shared with me photos on her cell phone of mold in her apartment. She mentioned the unending process she had been involved with in trying to have the city address her situation. She was clearly distraught, deeply frustrated, and seemingly helpless before a city’s faceless bureaucracy. She hit her head with her fist with such force I clearly heard the impact and saw her grimace with each blow. She told me how she felt unsafe staying in her apartment and spent her time in the square from morning through the evening, travelling by bus each way. This all seemed beyond me. I did not know what to do but I took her phone number, telling her I would get back to her. The only thing I could think of was to reach out to someone who had recently come to the Task Force only once. He had just retired after a long career with Boston’s public housing. However, at that meeting there was a large group, and I had only seen him from a distance. From the group email, I found his address and sent him an email, hoping for the best and yet, not to my surprise, it went unanswered.

Two weeks later with another neighborhood peace walk, I meet Julia again. Seeing me this time she was even more irate. I had not called her and I had no follow through to offer her. She looked directly at me while hitting her head with her fist several times and screamed at me, “You didn’t call me, you didn’t call me. I know why, because I’m black!” There was silence and the feeling of an unnavigable chasm between us. There was more silence as she continued to stare directly at me. I did not know what to say. Nevertheless, clearly a response was necessary. I mentioned to her that I still had her number and that I would call. I did call her the next day to determine the basic facts of her situation, not knowing how I would proceed.

Later that month, I was on what was a weekly walk through Nubian Sq. on a Thursday morning with a different group, this time with several business leaders. The group also included someone whom I knew from the task force who served with community outreach for a local non-profit. I went to him and explained the housing situation with Julia. Several minutes later as our small group continued to walk through the square, Julia came up to both of us. I introduced both of them to each other hoping that he would be able to help. I later learned that he was eventually able to connect her with someone directly involved with city housing and that Julia was able to move to a different apartment.

But, I wasn’t aware of this when on a summer evening, CMM was at Nubian Sq as our final stop. We had greeted a few people at the back of the van around the barista table but otherwise things were slow. I walked around to the front just to see if anything was going on. Things seemed quiet but then I saw a woman coming towards me with a portable boom box to her ear, singing a song. I could not make out the words but clearly, she was endeared to the song and was thoroughly enjoying singing it. She came right up to me and it was evident she wanted to share the song with me. Stranger things have happened on the street. Where we were standing, as the van was blocking the light from the streetlight, it was dark. I could not clearly see whom this person was. But then I recognized her.” Julia! How are you?” She just continued singing the song holding the boom box against her ear and between us. This was clearly a moment that she wanted both of us to enjoy, and I was happy simply to stand together with her. What was previously disturbing and anguished was now sweet.

Beginning with *From Gospel to Life and Life to the Gospel*, with the chapel serving as the center of it all, continuously and infinitely enriched by encounters on the street, it was as if the vibrations between liturgy and ministry become such that the distance between the two became closer and closer with an intimate force field embracing it all. Through a rhythm of life infused with prayer, fraternity, liturgy, the Eucharist, encounter and community, the unity of living and working became a palpable presence. Yet, it was something that could not be effected or sustained, but simply participated in through trust, consent and surrender. Nor *is* it a self-contained dynamic but one that “strengthens solidarity and lays the necessary foundations for achieving justice.”

Fr. Sam Fuller, OFM Cap serves as the Provincial Spiritual Assistant to the Order of Secular Franciscans while continuing his community engagement in the Roxbury section of Boston.

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