

Basilica missionaries bringing Jesus to city streets



Colin Miller and Nathan Belk are spending their days walking through the streets of downtown Baltimore. They have a backpack in which they might carry some clean pairs of socks for a homeless person or a bottle of water.

But they are also carrying with them the word of God and the presence of Christ.

Miller and Belk are the first two urban missionaries who are working with a new initiative, the **Source of All Hope**, based at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the heart of downtown Baltimore. The project was officially launched on the church's patronal feast day, Aug. 15.

Father James Boric, rector of the Baltimore Basilica, said the program is modeled after the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, in which young people give a year of their life to evangelize on college campuses.

"We need to do that in the city," he said. "Instead of ministering to people in universities they're going to minister to the people right here on the streets of Baltimore."

In his homily at the Mass, Father Boric said it was no coincidence that the Source of All Hope was being launched on the feast of the Assumption.

"After Mary conceived of Jesus in her womb, she did not keep him to herself. She gave birth to him, raised him and then gave him to the world - to bring hope to those who were hopeless - so that others could be united with him and proclaim the

Magnificat for themselves.”

He continued, “From the womb of this Marian church, Jesus will go out into the streets of Baltimore, through the instruments of our missionaries. They will encounter the homeless, the addicts and downtrodden, everyone who – rich or poor – needs Christ.”

If just one soul comes to know that Jesus, learns that he is present in the Eucharist in the basilica or is united with Christ in the Catholic Church due to the efforts of the urban missionaries, Mary will again pray the Magnificat, in which she prayed, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Miller and Belk will reach out especially to those who are homeless, addicted or struggling in other ways. “They’re going to get to know their stories,” Father Boric told the Catholic Review. “They’re going to love them. And they’re going to begin to give them the hope of the Gospel.

“The idea is, we know that we don’t have a solution for all the problems in the world, but we know Christ does.”

To those who might say they don’t need Jesus, they just need a sandwich, the priest said you need both. “So yes, they do need a sandwich. Christ said if you see someone in need, you have to help them, and not just say you are going to pray for them.

“But social justice without God isn’t going to get anybody to heaven. So, what we need to do is we need to give them the sandwich but then we need to bring them into relationship with the one who is the creator of not only the sandwich, but them,” Father Boric said. “And by doing both, a lot of good can happen.”

Belk and Miller said Aug. 15 they had already spent a few days on the streets getting to know the territory. They encountered homeless people living along the median of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, including three people who had been attacked by a group of younger people. One woman said she had been shot in the back of the head several times with a BB gun; another man had been kicked in the back so hard he hit his face on the pavement when he fell.

“There is a lot of suffering on the streets,” said Miller, who has previous street

ministry experience. He said the effort would be rooted in prayer.

“Our program is called the Source of All Hope because we believe that Jesus is the source of all hope. In addition to encountering him in the sacraments and the Eucharist, that’s what’s going to give us the strength to minister to all the people we encounter,” said Miller, who is originally from Damascus, Md., and came to Baltimore two years ago after a year working in a shelter for those experiencing homelessness in the Bronx, N.Y.

Accompanying people who are living on the streets can be challenging, but getting to know them and accompanying them, “seeing Christ in them and allowing Christ to transform that relationship, is huge.”

Belk, originally from Westminster, recently returned to the area after attending school in Ohio. He said, “People are taking advantage even of the homeless. It was really heartbreaking to see that. But then sitting down and talking with them, time flew by.”

Miller added, “Much of what we’re doing, we’re out on the streets and just listening to people and allowing them to just relate whatever they feel like they need to get off their chest. And a lot of times building up the relationship simply through being there and being willing to listen and to encounter them as a fellow human being, it’s a healing process. It can be really restorative.”

Many people ignore or abuse the homeless, so when they have someone who listens to them and gets to know them, it’s a welcome change in their lives, he said.

The missionaries live in the former convent of the basilica on Charles Street. They start their day with morning prayer and Mass. They head out into the streets either in the morning or the afternoon, and will eventually work on standard “routes” that take them through various parts of the neighborhood. Some homeless people tend to be out in the mornings, others in the afternoon, so they get to encounter different people at different times of the day.

They end their day with a holy hour in front of the Blessed Sacrament, and evenings sometimes include spiritual talks or times to discuss the ministry with Father Boric

and others.

Father Boric has plans to recruit a couple more missionaries. While FOCUS missionaries generally must raise about \$30,000 a year to cover their expenses, he wants to be able to provide all of that so the missionaries can focus on their ministry, instead of fundraising.

"I need to provide everything, except for their own health insurance – that's the one thing I can't provide for," Father Boric said. He donated his old 2008 Toyota Corolla to the project as the "mission car."

"I'm trying to raise money through the Internet and through donors to be able to have these guys just be able to focus on the prayer and on outreach in the city so that their days aren't spent trying to figure out how they're going to raise enough money to eat."

The missionaries are committed to spending a year on Source of All Hope.

Listen to an interview with Father Boric about the Source of All Hope on "Catholic Baltimore." <https://bit.ly/aobradio-080419>