

He's just a saint, just a pure out and out saint': Founder of Capuchin Day Centre retires.

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'The number of families that we come across here is frightening', says Br Kevin as he steps back from homeless service.

By Patsy McGarry Fri Aug 12, 2022 - 13:00

Maria Harmon was having none of it. The very notion that Br Kevin Crowley of the Capuchin Day Centre in Dublin, where he has lived for almost 60 years, still considers himself a Cork man just does not wash. A Dubliner herself, and a volunteer at the Day Centre for 22 years, she is unequivocally clear. "I actually believe that he is a Dub. He just keeps saying he is a Cork man, but we just have to let him think that you know."

Besides, and she is every bit as clear about this, "he's just a saint, just a pure out and out saint."

Maria happened to be the person who opened the door to this reporter at the Centre, arriving to speak to Br Kevin who this week announced his retirement after more than half a century heading up the homeless service. Br Kevin Crowley says he will retire to Cork this month after more than half a century heading up the Capuchin Day Centre, a homeless service in Dublin. Br Kevin was "going to be well missed," she said. "All the homeless people are going to miss him terrible. The staff, we are all upset over the fact that he must leave. He is just a great man. He gave his life to all the homeless people. I have seen people come in on their knees in here and Br Kevin helping them all out till they got sorted," she said. "So, we're all heartbroken."

Br Kevin has been a positive influence in her own life too. She started at the Centre in 2000 as part of a FÁS scheme. "He offered me full time. I was in some bad situations myself, very bad situations, and I have to tell you, only for Br Kevin I would not be standing here today. All the help he gave me and my children ... I have five children, a big family. My youngest is 20. Only for Br Kevin, I would be lost without him. He is going to be a huge loss

in my life.” I saw the people coming to our church. I saw the people walking the streets. I saw the people looking into dustbins and taking food out of the dustbins. Her gratitude was evident in her tears. Br Kevin himself is in sprightly form sitting in his office, even if moving around is not as easy anymore. He is from Inniskeen, near Bandon, in Cork. “My parents had very strong faith. It was a house of prayer, not putting religion down your throat but a solid foundation, solid faith. My father was a farm manager, with five in [the] family. There is just two of us left now and at 87 years of age I think it is time for the Lord to take me.” His brother Gerard is ninety. He joined the Capuchins in Kilkenny. “I was a signalman in CIE. I was, for a long time, thinking about joining the religious and I suppose I was selfish and enjoying life and then I decided to do something about it. Eventually, I saw an ad [for the order] in the Southern Star/the Skibbereen Eagle and then I applied. It all started off from there.” He entered in Kilkenny, finished off his novitiate at Rochestown in Cork and I was in “various (Capuchin) houses for a short period of time and then I ended up here and that’s where I am today.”

Why the Capuchins? “I suppose St Francis (founder of the order) appealed to me and I felt that maybe that I could do something.” He began to notice homeless people. “I saw the people coming to our church. I saw the people walking the streets. I saw the people looking into dustbins and taking food out of the dustbins.” As a follower of St Francis “I decided something should be done for them.” It was the beginnings of the Capuchin Day Centre.

“We had no money. Things were unbelievably bad. I owed a bill for £1,000, and £1,000 then was a lot of money and I did not have it. I went down to the oratory, and I do believe in God in a very, very big way, and I said to the Lord ‘these are your people and if you want me to feed them you’d better go get the money’. And we never went short of food or money since then.” The drug scene has taken over completely and is appalling. Only for our medical team we would have had many deaths here on the premises. There was help from media and people working locally. “What I do know is that (Irish Press editor) Tim Pat Coogan, his wife was volunteering here at the time, and she got on to her husband and Tim started making contacts with various people. He started doing articles in the Irish Press, and it went on from there.”

“I would go to Arnotts, Clerys, and Roches Stores and I always went to meet the staff, having a cup of tea in the morning time, then they used to start making collections ... it kind of steamrolled from that. I used to go down to Moore St, meet the people, have a chat and they would start donating. There was one lady in particular, every week she would bring a barrow of chickens up to the centre, up from the market. That is how we got going.”

Today, the centre has a turnover of about €3.3 million, all donated except for €450,000 that comes from the State. “We get fantastic donations from throughout Ireland, from abroad. I do not believe in paying for fundraising because I believe that every halfpenny that comes to the centre is entirely for the homeless people, to make sure that they are treated with dignity and respect,” he said.

“I remember when we started in ‘69 it was drink [alcohol addiction problems] and we had about fifty people coming to the Centre. That time I thought the drink was a huge problem, which it was, but then the drug scene came in. The drug scene has taken over completely and is appalling. Only for our medical team we would have had many deaths here on the premises.”

Asked if the drug scene is worse now, Br Kevin replies: “Oh certainly. It is as bad now as the eighties. What is bad about it now is the way they are selling on the streets and it is frightening to see young people out on the streets selling drugs.”

He said the centre has gone from fifty people when it started to now having two hundred people for breakfast, 600/700 for lunch from Monday to Saturday. The centre has also seen a sharp increase in demand for food parcels. “Again, when we started giving out food parcels, we had maybe 100, 200, and now we have maybe 1,000 or maybe more every Wednesday. As well as that we give out baby food, baby nappies on a Monday morning and we can have up to two hundred families for those.” He is very worried about the current situation. “The housing situation is appalling. When you see, and especially young people trying to make ends meet and especially families, it is frightening. The number of families that we come across here is frightening.” The greatest for me was the day they saw the Pope coming up Bow St in the Popemobile and the first thing he did was

to come up to the homeless people to greet each and every one of them... the homeless people were being recognised. That was the most important thing for me.

Br Kevin believe the Government is trying to do its best. "I've great time for the Taoiseach. He has been very supportive to here. He is a human being. He is a man who can see where people are in need, and I think he's trying to do his best to help everybody. He was here again, and then he came to visit me a few months ago.

The day centre has received other noteworthy visitors. In December 2016 there was President Michael D Higgins. He said then that "there must be nobody who is not aware now of the extent, and depth, and consequences of the homelessness problem," in Ireland. What Br Kevin made possible at the Day Centre was "the stuff of a real republic", he said. Unsurprisingly for a man of the cloth, the visit that really shone out for Br Kevin was that of Pope Francis in August 2018. "The greatest for me was the day they saw the Pope coming up Bow St in the Popemobile and the first thing he did was to come up to the homeless people to greet each and every one of them. And I made it quite clear there were to be no dignitaries whatsoever here." Present too on that day were two other great allies of the homeless, Alice Leahy and Sr Stanislaus Kennedy. What was most significant for Br Kevin about such visits was that "the homeless people were being recognised. That was the most important thing for me."

He is homeward bound now to the Capuchin Centre in Cork on August 22nd. "I'm 87 years of age and I feel that it's not appropriate for a person of 87 years of age to be still carrying on and I think it's only right that younger blood should be coming in and carrying on where we left off." No successor to him has been appointed. "Not yet, no. That is up to the provincial council." He feels "a certain amount of sadness of course and at the same time a certain amount of joy as well because of what the centre has achieved down through the years".

Were his humility to allow it, he could look back now on a long life well lived.