



Lawrence, MA: Late night comedian Conan O'Brien holds up a Labels Are For Jars collection container, as the Rev. Paul O'Brien, Pastor St. Patrick Parish, looks on, during a ceremony at the Cor Unum Meal Center in Lawrence. Monday, September 25, 2006

Mark Lorenz / Mark Lorenz/Eagle-Tribune

No joke: Conan O'Brien breaks bread in Lawrence

Comedian helps priest open meal center

By Jason Tait
The Eagle-Tribune

Lawrence, Mass. — The Rev. Paul O'Brien has influential powers on his side to fight hunger — the Lord and funny man Conan O'Brien.

Conan O'Brien, the "Late Night" television show host, was in Lawrence yesterday to help his old college roommate, Father O'Brien, with the grand opening of Cor Unum, the Catholic priest's newly built kitchen that will feed hundreds of the city's poor.

The comedian's star power drew the intended effect — major media attention which the O'Brien boys hope sparks added donations for Cor Unum.

The \$1.5 million food center at 191 Salem St. across from St. Patrick Parish opens Sept. 30 for dinner after about three years in the making.

The hope is to serve three meals a day, 365 days a year.

Father O'Brien says far too many Lawrence residents, many of them single mothers, go hungry. They choose between paying the electric bill or buying food, he said. About a third of the city lives under the poverty level.

"It will eliminate the reality of hunger for anyone who wants it," Father O'Brien said yesterday.

Conan O'Brien, a Brookline native, roomed with Father O'Brien at Harvard University in the mid-1980s.

The two lost touch but later reconnected while Conan O'Brien was in Brookline for Christmas. The two have been a team ever since.

The New York-based television show host did not speak during the ribbon cutting ceremony yesterday. He was there to raise awareness of a worthy charity, he said, but wanted the focus to be on the center.

"I told Father Paul that if it will help attract the media, I'll come to the event, but it has nothing to do with me," he said.

His single moment of comedy happened after Father O'Brien showed a donation jar to the cameras, then handed it to the comedian who at first was confused about what to do with it. So he displayed it to the cameras with a smile like a Home Shopping Network model.

The center is being funded by private donations, the Boston Archdiocese and Father O'Brien's fundraiser, "Labels are for Jars."

The Labels campaign sells T-shirts that come with jars, which the buyer fills with coins and cash for Cor Unum, which means "One Heart" in Latin.

Each T-shirt lists a stereotype such as "jock," "geek" or "pacifist." The idea is to prevent societal labeling.

The Labels campaign has raised more than \$750,000 since the winter of 2004. The T-shirts can be found at Newbury Comics locations or at the Web site www.labelsareforjars.org.

Each jar can hold about \$100.

Volunteers will staff the kitchen, and the food will be donated by food banks.

Cor Unum can feed 80 people at one seating, with multiple serving times to accommodate up to 250 people each meal.

Anyone can eat there, and no one will be turned away, Father O'Brien said.

Cardinal Sean O'Malley is in Rome but taped his comments for the Cor Unum event, which was played on a TV during the ribbon cutting ceremony.

O'Malley said there is a solution to hunger in the United States, an answer that Jesus preached.

"We need to feed one another," O'Malley said.

Jason Tait writes for The Eagle Tribune in North Andover, Mass.

Question and answer with late-night comedian Conan O'Brien:

Late-night TV host Conan O'Brien was in Lawrence yesterday to promote his friend's charity Cor Unum, a meals center for the city's poor. The center's fundraiser is called "Labels are for Jars," which tackles stereotypes attached to people such as "jock" or "geek." O'Brien took a few questions before heading back to New York to tape his show:

What labels have been attached to you?

"I'm a freak. I've been a freak for a long time, and it's been a good career for me. So I'm sticking to that. My labels have been good for me. All the names kids called me when I was a kid. 'You're weird. You're a freak.' It's turned into a lucrative business."

Have you toured Lawrence?

"I stayed in the rectory last night and woke up early this morning, and Father Paul walked me around across the railroad tracks to the school. We went from classroom to classroom, you know, quizzing kids. Father Paul was quizzing them on, you know, parts of the plant. Pollen. Whatever field they were studying."

What is your impression of the city?

"I've been here before. I actually came here ... we were married in the Catholic Church and needed counseling sessions from a priest before he marries you. So we came here to Lawrence (in 2001) for our marital discussions. So I've been here a few times, and you can tell it's a city with a lot of character ... You can tell there is a lot of passion there, but they have their problems like a lot of former mill towns, but they have all the ingredients here in Lawrence to bounce back."

Do you watch late night television? Leno or Letterman?

"Every now and then. But when you do late night television, it's not how you relax, you know what I mean, at night ... I tend to watch the History Channel or autopsies. Uplifting stuff like that."

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