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NBC late-night host Conan O'Brien listens to a press conference announcing the opening of the Cor Unum Meal Center in Lawrence.

**By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | September 26, 2006**

LAWRENCE -- Conan O'Brien and Paul O'Brien seem an unlikely pair.

One is a late-night comedian who lives the high life in New York and, when asked about his faith life, says "my parents are very Catholic."

The other is a Roman Catholic priest who oversees a large, trilingual parish in one of the poorest and most troubled cities in Massachusetts.

But the two O'Briens, who are both from Brookline but are not related, have been fast friends since the days when they lived together, in Mather House, as Harvard undergraduates. Yesterday, they joined hands to dedicate a new meal center in Lawrence, hoping together to address hunger in a community where one-third of the residents live below the poverty line and 84 percent of the public school students are low-income.

"As you can imagine, you do a TV show like mine, and you live in New York City, and you talk to the kind of celebrity guests that I talk to, and your job is to make people laugh, it can be easy to lose perspective occasionally on what's really happening," O'Brien said in a brief interview, standing in the unused kitchen of the new Cor Unum meal center, under the still-gleaming pots and pans.

"I probably shouldn't even admit this, but it's still hard for me to believe -- I find it a little shocking that there are people in the 21st century living in the United States who are hungry," said the comedian, who is host of "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" on NBC-TV. "But obviously it's true." The meal center -- the name Cor Unum is Latin for one heart -- is scheduled to serve its first meal this Saturday. Run by Father O'Brien's St. Patrick's Parish with one paid staffer and multiple

volunteers, the center is planning to begin by serving dinner Saturdays, Sundays, and Mondays, then gradually expand to dinner seven nights a week, and then add breakfast, and then lunch. The Greater Boston Food Bank has agreed to supply much of the food for the center at a deep discount.

The building, a 5,600-square-foot structure on land owned by the parish, cost about \$1.8 million to build, and supporters have raised another \$500,000 toward the first two years of operation. The endeavor has been funded in large part through an innovative marketing campaign, called "labels are for jars," in which supporters have sold black T-shirts featuring derogatory labels such as "addict" and "mentally ill," and then have used discussions about the T-shirts to raise funds. Father O'Brien said the idea for the meal center came to him on Thanksgiving 2001, when he and some friends hosted a dinner at the parish rectory for homeless people living on a nearby hill

I really do feel good that we've gotten to the end of the construction process, but I feel fantastic that we're finally going to be serving meals," he said. "We don't have any thought that this is going to solve all of the social problems in Lawrence, but if it gets to the heart of the suffering of thousands of people, there's hope for getting to some of the other social problems."

The pastor said there will be no income requirement at the meal center, which features in its entryway a large crucifix with the words "I Thirst," a phrase Christians believe was uttered by Jesus on the cross. The dining hall can seat 80 people, and Father O'Brien expects to serve as many as 250 people per meal, but said no hungry people will be turned away.

Parish officials are planning this week to begin promoting the meal center through elder service and social service organizations in Lawrence, as well as on the street. Father O'Brien said that there is one homeless shelter in South Lawrence, and that the need in the area is great; he said there are homeless people living under a nearby bridge, in a neighborhood cement factory, and in a variety of abandoned buildings in the area.

Conan O'Brien spent Sunday night sleeping in the parish rectory, and yesterday morning went from class to class at the parish school, greeting pupils. He said the visit reinforced for him a connection between food and academic achievement.

"This community is struggling," he said. "It's a great community, but they're struggling, and there are people here who are not getting enough to eat, and what's more fundamental than that? And Paul has always said to me, how can we educate people, how can we get them to stay in school, how can we get them to contemplate taking an SAT someday if they're hungry? You can't. So that's job number one."

Conan O'Brien grew up in St. Lawrence Parish in Brookline, but made it clear that it is friendship, rather than religious faith, that has drawn him to this project. He has been close to Paul O'Brien for years, and the priest officiated at the marriage of the comedian four years ago. Father O'Brien declined to detail the comedian's financial role in the project, but said he has been a strong supporter.

"My parents are very Catholic, [but] obviously, over the years, with everything that's going on, you can wonder, 'OK, what's happening with the Catholic Church?' " Conan O'Brien said. "But this is an example of the simplest idea, which is treating other people the way you'd like to be treated, and . . . that to me is the most powerful message of Christianity or really any other religion."

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, the Catholic archbishop of Boston, has been a supporter of the Cor Unum project. O'Malley is currently in Rome, but sent a video greeting in which he praised Conan O'Brien for setting an example of volunteerism. O'Malley's top aide, the Rev. Richard Erikson, the vicar general, said the archdiocese has committed up to \$900,000 to the construction of the meal center. . . . *Michael Paulson can be reached at [mpaulson@globe.com](mailto:mpaulson@globe.com).* ■