

STEVE BASTINEAU

Casey Goes to Bat for Lawrence's Hungry

The first thing you notice about Sean Casey, wearing an apron as he ambles toward the next table, is his size, all 6-foot-4, 235 pounds of him.

Then comes that big, wide, energetic smile into focus. Then, finally, come the scrambled eggs.

"Can I help you?" said the Red Sox backup first baseman, holding a tray of eggs as he approaches hungry customers at Cor Unum Meal Center. "I've got eggs; lots and lots of eggs."

The 34-year-old might be "The Mayor" of Major League Baseball - he was recently voted "The Friendliest Player in Baseball" in a *Sports Illustrated* poll of MLB players - because of his easy-going, affable, talk-a-holic personality.

But here in one of the poorest sections of one of the poorest cities in America, Lawrence, MA, Casey is a saint.

"Sean is a gift from God," said Father Paul O'Brien.

Father O'Brien is no slouch himself in the gift-from-God department. He is pastor of St. Patrick's Parish, and is the creator of the Cor Unum (one body) Meal Center.

Father O'Brien, with help from some people, including his college roommate Conan O'Brien (no relation) and Casey, to name a few of the famous ones, didn't just build a place for the poor to eat. They basically built a palace. And the poor, now numbering 250,000 hungry visitors in two years, have come.

"I am in awe of this place," said Casey. "Look at it. It's better than a lot of restaurants that I've eaten at. The hungry get special treatment here. They get treated with dignity. I can't explain how special this place is to people. They have to see it for themselves."

In fact, food is what brought Casey and Father O'Brien together in July of 1994 in Brewster, on Cape Cod, in the first place.

Casey was a University of Richmond student playing in the nationally-renowned Cape Cod League. His part-time job was working the frozen foods section at the local supermarket.

It was there, somewhere between the frozen corn and peas, he met Father O'Brien, who was vacationing.

"We just talked and I was struck by him the moment I met him," said Casey.

A friendship, which led to a spiritual awakening in Casey's life, was born.

"I just felt a connection. There's something special about Paul," said Casey. "He had a humility about him. He's also very funny and very smart. Paul is such a good person. I just enjoyed his insight, and we became good friends."



Red Sox fans have come to appreciate Sean Casey for his contributions to the Red Sox in 2008, just as the visitors at the Cor Unum Meal Center in Lawrence, MA are thankful for the time, service and support he offers them. Photos courtesy of "Labels Are For Jars."

Father O'Brien officiated at Casey's wedding to his wife, Mandi, and he baptized all three of his children (Andrew, 7; Jacob, 6 and Carli, 3).

Both of their careers blossomed.

Casey was drafted by the Cleveland Indians, eventually was dealt to the Cincinnati Reds and became an All-Star first baseman in 1999.

Father O'Brien had ministered to people with AIDS in Rome and worked with Mother Teresa in both Calcutta and Hungary before being named as pastor of one of the biggest parishes in the Boston Archdiocese, St. Patrick's, in 2001.

"I found out pretty quickly that, among some serious issues here in Lawrence, hunger was right near the top," said Father O'Brien.

It was during a trip to Casey's home in Pittsburgh, after the baptism of one of his sons, that Father O'Brien talked about the plight of his new parish.

Casey remembers the conversation as if it were yesterday.

"Paul; my wife, Mandi; and I were driving, and Paul talked about his dream to build a place for people to eat, a nice place," said Casey. "To think about that conversation and then where we are now is amazing."

In 2002, a committee was established



Sean pitching in to clean up!

by Father O'Brien to proceed with the planning and organization of the Cor Unum Meal Center. Casey was on that committee.

"He wasn't just on the committee, he was a force from the inception," said Father O'Brien.

Two years later a capital campaign was formed to raise \$1.5 million for the construction of the meal center. Another campaign was begun to pay for the estimated \$400,000 in operating expenses. The doors

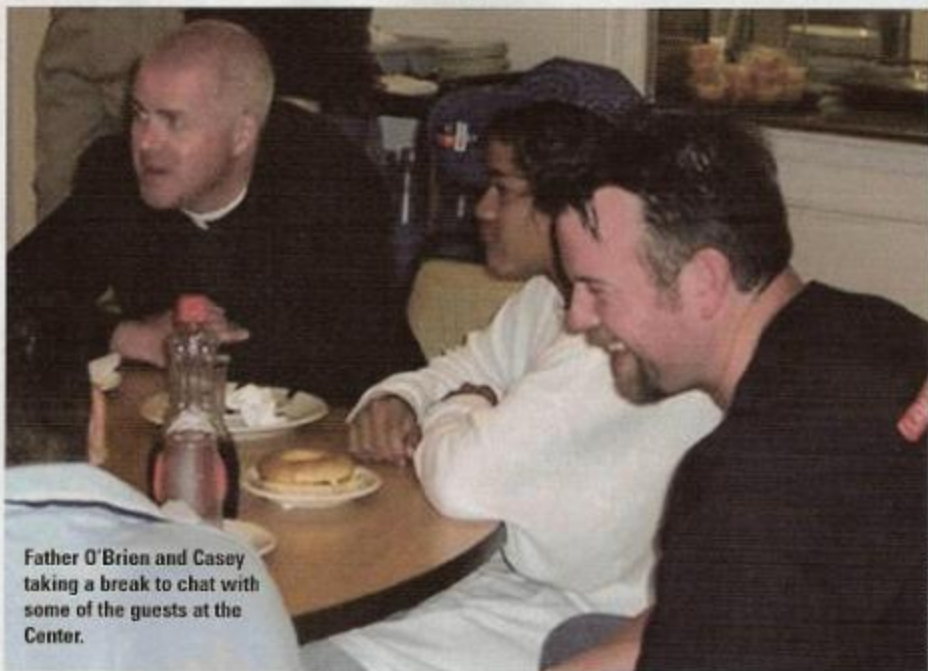
officially opened on September 30, 2005.

People can donate two ways. They can write a check. Or, in a more thought-provoking way, in which people, while holding a jar, wear a thought-provoking black T-shirt, adorned with a commonly used negative label, such as "addict," "troubled teen," or "mentally ill" on the chest, and "Labels Are For Jars" across the back. Hence, labels "are for jars" and not for people. Each jar has a black T-shirt.

"Our goal is to raise as much money as possible to feed as many hungry people as possible," said Father O'Brien. "We've raised all of the money thus far, through word of mouth and filling jars. We haven't had an event or fund-raiser."

Casey probably would have found a way to be at the opening of the Center if not for the fact that he had another dream of his own coming true about that same time. After nine years, Casey, then with the Detroit Tigers, was preparing to play in his first postseason.

Not only did Casey get to play, he played probably the best baseball of his career when the bright lights were their brightest. Over the last four games of the World Series, won by the St. Louis Cardinals, 4-1, Casey was an astounding, 9-15 (.600), including two homers and five RBI.



Father O'Brien and Casey taking a break to chat with some of the guests at the Center.



Casey with some of the Center staff.

has been one of the most enjoyable seasons of my career. This really is a special place to play baseball, just like I heard about. And the players they have here are all class. I'd recommend Boston to every player in baseball."

Casey has made intermittent stops to Lawrence, most recently with a friend of his

"As I was rounding the bases after hitting the first home run in that World Series, against (Jeff) Suppan in Game 4, all I could think of was my dream had come true," said Casey. "I was remembering playing Whiffle Ball in the yard, imagining that I was hitting a home run in the World Series. I'll never forget that."

About 1,000 miles away, O'Brien was having similar momentous recollections. He was opening a brand new building, the Cor Unum Meal Center on Salem Street.

"I was in touch with Paul throughout that entire time," said Casey. "That was a special time for all of us."

There is no other place like Cor Unum Meal Center. Not only is it a beautiful structure, but it feeds people three meals a day every day of the year.

The hungry are "served" rather than waiting in line. A vase of fresh flowers sits in the center of each table. And mellow music is playing in the background.

"That's the message," said Casey. "Everybody is special. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity."

The story gets better.

On February 1, Casey, a free agent, signed a one-year contract with the Red Sox. Coming to the defending World Champions

was too enticing. Being a 30-minute drive to Father Paul and the Cor Unum Meal Center was the cherry on top.

"I'd thought about how great it would be to play here," said Casey. "The fans are crazy. They really are. I've never been to a place where they are into every pitch of every game. They don't allow players to coast. I love that."

"And then to be so close to Paul...It's like out of a fairy tale," said Casey. "This

from Ohio who has donated money to the meal center.

"We are so lucky to have a friend like Sean Casey," said Father O'Brien. "The enthusiasm that people see and hear about in his public life, on the baseball field, well, brings that to his private life, too."

Casey simply smiles.

"I am a lucky guy," he said. "Look at me. I'm a regular guy living a dream. I'm 34 and playing baseball for the Boston Red Sox. My family is healthy. I have no complaints. What I do for Cor Unum is nothing special."

Let us be the judge of that.★

Bill Burt is a long-time sportswriter for THE EAGLE-TRIBUNE in North Andover, MA.

If you would like to find out more information about the Cor Unum Meal Center, or would like to help out by donations or serving, you can go to <http://www.labelsareforjars.org/> or <http://www.corunummealcenter.org/>.