

Making a difference in the lives of those we serve...



How have the Capuchins made a difference in my life?

St. Anne Parish was established in 1848 for the Irish immigrants working the mills in Manchester. Traditionally the parish had been served by (Irish) diocesan priests. We were told after 142 years the Capuchin Franciscans Religious Order was to take over the parish. To be honest I had no idea of the difference between diocesan and religious order priests. I thought that maybe the religious orders were like that side of your family that everyone whispers about behind their hand.

Enter Fr. John Gallagher on October 1, 1990. Not only was he a religious order priest, he was not an Irishman but a Scotsman, can you believe it? Fr. John came not just for the Irish but he was bringing a new contingency – the Hispanic Ministry of Greater Manchester – St. Anne was to become their home parish.

There were many bumps as Fr. John began the process of melding an established parish with new blood, new ideas, and a new language. He worked hard to help us become a blended “family.” His plan was to get the leadership of both “communities” to work together and help the rest with the transition. He became famous for telling us that we had to take ownership of our parish. At every planning meeting he wanted to know who was going to be the responsible person when we had a fundraiser, party, women’s group meeting, etc. There were times I hated that question.

Fr. John brought the parish into the 20th Century; when in 1992 we got our first computer. I don’t care how many meetings he had in a week he was always prepared. Liturgy was very important to him. He would spend afternoons working on his homily and spend time in the Church making sure the “environment” was just right. Those of us who lived near the Church would sometimes see the office light on at 9 or 10 o’clock at night, knowing he was there preparing and planning – working for us.

When Fr. John was called back to White Plains after the death of their Provincial, Fr. Gary McAuley in 1995 he left us a stronger parish. Those who had been leaders were better leaders; those who had never led had stepped up. At diocesan events our parish always had the highest attendance. Families, both Irish and Hispanic now spent time together as friends. None of it would have happened if not for Fr. John’s energy, thoughtfulness and I’m betting a lot of prayer.

The story didn’t end there, he came back in 1997 but the challenges were so much more. When Fr. John returned he was named Pastor to our twinned parish, St. Augustin, the first French National parish in the U.S. St. Anne’s also had become the home parish to the Vietnamese ministry. Shortly after his return we also had a small group of refugees from Bosnia join us and a few years later became the home parish to the African ministry – the majority of Africans coming from South Sudan.

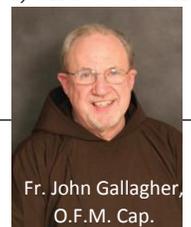
Although daunting Fr. John always seemed up to the task or else he had a great poker face. Besides the multiculturalism other difficulties faced were in 2003 there was partial ceiling collapse at St. Anne’s; we all knew the day would come when we had to make a decision as to which Church to keep and which to sell. I like to think that God made the decision for us. In 2004 we unified with St. Augustin and put St. Anne’s up for sale. It was the end of an era for many of us – and although Fr. John very rarely spoke about his feelings you knew that he had loved St. Anne’s too

He knew that to lead us he had to look forward and not backwards. He again put his energies into helping us see each other as one parish – one family – and not many cultures sharing one building. I’d be lying if I said it was an easy process and that no one left to go to other parishes.

In the beginning I said I had no idea what the difference was between diocesan and religious order priests. The answer is Community. There are many wonderful diocesan priests but not one in our area wanted us as a whole. Some had offered to take one community – rather like foster children being separated and sent to different families. The diocese even tried to move the African ministry which Fr. John kept saying was a mistake; the diocese came to see the error of their ways. I thank Fr. John Gallagher who heard the whisper in the wind and was a willing, spirited, and God-sent shepherd to this amazing flock!

Karen Bourgeois

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