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ON RELIGION

Finding God in a Storefront at the Mall



Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

The Rev. Murray Bodo with a family at a mall near Cincinnati. His order, the Franciscans, offered shoppers rest, coffee and an ear.

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN
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COLERAİN TOWNSHIP, Ohio — Several days into the Christmas shopping season at the Northgate Mall here, the Rev. Dan Anderson stood improbably in a storefront between Sci-Fi City and the Loveable You Portrait Studio. An older couple, strolling past, slowed down to regard him.

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Father Anderson, 66, wore the brown habit of the Franciscan friar, its plain humility broken only by a name tag affably identifying him as Dan. The former shoe store that he occupied contained holiday decorations, a brimming coffeepot and a life-size statue of the order's founder, St.

Francis of Assisi. On one table rested a glass fishbowl for prayer requests.

The couple asked Father Anderson if they could confess, and he guided them to a quiet corner. They spoke, he listened, and as the minutes passed, 15 or more, they gathered the courage to ask their question of both the friar and the universe: A relative of theirs had committed suicide. Was he in heaven?

As startling as the encounter may have been, it was also the precise reason Father Anderson and about 25 other friars based nearby in Cincinnati had set up temporary shop at the Northgate Mall. They opened their doors on Black Friday, which they promptly

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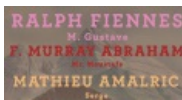
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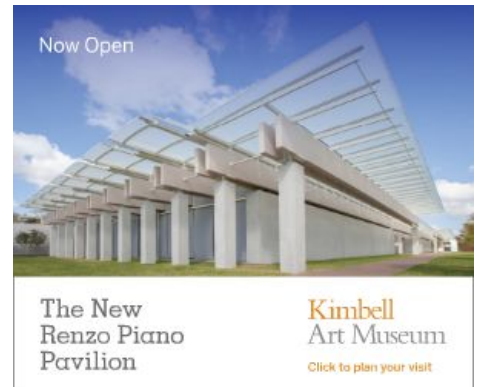
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renamed Brown Friday in wry reference to their clothing, and they will remain until the afternoon of Christmas Eve.

“It’s from the basis of Franciscan theology,” Father Anderson said. Referring to St. Francis, he continued, “For him, the ultimate wonder is that God loved us enough to be one of us. And he was one of us in the simplicity and vulnerability of a child.”

The Rev. Jeffrey J. Scheeler, 61, the provincial minister for the Franciscans in a large portion of the Midwest, took his scriptural inspiration from John 1:14. While a central phrase in the verse is commonly translated along the lines of, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” Father Scheeler said he preferred an alternative rendering: “He pitched his tent among us.”

How a tent in ancient Judea became a storefront in a Cincinnati suburb is a particularly Franciscan story. In recent months, the world has seen a Jesuit priest [take on the papal name of Francis](#) and vividly express what Father Scheeler described as “the Franciscan spirit — humble, flexible, open to change, caring for the poor.”

For more than a century, the Franciscans in Cincinnati have put their imprint on schools, parishes, sports programs and social services. Their efforts, which once served German immigrants in the working-class neighborhood fittingly called Over-the-Rhine, now reach deeply into African-American and Hispanic communities, including many non-Catholics.

Even so, the ranks of the province that includes Cincinnati, officially known as St. John the Baptist Province, have dwindled to about 160 friars from more than 600 a half-century ago. [Roger Bacon High School](#), one of the Franciscans’ proudest institutions, now has just a handful of friars on its faculty.

The notion of bringing ministry to the mall began simply enough last September, when Father Scheeler stopped by Northgate after celebrating Mass at a suburban parish. He was struck by the number of vacant storefronts: evidence that the nation’s asymmetrical recovery from the recession had largely bypassed this middle-class area, still reliant on industry and manufacturing.

“We just wanted to be a presence,” he said. “We wanted to go into the marketplace, into people’s midst. We weren’t trying to convert anyone. We didn’t want to sell anything. We just wanted to bring welcome and hospitality. Just come in and have a cup of coffee.”

With a formal endorsement from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Father Scheeler set about choosing a storefront, which the mall’s owners gave the Franciscans rent-free. The friars replaced the burned-out light bulbs, swept up the dust and installed a crèche, a Christmas tree and an Advent wreath. Then they waited to see what would happen.

One day, a Greek Orthodox priest stopped in while his wife was shopping at a Macy’s store down the hall. Another time it was a Catholic woman who had stopped attending church 45 years ago but still said the rosary and wanted to know if she had to take a class before returning to Mass. (Not required, Father Scheeler assured her, but available if you want it.)

Becky and Ryan Ponatoski were taking a breather last Saturday beside some empty choral risers after the hazardous duty of shopping with three children younger than 6. Michael Radomski, 53, a friar from Detroit who had come to help his Cincinnati brethren, called out to the couple, “Want a cup of coffee?”

Half an hour later, they were still in the Franciscans’ storefront, chatting with Brother Radomski while their children sipped hot chocolate. “It’s nice to have a conversation about prayer and being kind to others and giving,” said Ms. Ponatoski, a human-resources manager. “It’s the way we want to raise our kids.”

Not all the interchanges, of course, resolve so easily or happily. After the friars’ first week at the mall, Father Scheeler gathered up the prayer requests that were filling the fishbowl. Several asked for prayers to find a job.

As for Father Anderson and the older couple, he confided to them about a nephew of his who, like their relative, had taken his own life.



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“I told them what my faith tells me,” Father Anderson recalled. “And my faith tells me that God is all-knowing and all-forgiving and all-embracing.”

The couple, seemingly soothed, returned to the maelstrom of Christmas shoppers. Father Anderson went back to the motherhouse that night certain that, even if not one more person came to the storefront before it closed, divinity had been there.

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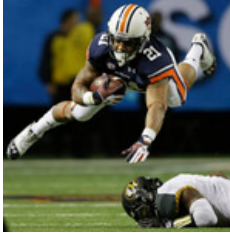


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