

Hold tight, please, on the Mercy Bus

A Salford priest found an original way to promote the Pope's special year of prayer and bring a breath of fresh air back into the sacrament of Confession. AM CONSTANTLY describing Pope Francis as "an inspiring figure" and then afterwards asking myself: What exactly has he inspired me to do?

PHOTO: CNS PHOTO, COURTESY DIOCESE OF SALFORD



If you ask Fr Frankie Mulgrew that question, he has a solid answer. He responded to the Pope's Year of Mercy by creating the "Mercy Bus". This was an actual bus, which was driven around the Salford Diocese all through Lent earlier this year offering blessings and Confession wherever it stopped.

Fr Frankie got the idea from the Mercy Ships – hospital ships that sail the oceans to the poor areas around the world offering healthcare and simple operations.

"The Pope said we need to walk with the people," Fr Frankie explained. "Even when they are walking away."

Confession is a dying sacrament, so Fr Frankie decided to take it out into the world, to see if some fresh air could revive it. He and his team hired a bus from a local bus company and had it painted up in bright Year of Mercy livery. They took the plans for the Mercy Bus to a public papal audience in Rome and Fr Frankie managed to wedge himself at the front of the crowd and show them to the Pope.

When the Pope agreed to pose for a photo with the plans, Fr Frankie crowded in next to him and gave the camera a thumbs-up. It was a brilliant image and the profile of the project was suddenly raised enormously. Of course, having an idea is one thing; getting it out on to the street is another. Although

we are told to go and spread the Gospel, approaching strangers with the Good News is most people's idea of hell. But Fr Frankie is a former comedian and he devised a perfect

ice-breaker for his team to use. They got hold of thousands of Miraculous Medals and he and his team would stop people in the street, offering a "free gift blessed by the Pope". Once the conversation had started, he would invite people on to the bus for a blessing. If they accepted the blessing, they would then be offered Confession. It worked. Fr Frankie had set the bar for success very low. "If we just reach one person it would be worth it," he said. In fact, 14,000 people came on to the bus.

Many of the visitors to the Mercy Bus had the most profound experiences. One young man was extremely reluctant to come aboard but kept shoving his girlfriend forward. "I won't take a medal," he said, "but she will." But, once she had taken a medal, he also took one. "I won't come on the bus, but she will". The girl asked if the blessing would make her rich. "It doesn't work like that," said Fr Frankie. "It's more about spiritual enrichment." She got on board and then Fr Frankie turned to her boyfriend. "Go on, go on," he said. "You know you want to." The couple stayed on board with the Mercy Bus team for 10 minutes. Afterwards, the young man made a beeline for Fr Frankie. "That was amazing," he said.

There were many stories of people making their confessions after lapses of decades and of people saying they would return to the Church. But the bus did not just appeal to lapsed Catholics. Agnostics, Protestants, people who had never been baptised – many of whom had recently experienced illness or bereavement – all ventured aboard in such numbers that the team had to persuade the recently-ordained Salford priest Kevin Murphy – who was returning from Rome – to stuff his luggage with 10,000 extra medals to keep the operation going. The team back in Salford prayed him right through security.

The Mercy Bus became so popular and so well regarded that the bus company decided to retain its livery for the rest of this year. It was – literally – a moving witness to an eye-catching, simple but powerful idea.

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