



Poverello News



March 2009

(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org



Ní heaspa do dith carad.

There is no need like the lack of a friend.
(Irish proverb)

I heard an interesting factoid a few years ago. St. Patrick's Day is celebrated more vigorously here in the U.S. than in Ireland. I think that says something about the Irish influence in America.

One of the places one could always find the Irish, and Irish-Americans, was in the Catholic Church. Most baby boomer Catholics can still remember growing up with Irish priests and nuns, some of whom spoke with the old-country brogue. Those men and women of the cloth were stalwart and often flinty, probably influenced by life's difficulties in Ireland, or by growing up as children of immigrants here in America. Their faith was unshakable.

Certainly my life was deeply influenced by Father Simon Scanlon, who was an Irish-American priest. When things were at their nadir for me, I discovered Father Simon and the San Francisco Poverello, and the rest is history.

The Irish proverb quoted above really applied to me. I didn't know what friendship meant. I knew a lot of people, but our connections to each other were based on mutual interest in drugs, drinking, sex and violence. I was empty inside; I really had no one with whom I could connect at the level that my soul craved.

When I met Father Simon, I knew he was different from anyone else I had ever encountered. We were separated by a generation, as he

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was old enough to be my dad; he was devoutly religious, whereas I was completely irreligious. I think what drew me to him was his inner happiness, which was a mystery to me, and his complete acceptance of me, with all my follies and sins.

When I think about St. Patrick, I imagine him to be much like Father Simon. Both men had traumatic experiences when they were young. St. Patrick was kidnapped and enslaved by the Irish, and Father Simon entered World War II. These were horrifying and life-changing events in both men's lives.

Rather than turning them to bitterness, however, these situations led them both to discover their God in a profound way, and gave them immense empathy for people who were lost. Patrick, once he was established in the church, went back to Ireland because, despite his ill-treatment as a slave, Christ had given him a great love for the wild, pagan Irish people. Father Simon, upon becoming a priest, worked at one of the most difficult parishes imaginable: the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. He too had an immense love for the hopelessly lost people in that dangerous neighborhood.

Today at Poverello House, I see the truth of the Irish proverb. The people who come here can't trust, because the streets rob you of both trustworthiness and the ability to believe in others. Deception, violence,

threats, loneliness and disappointment are the daily fare of the homeless. They may have many acquaintances, but most don't know anything about true friendship.

On St. Patrick's Day, it might be good to pause amid the festivities and remember the contributions of those tough old Irish priests and nuns, especially the toughest old priest of all, St. Patrick. Because of their example and persevering love, there are places today such as Poverello House, where those who lack friends can find their deepest needs met.



Mike

Unlikely Prospects

For over thirty-six years, Poverello House has been serving the poor and homeless. A critic might ask the question, what has all of this accomplished? When you look around this area, are things any better than they were back then?

About one-third of Fresno County residents are living below the federal poverty level. Our jails are filled to overflowing with people who will, in all likelihood, recommit crimes upon release. If anything, drug addiction is more rampant than in 1973, when Mike McGarvin started Poverello, and more drugs are available on the streets today. Just south of Poverello House, under the freeway overpasses, another shantytown of homeless people living in tents and lean-to shelters is flourishing, if that's the right word to use. What, the critic asks again, has changed?

To be honest, many of us at Poverello House often ask ourselves the same question. The frustration of feeling as if all our work has no impact is utterly demoralizing at times. Occasionally, though, something happens that silences our inner critics and makes us feel that maybe it's all worthwhile, after all.

Every year during the Christmas holidays, Amici del Poverello Guild sponsors a party for Poverello residents and their families. Alumni of the Resident Program are always invited, but in the past, few came. This year, ten men and their families returned to attend the party. All of the former rehab program residents have maintained long-term abstinence from drugs and alcohol, are involved in twelve step programs or churches, and are actively improving their lives.

Their stories are varied, even though all of them started out at the same place. The common denominator in all of their narratives is the overwhelming obsession with drugs, which brought each of them to the brink of destruction.

What is inspiring about the return of these men is the contrast they provide to those who *don't* make it. We often hear the tragic stories of men who turned back to drugs and alcohol after leaving Poverello. Some have died through overdose, drug-related violence, or diseases contracted through their addictions. One young man was sentenced to prison for murdering another man in a drug deal gone bad. Another

was found dead in a canal, an apparent suicide. Most, however, we see again on the streets, eating at Poverello House and living a pathetic, zombie-like existence. For the men in our Resident Program, happy endings are few and far between.

There is always the possibility that someone who discovers sobriety may yet start drinking or using drugs again, so even the ten men who returned don't yet have a final happy ending. It might be better to say that their happy ending is a work in progress; or, maybe, that they have ceased writing their own horror story.

Some of those who came to the party had stumbled and used drugs again; however, even these men returned to the sanity of abstinence and living a life based on spiritual principles. Some of them have done amazing things. One man named Victor reunited with his wife and six children, and then added to his responsibilities by taking in some children of relatives. These relatives themselves have drug problems, and were no longer able to care for their kids. Victor and his wife have trouble making ends meet, but they continue to stay sober, trust in God for their needs, and are daily working to make life better for their now *very* large family.

Others have had setbacks that in the past would have sent them running to the drug dealer. Instead, they now look to God, to the people of A.A. or N.A., or those in their churches for help. They keep plugging along, and, little by little, they are building new lives on a solid foundation.

We're familiar with the cynical aphorism, "The more things change, the more things stay the same." At first glance around the Poverello neighborhood, it would be easy to come to the same conclusion. However, at Poverello House, we know that it's necessary to look a little deeper and longer in order to perceive the reality that God is indeed doing new, exciting, and often surprising things in people who, at one time, had little for which to hope.



Continued Thanks

by Kathryn Weakland

Last month, we thanked many, but not all, who donated food and other material goods to Poverello House over the holidays. Space and our printing deadline allowed us to mention only those contributions received from October to November. The Poverello staff, board of directors, and the people we serve would like to thank the following companies, groups, and individuals for the generous in-kind donations received during December:

Baird Middle School, Burlington Coat Factory and “One Warm Coat Drive”, Butler Construction, Carrow’s, Citi Financial, City of Fresno Airports Department, Computech Middle School, Costco, Dibudio Land Management, Deli Delicious, Freedom Elementary, Fresno Convention Center, Fresno County Hell’s Angels Toy Drive, Fresno Heart Surgical Center, Fruit Fillings, California State University Fresno – Food Service, California State University Fresno – Farm Market, Foster Farms, Food Maxx, Kohl’s, Kaiser Permanente, Lithia Ford of Fresno, Mepco, Men-Ed’s Pizzeria, N.K.R.S. Trucking, Nabisco Co., OK Produce, Payroll People, Pelco, Producers Ice Cream, Save Mart Grocery, Silver Dollar Hofbrau, Silco, Saladino’s, Art & Gay Spierer, Titus Enterprises Inc., Valley Chrome Painting, Valley Surgical Specialist, Washington Academic Middle School, Wiebe & Associates, and Winco.

Also, we would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all of our wonderful volunteers who donate their labor throughout the year. We are so thankful for your service, because we simply couldn’t do it without you.

To those who contribute monetary donations that help keep our doors open, please know that your gifts make a tremendous difference in our mission, and that you are a great blessing to the poor and homeless. We really cannot thank you enough.

We apologize for not being able to list any donations received after the printing deadline, and appreciate your understanding. However, your gifts are a godsend, and go a long way toward supporting and improving the services offered at Poverello House.

A Right and Proper St. Patrick's Day

With Mike McGarvin as the head Irishman at Poverello, you can be sure we won't forget to wear the green and greet St. Patrick's Day properly! We'll have Irish music, and of course, a traditional Irish meal. You could help us celebrate by donating some corned beef, cabbage and potatoes. If you are able to donate, you can bring the food down to us here at 412 F Street, or call (559) 498-6988 for more information. Erin go bragh!

Poverello Ponderings...

Is gaire cabhair Dé ná an doras.
(God's help is nearer than the door.)—Irish proverb

If I have any worth, it is to live my life for God so as to teach these peoples; even though some of them still look down on me.
—Saint Patrick

May the strength of God pilot us, may the wisdom of God instruct us, may the hand of God protect us, may the word of God direct us. Be always ours this day and for evermore. —Saint Patrick

Wish List

Corned beef * Cabbage * Potatoes
Disposable razors * Deodorant
Business envelopes (size 10)
Men's tee-shirts * Men's underwear * Jeans

Remember, we now take credit card donations. Please see the enclosed envelope for instructions.

To donate online, visit our website at www.poverellohouse.org

Poverello House

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Who Are We? A nonprofit, nondenominational organization that believes in the dignity of every human being. Our mission is to enrich the lives and spirits of all who pass our way, to feed the hungry, offer focused rehabilitation programs, temporary shelter, medical, dental and other basic services to the poor, the homeless, and the disadvantaged unconditionally, without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex or disability, through Providential and community support. We have been operating since 1973 and are governed by a Board of Directors, consisting of local volunteer business men and women.

Future Goals? To provide additional facilities for increased services.

How Are We Funded? Primarily through private donations from individuals, churches, businesses, and community organizations; and through United Way. Rules for acceptance and participation in the programs of Poverello House are the same for everyone, without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex or disability.

