

# Poverello News



November 2011

(559) 498-6988

[www.poverellohouse.org](http://www.poverellohouse.org)



Several years ago, just before Thanksgiving, someone donated a turkey to us that was over fifty pounds. It was an absolute monster, the biggest gobbler I'd ever seen.

I figured that the meat from that bird would take care of several families on Thanksgiving Day. We made a big deal about it; we thanked the donor, of course, but we also mentioned the turkey to some of the news outlets that make their way down here on the holidays, and at least one station took some footage and showed the prize turkey on the air.

We were curious to discover just how much meat this big boy would provide, so it was with great anticipation that it was prepared and placed in the oven. Later that day, I went to our chef to ask how it came out. He looked at me and sighed.

"Well... the boys burned it."

"Whaddaya mean they burned it?" I asked in stunned disbelief.

"They just... burned it up. Nothing salvageable. I guess they weren't paying attention."

This wasn't the first time that our drug program cooks had done something like this. I remember one time when lettuce prices were sky-high, and we received several crates of lettuce as a donation. I was elated, because it meant plenty for salads and hamburger trimmings at a time we couldn't afford to buy this produce item.

Our program cook at the time was a man who claimed to be a professional chef. I walked through the kitchen, and saw him happily

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washing the lettuce—in scalding water. By the time I caught him, he had washed over three-quarters of the supply, rendering it wilted and useless.

In the real world of Poverello, our blessings are mixed, more often than not. Those donations mentioned above seemed like such a god-send at the time, but their usefulness was short-lived, thanks to some kitchen bumbling.

Sometimes an apparent success is followed, not by more success, but by crashing failure. Murphy's Law, as well as human tendencies toward incompetence, corruption, or indifference, tends to add the possibility that something good can quickly or eventually go bad.

I've always believed that God opens doors, but I've also learned that I can be very presumptuous about what constitutes an "open door". Sometimes my wishful thinking makes something *seem* like God's will. I'm sure when that turkey and lettuce came in, I thought, "The good Lord has provided again!" When they were ruined, it came as a shock. What the heck could God be doing to tease us with a needed gift, and then take it away through others' ineptitude?

In the Old Testament Book of Jonah, the last chapter has a curious little side story. Jonah, surely the most sullen prophet in the Bible, gets ticked off at God and goes out to sulk in the desert. The Lord then causes a plant to grow rapidly and provide Jonah with shade, which pleases the mooney prophet to no end. Shortly thereafter, God sends a worm to attack the plant and kill it, and the sun beats down on Jonah. The prophet is not amused. God's purpose for these acts was to teach Jonah a lesson, but he was too busy feeling sorry for himself to try to understand what God was doing.

I've come to the conclusion that life is what it is; we receive good things that give us joy and hope, but many times, these same things are taken away. I find it helpful to try and be thankful at all times, in all circumstances, because like Jonah, I seldom know what God has in mind. For all of us, our job is always to be faithful to our calling, and in my experience, gratitude is a prerequisite for faithfulness; it is the fuel that drives faithful perseverance.

Thanksgiving is a holiday that reminds me to be grateful. The difficult part is to remember to keep that attitude throughout the rest of the year, when things don't always work out quite the way I expect them to.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike". The letters are slanted and have a casual, cursive feel.

# Cruel Kindness

Is it kindness to give a few dollars to a beggar who is likely to spend it on alcohol? Do I have the interest or ability to determine actually what his problem is, and if I should, how I should help him? Or is it easier to give him money? Of course it is, for it makes me feel good, as I may call it kindness.

—David Mamet

Over the past few years, the number of panhandlers in Fresno has proliferated. The social sciences will offer many explanations: a sour economy forcing more people onto the streets; increasing desperation of newly and existing homeless people; or our society's inability to provide for the needy. These are plausible explanations, but like all hypotheses in the realm of social sciences, they lack one thing: scientific verification. Social problems are, by their nature, never amenable to empirical testing, because human behavior cannot be reduced to a simple cause and effect. There are too many variables involved, including genetics, environment, individual temperament, and volition.

So why are so many grim-faced people now at freeway on-ramps, traffic medians, or busy intersections, holding signs imploring passersby to help? And is there a qualitative difference between those who hold signs that say, "Homeless, please help, God bless," and those whose signs proclaim candidly, "Why lie? Need beer!"?

In the absence of empirical explanations, it is often best to defer to historical precedent, experience and common sense. At Poverello, we would like to think that, in this matter, we are fortunate enough to possess all three.

More than two decades ago, our local newspaper ran an article on



this very topic. It featured a sad-looking man who panhandled daily with his cute little dog, along a busy thoroughfare. When the reporter interviewed him, he was remarkably transparent about his motives.

He was a long-time heroin addict, he said. He was fond of his diminutive terrier, but mostly he used the dog to elicit sympathy from motorists. He made a very decent amount of money each day from begging, which he admitted went to support his heroin habit.

Indignant letters to the editor followed from people who were appalled at the man's deception. In response, the paper found the man and re-interviewed him. This time, he was angry, and said the original article ruined his prospects for begging, because people were now wary about giving him money. The irony was lost on him.

By the way, the man was a regular at Poverello House. After a long day of solicitation, he would come and eat dinner here. He never showed any desire to stop using heroin. He still eats here regularly.

The tragic fact is, most of the begging people with sad stories and creative signs are on street corners to support drug or alcohol habits. They beg for one reason: it works. If it wasn't profitable, they wouldn't waste their time. Their efforts finance their supply of meth, crack, heroin or booze.

There are two reasons people give money to the beggars: guilt, and a misdirected desire to relieve that guilt. When you're on your way to work in a nice, late-model car, enjoying your morning latte, the sight of a bedraggled beggar can make you feel terrible about the obvious income disparity between you and him. Although panhandlers help create or exacerbate guilt simply by their presence, they also provide an easy escape for the guilty conscience: just throw in a dollar or two, and you can feel immediate relief.

However, as playwright David Mamet discovered, this is ultimately an act that hurts the homeless beggar more than it helps him. It relieves our burden of our guilt, but it simultaneously enables a very ill person stay sick or get sicker. It helps the addict to continue buying the very substance that is killing him.

There is no easy answer to this dilemma. As long as people give money to street beggars, they will continue to beg; as long as they receive money, they will continue to commit slow-motion suicide with their drug or alcohol use. However, knowing these facts doesn't help

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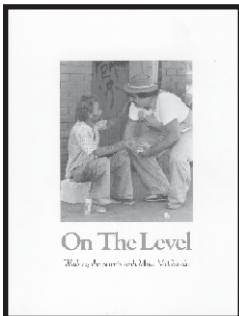
relieve the pain good people feel when they see a beggar; nor does it provide a positive outlet for their desire to help a fellow human being.

It is important to remember that there are organizations in town that address the very real needs of homeless people. The fact is, the homeless don't have to beg. They can come to Poverello House to receive meals, clothing, showers, medical and dental care, residential drug recovery, and temporary shelter. They can go to the Fresno Rescue Mission and get food, overnight beds, Bible-based drug recovery, and job training. The Salvation Army has myriad services including residential drug recovery, social services, and groceries. Food Not Bombs provides meals at Roeding Park on the weekends for homeless people, and many churches and other groups distribute meals on the streets in southwest Fresno several days a week.

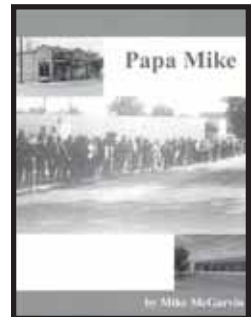
If you have real concerns about the people you see begging, give them the names and phone numbers of these organizations, rather than giving them money. Support a homeless service organization of your choice with monetary donations, in-kind gifts, or volunteer hours. Such steps may not give you the immediate satisfaction that you get when you hand someone a dollar, but these actions will have a far more beneficial effect. By joining the efforts of those who have worked with the homeless for decades, you are actually increasing the odds that a desperate man, woman or family on the street will have a fighting chance to have a better life.

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## A Poverello Tradition



In 1993, *On the Level: Walking the Streets with Mike McGarvin* was published. It is a photographic compilation of some of the



best of Founder Mike McGarvin's homeless portraits. In 2003, Poverello House was able to offer a companion

volume entitled *Papa Mike*. *Papa Mike* is Mike McGarvin's autobiography and his history of Poverello House. You can purchase either book for \$20 each, and all proceeds will benefit Poverello House. Thinking ahead to Christmas, these books would make very meaningful gifts.

To order the books, just fill out the form below, clip it out, and send it with your check, money order or credit card number to:

Poverello House  
P. O. Box 12225  
Fresno, CA 93777-2225

Please send me \_\_\_\_\_ copy(ies) of Mike McGarvin's book, *On the Level* (\$20 per copy).  
Please send me \_\_\_\_\_ copy(ies) of Mike McGarvin's book, *Papa Mike* (\$20 per copy).

METHOD OF PAYMENT:

- Check/Money Order enclosed (Make checks payable to Poverello House)
- Credit Card

\_\_\_\_\_  
TYPE OF CARD (VISA, MASTERCARD)

\_\_\_\_\_  
ACCOUNT NUMBER / EXPIRATION DATE

\_\_\_\_\_  
CARDHOLDER SIGNATURE

\_\_\_\_\_  
CARDHOLDER TELEPHONE #

## *November Wish List*

Turkeys (we need 800 to 1,000; *any* turkey donation will be greatly appreciated)  
Canned sweet potatoes \* Pumpkin pies  
Warm men's clothing

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

*To donate online, visit our website at [www.poverellohouse.org](http://www.poverellohouse.org)*

# Poverello House

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## FORWARDING SERVICE REQUESTED

**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.



United Way of Fresno County  
Member Organization