

# *Poverello News*



**October 2009**

**(559) 498-6988**

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



St. Francis was known to have a reverence for all of God's creation, and stories (myth or fact?) arose about his otherworldly ability to communicate with animals. Such was the story of the Wolf of Gubbio. In a nutshell, here it is:

The little Italian town of Gubbio was terrorized by a man-eating wolf. Francis went out to meet the wolf, and rather than get eaten, he dominated the canine with love and authority, calling it "Brother Wolf." Francis managed to convince him that eating Gubbio villagers was a great wrong. The wolf publicly repented and never again killed a human being.

Many see the story as a metaphor for various things, such as our kinship with creation, or even urban peacemaking, for example. On the other hand, from my simple point of view, I like to think of it as a good ol' dog story.

As a Third Order Franciscan, my first priority is to show an active love for suffering people. However, I've always had a great affection for dogs. Here at Pov, we have had plenty of human and dog interactions over the years. None can rival the tale of the wolf of Gubbio, but they are touching, and sometimes funny. As this year's tribute to the Feast Day of St. Francis, I offer a few of these narratives.

About ten years ago, my family said goodbye to our basset hound. Ruffles had been a wonderful, comical dog. I had been fond of bassets for a long time, and he was our third one. He was old and sick, and one day he just lay down and died. All of us cried a good long time,

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and I told my wife that I never wanted another dog. I figured it was too much work and emotional pain for my golden years

Well, Mary recently bought two dogs. I was dead-set against it, but she's had a rough year, and when we have arguments, I seldom come out on the winning side. Once we got them, as I saw the joy on her face when her little "babies" were romping all over her, I overlooked the mess they made in the house. We own dogs again.

I'm not the only one on F Street who cares for some pooches. A surprising number of homeless people have dogs. Probably because many feel that humans have failed them, they adopt pets. Even though they can barely take care of themselves, a dog gives them reassurance and unconditional love.

One man brought a sick puppy onto our property. The dog suddenly had some kind of seizure. Desperate, the man tried to give it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. (Just when we thought we'd seen everything, this happens.) It was a weird and pathetic thing to do. The puppy died, its expiration possibly hastened by its owner's efforts to save it. That grown man cried like a baby.

In spite of the many sad stories, some homeless dog/man tales are humorous. A man named Kirk brightened my day with his.

Kirk had acquired a Chihuahua named Ray-Ray. One day a pit bull grabbed the little dog and tore into him. By the time someone could get him away from the attacker, Ray-Ray had a badly-injured leg, all bloody, bitten up and the bone shattered.

Kirk didn't have the funds necessary to take Ray-Ray to a veterinarian, so I scraped together some money and helped out. The vet set the bone and put on a splint, but warned that it might develop an infection, in which case the dog would lose his leg.

I knew Kirk was very fond of Ray-Ray, and I wondered if he was worried. I asked him how he felt about the possibility of an amputation, fearing he'd be greatly saddened if it came to that. He shrugged, and said, "Well, if that happens, I guess I'll have to rename him 'Tripod.'"

Apparently, if you're on the street long enough, you learn to roll with the punches.



Mike

## Reflections of a Franciscan

*Every October, Poverello celebrates the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, on October 4. "Poverello," which means "little poor man" in Italian, was the nickname of St. Francis, and the name of the coffeehouse that our founder, Mike McGarvin, discovered in San Francisco. In that little coffeehouse, Mike met Father Simon, the priest whose influence changed the direction of his life. We present here a short meditation written in 1972 by Father Simon for the Franciscan journal, Way.*



*Father Simon Scanlon*

THE VIOLENCE SEEMS ALMOST UNREAL NOW. Though we operate our Coffee House in the eye of a hurricane of violence, it was the first time it had broken out within our walls, though we have been serving the area for five years. A young man, high on speed, an abominable drug pushed in the area, went berserk. We removed him from the premises with only minor damage to another member of the staff and to me. But afterwards, our little cat, Janis, was trembling for a long time and eventually became nauseated and vomited. The violent incident affected the gentle little creature very much. It required two days of the gentleness to which she is accustomed before she recovered.

The whole incident caused me to do some deep thinking. I realized how much the universe is one, affected along the way by what any of us do. As Chardin puts it: a man blaspheming, alone in his room, upsets the entire order in the universe; a man lost in a forest, sitting on a log and loving his fellow man and wanting the Kingdom of God is making peace.

We want it both ways but we simply cannot have it both ways... We cannot hold onto our prejudices and grudges and not expect fights and riots. We cannot cheat in business and in making out our income tax and not have crime in the streets.

In this issue (of *Way*) we have something to say about crime in the "bad neighborhoods." Permit me something to say about crime in

“good neighborhoods.” A family close to me, who live in a very affluent suburb of one of our major cities, suffered the crime of burglary twice within a few months. The burglars were apprehended and the family had to appear at the police station to make a complaint and to check on the items reported stolen in the burglaries.

Some items, e.g., money, had been spent; jewelry had been disposed of to a fence; clothing was still in possession of the burglars when arrested, as was a movie camera and was in the police station for safekeeping. After checking the list, the burglars said they wanted to make a comment. This was the comment: “We pulled 203 jobs in the suburb during the last 18 months. This is the only list turned in by any of our victims which was not greatly padded by listing large amounts of cash, expensive jewelry and appliances and clothing which we never saw.” And, when they went to get the items turned into the police station for safekeeping, they were gone.

Perhaps the thing to do to reduce crime is not to repeal the laws in the bad neighborhoods, but to begin keeping them in the good neighborhoods.

—Simon Scanlon, O.F.M.

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## **Holidays Upon Us? What, Already?**

As the thermometer goes down in October, we in Fresno are finally treated to some cooler fall weather, and reminded that the long Central Valley summer is over. At Poverello, we’re also reminded that the holidays are around the corner. It may seem early, but here at the Pov, we have to start thinking about Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Economically, it’s been a very rough year for the Central Valley. However, our donors have continued to support our mission, so that none of the services we offer have been interrupted in the past year. We hope to do the same in the coming year, and a big part of making sure that happens is to receive sufficient donations over the holidays. Did you know that the majority of donations to Poverello House annually are given between Thanksgiving and Christmas? Watch in the next two newsletters for specific needs, and thank you once again for your faithfulness.

## Longevity Vs. Decline

Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. As much as things change, so much stays the same. The lean, withered people passing through the food line today are eerily similar to the ones that first queued up when Mike McGarvin started handing out food on the street almost four decades ago.

Some of the changes are obvious: there are more families using our services, crack and meth have overtaken heroin and PCP as the primary drugs of choice, and Poverello is now capable of providing better and more sophisticated services than it was in 1973, when it was largely a one-man operation. But the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Poverello House has passed through thirty-six years of ups and downs, and we're still here. The original Franciscan vision has broadened to include things that the founder couldn't even have imagined. There has been one constant, however: Mike McGarvin.

Papa Mike still shows up each day, still spreads his own style of quirky, irreverent mirth and earthy spirituality, as he seeks to interact with the poor in a fashion strikingly similar to how he did it as a burly but naive twenty-something man. Papa Mike has changed very little over the decades.

So much of Poverello House is wrapped up in this bigger-than-life man. Its history, its ability to inspire, and its unique "Poverello spirit," are, quite frankly, tied to its founder, whose spiritual origins are Franciscan. We seldom stop asking the question: What happens when Papa Mike is no longer here?

Many organizations go through a recognizable cycle. There are the early years of struggle, followed by growth and stability. Then, there is a major fork in the road. Some organizations follow a pathway that leads to longevity; others take the road to decline.

The Feast Day of St. Francis is a recurring event that reminds Poverello to remember its beginnings. It's not just another excuse to have a special meal here, but it is a day for reflecting upon how intertwined we are with the Franciscan tradition.

It's a sad fact that many, if not most, of the American Catholic orders (priests, monks and nuns) are experiencing declining numbers. Fewer people today feel compelled to embrace the rigorous life of the

Catholic ministry, with its devotion to prayer and service, and its vows of poverty and celibacy. In the past, Catholic missions were staffed by brothers and sisters who had taken on the vocation of the orders; Father Simon and the San Francisco Poverello are good examples of this. Today, organizations such as Poverello House have increasingly filled the void left by priests, monks and nuns who are too few, aging, and stretched too thin.

As the years go by, will Poverello continue to bridge this gap, becoming a permanent and stabilizing force in the community, or will it drift toward the road to decay? When Papa Mike is no longer able to be here, will the Franciscan roots melt away? Does it really matter?

We think it does matter. Organizations must change, just as societies change. However, at Poverello House, we recognize that human nature stays essentially the same; as Aleksandr Sozhenitsyn put it, “Human nature, if it changes at all, changes not much faster than the geological face of the earth.” We face the same issues of human nature today that we did thirty-six years ago, 136 years ago, or 1,036 years ago. The Franciscan revolution in the 13th century was a recognition of human nature in all of its glory and dignity, but also its degradation and suffering. Francis applied the Gospels to the human problem as literally as he could. That’s what Franciscans have always done, and that’s what Poverello has tried to do.

If we are cut off from these ancient roots, there is a danger of drifting away slowly, imperceptibly, until what we know as Poverello House will no longer exist. After all, severed roots lead to dying trees. Thus by celebrating, again and again, the life of St. Francis and the unchanging principles he brought into fruition, we are reminded, at least once a year, that there is a standard to which we should always aspire.

### ***Wish List***

Men’s tee-shirts, shoes & jeans  
Disposable razors \* Deodorant  
Olive oil \* Butter \* Eggs

***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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## RETURN 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