

Poverello News



October 2011

(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org



It's October, the time of year when we celebrate the life of St. Francis. I'm going to tell you three stories, none of which will initially seem to have any relevance to St. Francis, but please bear with me until the end.

One family that comes to Poverello has a little girl who is really out of control. A while ago, she entered the Pov dining room with her mom and siblings, spotted me, and, screaming like a banshee, came running up to me and side-kicked me in a very sensitive spot.

Needless to say, I wouldn't let that girl get within five feet of me after that. One day, I realized that the family hadn't been in to eat in a long time. After that excruciating kick, I wasn't too sad about their absence.

Not too long ago, they reappeared. While I wasn't looking, the girl slipped up behind me. When I turned, I was initially shocked to see her (and, I might add, a little scared). Then she did what I never would have expected: she wrapped her arms around me and gave me a big hug. It was hard to believe that it was the same child.

Lately, people have been thanking me quite a bit. One little alcoholic woman walks by, smiles, and says "Thank you very much!" at least six to ten times before moving on. A Mexican man has wanted to thank me, but never can quite get the "Papa" right in the nickname, "Papa Mike". He'll say, "Thank you, Poopy", or "Thank you, Poppy."

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Big Sue is about my age, but she still has a good eye for a manly man. She often hangs out around the fence surrounding my house. One warm summer day, she called me over and pointed to some city workers across the street, laboring over replacing some sewer pipes. “Papa Mike, can you do me a favor?” she asked. “Would you tell those construction guys to take off their shirts a little earlier?” Apparently, she had things to do and places to go, but she didn’t want to miss this gritty version of a Chippendale’s show.

I have no doubt that St. Francis met people every bit as colorful and humorous as those I described above. One of the things I enjoy about Poverello is the wide array of personalities that make their way to our door. I still remember unique, funny, or tragic people and their stories from three decades past. The poor have a way of being memorable. I’m sure that what Francis loved about the poor were the very things I love about them.



There are precious few rewards in this line of work. Obviously, Francis’s main reward was spiritual, such as a closer walk with God and the knowledge that he was doing the will of the Lord. However, I think he must have also gotten a big kick out of the people he met. The homeless can be exasperating, demanding, and unreasonable, but they can also be charming, truthful, and endearing in ways that you don’t often find in more genteel society. That’s probably one big reason I’ve always felt at ease among the poor; the little joys outweigh the frustrations.

When we think of St. Francis, we often make the mistake of envisioning him as so spiritual that we could never relate to him. I’ve always viewed him in the same light as I viewed the Franciscans I met early on in San Francisco. They had all the flaws that come with being human, but the beauty of these men and women was their dedication to the poor, in spite of their flaws. I believe that Francis was such a man, someone who had a special relationship with God, but who also reveled in the humor, the complexity, and the individuality of every poor person he encountered.

Mike

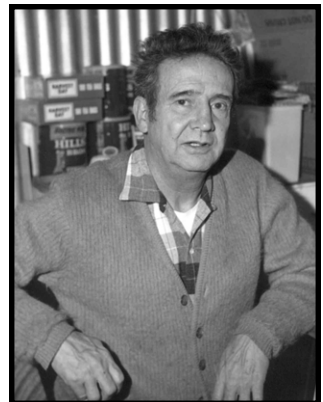
From Poverello's Past

*The Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi is celebrated each year on October 4th. To honor St. Francis, and to honor as well the Franciscans who saved our Founder Mike McGarvin from a life of despair, we occasionally reprint an article by Father Simon Scanlon, Mike's mentor. Father Simon ran the San Francisco Poverello and edited the **Way of St. Francis** journal for many years. This piece is from **Way**, and was originally published in the January-February edition in 1988.*

For Wayfarers...

I watched and prayed along with millions of other people as rescue workers strove to recover little Jessica from that hole; and was not embarrassed to be watching through tears as she finally came up alive. It warmed my heart to see volunteers doing the digging, owners lending the machinery rent free, and the media covering every moment. It felt good to be human.

Later, reflecting on that beautiful example of what we can do, I thought of all the holes in the world and of all the little girls and little boys and big girls and boys who are in them. There are the slums and the ghettos, the pockets of starvation, the villages ravaged by wars, undernourishment which will assure that children will not be able to absorb an education needed to survive in the world. There are people sleeping in doorways, standing in long lines for a meal, waiting vainly in lines for employment, waiting in lines in clinics, dying alone and uncared for in shabby, cold rooms. Why cannot those who have the skills and the resources and the power get them out? Why do not the media carry on a relentless campaign reminding them that they can do it and must do it? If we can do it for little Jessica we can do it for all of them in all the holes. Why do not all of us stand up and shout, "Do it"?



It's Just a Day at the Beach

by Doreen Eley

The capacity of others to give of themselves regardless of their own circumstances continues to amaze. Case in point is some of the residents at the Village and Community of Hope. These homeless individuals go far out of their way to welcome newcomers, resolve disputes, offer a compassionate ear when a fellow resident needs it and just constantly promote the Poverello principles of dignity and respect for all. In addition, they are the first to raise their hands to help out with special projects – be it posing for portraits for the local art museum, consenting to be interviewed by media and Ph.D. students or rising at 4 a.m. to conduct interviews for a study of homelessness. To say thank you for their varied assistance, staff treated them to a day at Pismo beach.

By all accounts, the trip was a rousing success. From the trip down counting port-a-potties along the way to getting a complete stranger to take the group photo – the day featured laughs and a really good time.



Overwhelmingly, the great feeling of ‘getting away’,

‘refreshing’ and ‘relaxation’ was echoed by all. For some, the ocean brings a personal sense of peace often longed for. Being provided money to buy whatever they wanted to eat was especially sweet – seafood is a rarity on the Poverello menu.

For staff, the joy was in watching their faces, watching them enjoy themselves – get out of their everyday routines, and ours too! It was rewarding to have the opportunity to say “job well done” in helping us fulfill our mission. It said again we are all the same, all together on this earth, all God’s children – brothers and sisters – seeking and receiving a helping hand.



Responsibility Fees?

Last summer, an article by the Associated Press detailed a big change in one of the nation's oldest rescue missions. This well-known mission in Southern California began charging a \$7 fee for overnight stays, and cut their three free meals per day to one.

The change was driven both by budget shortfalls in a tough economy, and by a shift in the organization's philosophy. The mission's chief executive believes that the homeless should learn self-sufficiency, and that free services undermine that goal.

Although this may seem heartless to many, early missions operated similarly. In the 19th century, rescue missions and Salvation Army houses would require guests to chop wood or perform some other kind of labor as a condition of receiving services. This idea goes back to the Middle Ages, when in the English Poor Laws, terms such as “sturdy beggars” denoting the able-bodied, and “impotent poor”, indicating someone disabled and in need of charity, delineated different kinds of treatment for the destitute. Such

policies assumed a distinction that many today find offensive. The modern mind may dislike such classifications, but for those who have worked among the homeless, it is just common sense that many people on the streets still have the



capacity to not only work, but also change the direction of their lives, while others, due to mental illness, physical disabilities, or late-stage addiction, cannot.

Poverello House indeed makes such distinctions. Although we would never charge a fee for food services or temporary shelter, or ask anyone to work for their meal, we do require much from the men in our residential addiction recovery program. When they enter the program,

it is assumed that they have the capacity to engage in “work therapy”, that is, assisting Poverello House to perform its services by cooking, cleaning, and providing security. We believe that a vital part of recovery is working, serving others, and being responsible.

The men in our program are treated as “able-bodied” poor. Our goal for them is to attain self-sufficiency, which begins with sobriety. We treat them differently than many on the streets who are unable to help themselves.

Our approach to basic services differs from the new policies of the mission in the article, but we share their goal of encouraging responsibility for those homeless who are capable of making responsible choices. Our hope is to arrest the progress of addiction while there is still time. Addiction is like a train that moves slowly at first. In the beginning, jumping off will hurt, but not badly. However, the longer the train goes on, the faster it goes, until it is impossible to jump off. Similarly, the longer an addiction goes on, the less likely someone in its grip will be able to jump off and stop using drugs.

Poverello will continue to offer free services as a safety net for people who have reached the bottom, who are utterly demoralized, crippled by mental illness, or physically unable to care for themselves. At the same time, we have, on a different level, a demanding program for addicts who still have hope of recovery, and we will not waiver from insisting that they be accountable for their past actions, present behavior, and future destinies.

October Wish List

Men’s shoes

Cold weather clothing (long-sleeved shirts,
sweaters, jackets)

Olive oil * Coffee * Sugar

Turkeys for the holidays

***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 non-profit, 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
unitedway.org



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