

Poverello News



October 2008

(559) 498-6988

www.poverellohouse.org



Everyone in God's world is a soul with a unique history. I think that we should respect the fact that each person is a mystery within a history. Considering my own story, I still think it's pretty implausible, and mysterious, that Poverello House ever got started, or that it is still standing and helping the poor.

Organizations each have unique histories, too, but people within the organization often lose sight of their historical roots. It's a mistake made by many. For example, a lot of ivy-league colleges began as Christian institutions with religious objectives; today, you'd be hard-pressed to find any trace of those beginnings at some of these schools. Maybe it's a modern tendency to view the past as irrelevant, or perhaps we just lose sight of the past in our day-to-day scramble for survival.

Every October, Poverello House celebrates a fairly obscure observance: the Feast Day of Saint Francis. Why? Simply because I never want to forget our roots. My life was saved by a Franciscan priest, laboring anonymously in the most terrible neighborhood in San Francisco. My spiritual lineage is traced to Father Simon, and from him backwards to St. Francis of Assisi. The Franciscan spirit is what animated me in 1973, when I started Poverello by handing out sandwiches on the streets, and it's what I cling to now, when my health is declining and so much around me has changed.

Poverello House isn't the same as it was back then, and that, quite frankly, is a good thing. When I started out, I had in mind a Franciscan kind of place, like Father Simon's Poverello in San Francisco, but the

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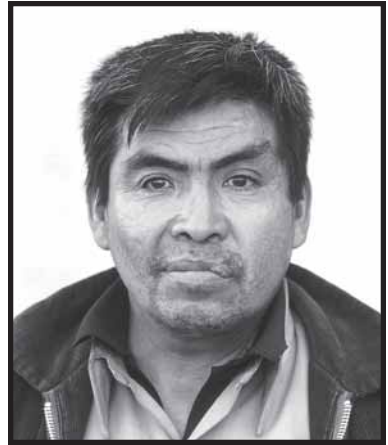
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Fresno Poverello took a few turns and became a very different mission. That doesn't bother me as long as we don't forget where we came from. In a nutshell, our Franciscan heritage informs us that all people are our brothers and sisters, and that each was made in the image of God. That spiritual underpinning can often be lost if we begin to regard our guests solely as "clients" to whom social services are delivered. Professionalism is a good thing, as long as it doesn't turn a brother or sister into a statistical notation used to impress funding sources.

Without reference to our foundation, we really have no mission. Sure, we'd still do a lot of good; but the nature of this business is such that without a spiritual foundation, you get worn down. You tend to forget the spiritual link you have with the homeless, and at some point, you forget that Christ walks among the poor.

As I thought about this, it made me remember Carl. He was a man who didn't want to be a man, and either had hormone shots or surgery to become a woman. It was hard to tell if he was a he or a she, and we had a few confusing arguments about which restroom he would use. He used a lot of drugs around here, and dealt some, too. Over the years, I helped him out a few times. He became very ill, and declined rapidly. Just before his final trip to the hospital, and ultimately his final journey on earth, he thanked me warmly for all I'd done for him, which really wasn't much. What I think he appreciated most, however, was that I accepted him as he was and treated him with kindness and humor, because I believe that Christ dwells within even the most confused and tragic person. Our Franciscan history reminds me of this, often when it's hard to believe it.

In C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, there is a discussion about losing spiritual focus: "Did ye never know...an organizer of charities who had lost all love for the poor? It is the subtlest of traps." That is what happens to a mission like ours that forgets where it came from. May God save us from ever succumbing to that kind of memory loss.



History & Tradition

The history of poverty, and societies' responses to it, is not a topic of high interest to the general public. It should be. Leo Tolstoy asked, "What shall we then do?" in an essay written after a tour of Moscow's homeless and poor. The question reverberates today, and frames political debates, individual responses, and private charitable endeavors. Although in our country we talk endlessly about solutions to poverty, we rarely seem to agree about what to do. Perhaps it's because we don't have much of a historical perspective.

Author Peter Brown, in his book, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, demonstrates that Christianity redefined the status and treatment of the poor between the years 300 and 600 A.D. The idea of loving the poor was a new and radical departure from the Roman idea of a "civic" solution to poverty. "The rich thought themselves as the 'fellow citizens' of a distinctive community—their city," writes Brown. "It was their city they were expected to love." Their city—not the poor.

Love for the poor was preached in the emerging Christian church, and practiced in Christian and Jewish communities. The idea of civic love limited the concept of poverty, and thus responsibility for ameliorating it, in the imaginations of wealthy Roman citizens. The new idea of *loving* the poor opened up society to personal accountability in assisting the needy, as an obligation stemming from love of God and love of man. From that dynamic arose innumerable charitable traditions and institutions within the church.

Yet, all innovations become old, needing periodic revival, and in the twelfth century, Francis of Assisi, by abandoning a life of privilege and dedicating himself to the poor, revitalized charity for centuries to come. Franciscans are now found all over the globe in some of the bleakest, most destitute communities on earth, and have provided inspiration for other non-Franciscans to emulate the order's acts of compassion.

The Franciscan answer to Tolstoy's agonizing question is not an easy one. In the Franciscan worldview, care for the poor is not left to others, to the government, or institutions, but is a spiritual mandate for each of us to fulfill in our own way. It springs from that same novel and

transforming idea that challenged Roman society: God is love, and love for the poor is a visible sign of His work on earth.

Father Simon Scanlon took this all very seriously when he started the Poverello in San Francisco. He chose to work among the worst that the Tenderloin District had to offer, and he suffered for it. He was physically assaulted more than once; he struggled with despair and loneliness. However, he persevered, and one day Mike McGarvin, with an empty soul and a thirst for renewal, wandered into the little Poverello coffeeshouse and met Father Simon. In God’s world, there are no coincidences.

As Father Simon put his life on the line to demonstrate love for the poor, so Mike McGarvin did when he started in 1973 with no visible means of support, working by himself on the always-dangerous streets. Now, thirty-five years later, the same animating spirit works through our hundreds of volunteers. When people help out at Poverello House, they do so with an attitude of service, and because they, too, think that responsibility for care of the poor falls upon their shoulders rather than another’s.

When Poverello House incorporated as a nonprofit organization, the board of directors made the decision to become a nondenominational mission. Franciscans have since visited Poverello, but have never indicated that they thought we weren’t “Franciscan enough.” Rather, they have rejoiced that despite the fact that we are no longer a specifically Franciscan organization, we nevertheless are *very* Franciscan in that the poor are fed, housed, clothed, given medical attention, and, most of all, loved.

So it is that our roots are very deep and they span the centuries. At Poverello, we don’t view ourselves as something new, but as a continuing chapter in the great story of personal, close-up charity that is integral to our religious and civic culture, and has revolutionized the

Western world again and again. In serving the poor, we believe that not only do we hold up a light in a dark and troubled part of our city, but also, that while doing so, we are standing on the shoulders of giants.



Time is Running Out to Purchase your 2008 Home of Hope Ticket

Get a new home for \$100!

Granville Homes is proud to present the 2008 Home of Hope fund-raiser, which benefits Poverello House and seven other local nonprofit organizations. A 2,029 square-foot Pasatiempo home with three bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, and a three-car garage has been built in Granville Homes La Ventana community, located in



northwest Fresno. The home was constructed in collaboration with various partners as the prize for a drawing to be held Saturday, October 11, 2008. Opportunity tickets are available for a \$100 donation. Last year, the Home of Hope event raised \$42,180 for Poverello House. This year, we hope to sell 10,000 tickets, which would mean \$100,000 for Poverello House, money that would directly benefit those we serve at our mission.

In addition to the drawing for the home, there are additional prizes you can win, including a 2007 Suzuki LTF 400 Utility ATV, \$1,000 Warner Company gift card, a Maytag Epic front load washer, and two \$500 gas cards.

The home is completed, and you are welcome to stop by for a tour. For more information, visit WWW.GVHOMEOFHOPE.COM.

Poverello Ponderings...

Father Simon Scanlon was not only a remarkable priest and courageous director of the San Francisco Poverello House, but he was also a prolific writer. He was extraordinarily well read, and had the unique ability to gather spiritual truths from the flinty and violent San Francisco Tenderloin district, where he served with love, compassion, wit, and boldness. The following is an excerpt from the October 1973

issue of *Way*, the Franciscan journal he edited and to which he contributed each month.

If a young addict has mugged you, and beaten or stabbed you after you have already given him your money, you may wonder why he hates you so. I can solve that mystery for you. He does not hate you at all; he hates himself. That will not make the mugging hurt less nor will it restore your stolen money; but it will answer the question “why.”

It is a simple, but not simplistic, fact that the great social problems of our day, which begin as personality problems and become social problems, are due to self-hatred... That is why most rehabilitation programs are doomed to fail, and why lowering crime statistics by legalizing so-called non-victim crimes is an illusion. Only by restoring an atmosphere of self realization, self acceptance, can these problems be solved...

St. Francis of Assisi was privileged to realize many secrets of the Kingdom: the blessing of poverty; the vision of brotherhood; the transcendent value of peace; but perhaps what most distinguishes him among all mere men was his realization of how God loved him just as he was. Knowing how he was loved he could love as no man ever loved before. If we could all realize how we are loved, we might be able to love the confused and sad people we now fear and help them to love themselves and us.

—Simon Scanlon, O.F.M.

Wish List

**Ground beef * Olive oil
8 1/2” x 11” copy paper * Transperant tape refills
Disposable razors * Toothbrushes & toothpaste**

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.



United Way of Fresno County
United Way Organization