

The Canticle

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Voice of
The Community
of St. Francis,
Province of
The Americas

Brother Ass

Our 21st c. knowledge of the functioning of body and mind and our attitudes of holistic care for self and others form quite a different context for Franciscan life than did the 13th c. European context in which Francis lived.

St. Francis is (in)-famous for calling his body “Br. Ass.” His body patiently carried him through life, silently accepting the physical abuse Francis heaped on it, just like a patient little burro. Francis, in step with the piety of his time, felt that physical abuse of his body was an appropriate spiritual discipline.

“The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” Incarnation needs to be firmly tied into the concrete events and images of the baby in the manger and the body on the cross. Jesus at the Last Supper washing the feet of his disciples... Despite this foundation of our faith, there has often been a bias against the body, portraying the body as impure and non-spiritual. But our very identities are bound up with our bodies and with touch. The fetus can touch within a month of conception. Babies touch and explore with their hands before they speak and the way we are touched and handled as infants affects our self-image for better or worse for our entire life. It was in touching the leper, kissing the leper, that Francis’ eyes were opened to the presence of Christ in these most marginalized, feared and despised of people.

The Incarnation was central for Francis and this caused him to focus on the earthly life of the flesh and blood Jesus. This led Francis to reproduce the birth of Jesus at the town of Greccio when he put on the first known Christmas pageant.

Francis was very connected with his emotions and the feelings in his body, if not as respectful as we

would prefer toward that body. Francis was always expressing his emotional state in very physical terms: laughing, crying, singing... At the Stigmata he prayed that he might experience the love Jesus felt for us at his passion and also the pain Jesus felt. The love and the pain go together.

Though Francis seems not to have approved of the extreme of self-mortification as practiced by several sects of his period, occasionally he did go a bit far. When experiencing intense physical temptation on one occasion, Francis first beat himself very severely with his cord saying, “See, Brother Ass...thus it is becoming for you to bear the whip.” However, when the scourging did not have the desired effect he went out into the garden and cast himself naked into a deep pile of snow.

Late in his life Francis confessed to one of his brothers that he had an uneasy conscience about his care of his body, and was still afraid of indulging it too much in times of illness, anxious about providing for it delicacies or extra food. The brother responded by asking Francis how obedient had his body been through the years and the saint admitted that it was obedient in all things, “sparing itself nothing, rushing almost headlong to obedience; shirking no labor and refusing no discomfort.” When the brother then asked Francis, “Where is your generosity toward your body?”, Francis’ reaction was to apologize to Brother Ass.

Thankfully, from our contemporary perspective, Francis did learn that self-denial should be tempered by discretion and include compassion. This is demonstrated in the story of the friar who had fasted too long and was unable to sleep for hunger. Francis put some bread before him and advised him to eat it and, breaking his own fast, Francis began to eat also lest the friar be embarrassed. Then at the end of his life, Francis’ deathbed instructions included a request for Lady Jacoba’s special marzipan that he particularly loved.



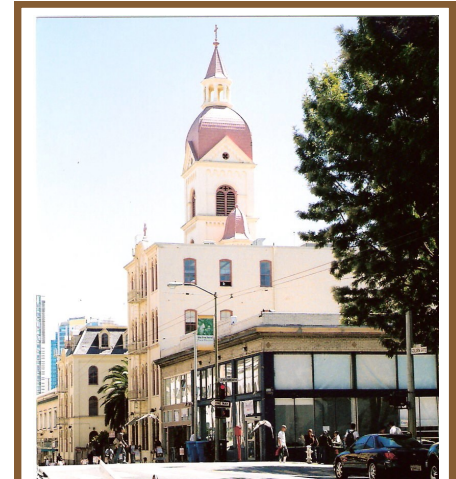
Sr. Pamela Clare practices embodied spirituality by means of Care Through Touch massage at these programs which offer care and respite for poor, ill, and addicted bodies.

St. Boniface Church is the Roman Catholic Franciscan Church in the Tenderloin, San Francisco's skid row. The 19th century German church is bedecked with abundant baroque adornment including brightly colored stained glass windows, painted ceiling and walls, almost-life-size ceramic statues of Francis, Mary, Joseph, and the Sacred Heart, among others. This church is the setting for the Gubbio Project. Gubbio was a town in Italy which became famous when it invited St. Francis to come save them from a killer wolf. In the end Francis was able to reconcile the hungry and marginalized wolf with the fearful townspeople. The Gubbio Project was founded ten years ago (2004) by Franciscan Friar Louis Vitale. The name refers to the hungry and marginalized people living on the streets of the neighborhood and the fearful congregation. Fr. Vitale saw an opportunity for Franciscan reconciliation when he realized that people needed a safe, warm place to be during the day, especially those walking the streets all night. The project aims to break down the stigma surrounding homelessness that keeps the unhoused isolated, feared and disrespected.

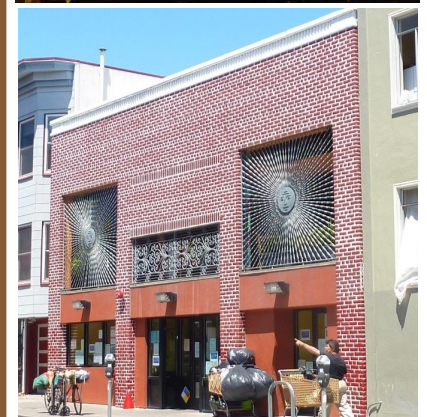
The Gubbio Project offers sacred sleep to homeless men and women between 6 am and 3 pm each day. The pews (and part of the floor at the back) are available for sleeping. It is a place of warmth and refuge for those vulnerable hours of sleep that each human being needs for health of body, mind and spirit. Sleep — most of us take it for granted as we settle for our eight hours in a warm, comfortable, safe bed each night.

Thursday nights are a kaleidoscope of colorful, diverse women for "Ladies Night" at Mission Neighborhood Resource Center. They are old, young, black, white, brown, transgender, disabled...but all are poor. Some live a lonely life in a small hotel room, others are signed up for a shelter bed or a chair to sleep in all night. Others are on the streets or in encampments. Ladies Night offers a variety of activities and resources — dinner, hygiene products, used clothing, art projects, Karaoke, Bingo, fingernail painting, time with social workers, and massage.

The women sit around the long table, enthusiastically talking with each other or hunched silently and alone in the crowd. A mentally ill woman rocks herself back and forth alone in a chair along the wall. A woman on drugs rolls around on the floor. Others dance to the too-loud music. The setting is far from the quiet, clean peacefulness of the spas advertised in the magazines. And yet, the list is full to overflowing as we provide them with a touch of care in their rough world.



St. Boniface Church, site of the Gubbio Project.



Mission Neighborhood Resource Center, where Ladies Night takes place on Thursdays.

Jesus, by your gentle touch and encouraging word, you raised up the woman who had been bent over: Lift up the heads and hearts of those who have been bowed down by the shame and pain of homelessness and abuse. Heal them so that they may stand up with dignity and may praise you through the living of their lives in fullness and in hope. Amen. (adapted from The Rev. Canon Lorna H. Williams, *Women's Uncommon Prayers*).

GUBBIO at St. Boniface Church



The darkened church smells of
incense and dirty socks

Gentle snores and
quiet conversations
—punctuated from time to time
by arguments and accusations
or just plain crazy talk—
rise among the seen-better-days
marble pillars with their gilt cornices

I touch the person seated before me
with gentleness, compassion
and skill
as I gaze out over the 100 pews
covered with blanketed bodies
Multicolored stockinged feet
stick up at all angles
on the hard wooden arm rests

The vault of the apse
at the other end of the church
shows the enthroned Trinity
floating above St. Francis
with the illustrious Franciscan saints
crowded to his right and left

Over my shoulder to the right is a
Pieta — Mary holding the dead body
of her son Jesus
Even the romantic facial expressions
and chipped polychrome paint
can't dim the power of that image
of suffering and loving touch



LADIES NIGHT at Mission Neighborhood Resource Center



Frail older women,
bent over with osteoporosis
Women with missing feet or limbs
from untreated diabetes
Toothless women—
dental care is a privilege of the rich

Shopping carts, wheeled suitcases,
bags carry their worldly goods
Bags aren't too heavy to squeeze in
a little dog—a trusted companion
for a lonely woman
Bandana-d pitbulls,
protectors of fearful women,
pull at cobbled-together leashes

Young street prostitutes
short-shorts and miniscule skirts
torn net stockings and platform heels
or flipflops on bare feet
with bare, bruised, insect-bitten legs
dash in for a quick carryout meal
and a bag of hygiene supplies
Outside pimps hang around the door
impatiently waiting

Old street prostitutes
disheveled, worn,
smeared make-up applied heavily
The street is not a kindly place
for those past their prime

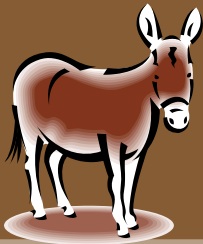


Mother of the Streets, Robert Lentz icon made for Gubbio.

The Canticle

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The Canticle
is the newsletter of the
Community of St.
Francis, a religious
order for women in the
Franciscan tradition in
the Episcopal Church.



Brother Ass

Companions in Franciscan Spirituality

A special kind of guest program—beginning 2015

Women are invited to live, work, worship and study with us as they immerse themselves in learning and living Franciscan Spirituality, Community and Service.

This three week guest program, offered March 21-April 12 and September 15-October 7, will include

- experience of life in a Franciscan community, including work around the house and garden, worship, and community life
- classes in Franciscan Studies
- opportunities to encounter and minister with the urban poor
- spiritual reflection and spiritual direction

Contact us for further information.

Note: We will still be offering our vocational discernment week in July, *Consider Your Call*, for people specifically interested in discerning a vocation to the Religious Life.

Also, our “Companions” program is flexible, so if you are interested but can’t do it for all 3 weeks and/or can’t make the chosen dates, contact us and we can talk about options.

Changes to *The Canticle*.....

The newsletter of the Community of St. Francis, *The Canticle*, has at long last entered the digital age with this issue. If you would like to receive this publication online, please send us your e-mail address.

We will print a limited number of newsletters for mailing to people who have not sent us their e-mail. But we would appreciate e-mail addresses if possible! Thank you!

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