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The Way of St. Francis

A photograph of a stone-paved path leading through a stone wall and buildings towards a valley. The path is made of large, rectangular stones and is flanked by a high stone wall on the left and a row of buildings with tiled roofs on the right. In the background, a valley with fields and trees is visible under a hazy sky. A tall, dark green cypress tree is on the left side of the frame.

Retreat
to Assisi

THE FRANCISCAN FRIARS PROVINCE OF SAINT BARBARA

among the friars

Franciscan Lessons from Mom: Poverty

BY MAUREEN K. DAY

I have a hunch that religious orders' most compelling charisms and practices are rooted in families.

Take, for instance, the Benedictines and their renowned hospitality; families have been making room for others long before St. Benedict suggested the practice. Dominicans take great pride in their preaching. But how many sermons did you hear growing up from parents, aunts, uncles, siblings and more? And while the sermons that are more of an admonishing flavor might stand out, far more often they were—I hope—encouraging and celebratory. Really, parents cornered the market on bringing *caritas* and *veritas* (charity and truth) together millennia before St. Dominic did.

As closely associated Franciscans are with poverty, good and loving families no doubt served as the inspiration for this. As a mom, I'm excited by the ways Franciscans have elevated and developed poverty. But we need to clarify what we mean by poverty in the Franciscan tradition to really appreciate how mothers continue to model this.

Franciscan poverty tends to be sorely misunderstood by those outside our tradition. Many people think of poverty in the negative sense, as a lack of goods. To clarify, I don't mean negative as bad,

but in the sense of taking away or opposing something. For example, there are negative commandments telling you not to do something, like "Thou shalt not steal." There are also positive commandments telling you to do something, like, "Honor your father and mother."

So Franciscan poverty isn't to deny oneself or abstain from material goods. Positive to the core, Franciscan poverty is a deep generosity of all that one has, including oneself.

This understanding of poverty is a fundamentally other-regarding attitude of service and love. It affected Francis' approach to work; in Francis' day nobles and clerics were not expected to engage in manual work. When early Franciscans (both the friars and the seculars) engaged in difficult or socially devalued work—such as farming or care for the sick—they were in solidarity with the poor as well as other laborers.

There is other devalued work, closer to home. Regardless of how unbelievably important and human it is to craft a Halloween costume, plan a birthday party, host Thanksgiving, scrub a toilet, tend to fruit trees and—most of all—raise a human being, it tends to be socially devalued.

In fact, scholars of family studies

Franciscan poverty is positive to the core, something moms know about.

Pictured here at Niagara Falls are Maureen Day and her children, Veronica and David.



Photo courtesy of Maureen K. Day

noted that across nearly every culture, childcare does not routinely fall to “fully adult” men; childcare is typically provided by females of all ages, male children, and elderly men, but rarely by healthy adult men. It is assumed to be beneath them. For Francis to encourage his brothers to engage in socially devalued work put him in solidarity not just with laborers of his day, but with active mothers and fathers today.

Instead of directing our attention to goods or objects, Franciscan poverty focuses on human persons and their spiritual and material needs. This other-regarding way of being and a loose holding of possessions births a joyful asceticism, which facilitates intimacy with Christ and easily witnesses to others that all one needs is this intimacy, rather than material objects.

Once we understand poverty as radical generosity, it is easy to see the ways mothers have done this through the centuries. Francis recognized this in his *Rule for Hermitages*: when a friar was freed for prayer—whom he called “the son”—the friar who attended to his needs was called “the mother.” Mothers are the ones who give, serve, and offer care, ready to put everything aside for the one who is most vulnerable.

But, I want to be sure we can see the

difference between generously giving of oneself and completely depleting oneself. Mothers—and women generally—have been expected to give at the expense of themselves. At an address on the 25th anniversary of John Paul II’s apostolic letter *On the Dignity of Women*, Pope Francis corrects this, saying that “women are called to service, not servitude.”

He continues, “I suffer—speaking truthfully!—when I see in the Church . . . that the role of service that we all have, and that we must have—but that the role of service of the woman slips into a role of servitude.” It happens in our society, in our families, in our Church. We all need to be on guard against this so that maternal generosity comes as a free, life-giving gift, not an exploitative expectation.”

My other concern is that our times are not care-friendly. In *The Second Shift*, sociologist Arlie Hochschild notes that women have been the center of the domestic sphere for centuries. As our markets have become industrialized and moved outside the home, as our economies have become global, as our schools become larger and more professional, and as our neighborhoods are more anonymous, care has gradually been whittled away from many public spheres.

Hochschild argues that families, especially domestic culture, are one of the last

places acts of care happen. Yet today's rushed families often buy out of domestic tasks: heat-and-eat meals, yard work, housecleaning, child-care, eldercare, dog-walking, and more. What happens when we push domestic work aside so that we can hurry to "real life," where we don't think about wiping cobwebs from corners or patching a jacket? What do we lose when we don't see the love that these acts make manifest? I worry about what we're leaving behind, and I'm sure Francis would too.

Moms—biological, adoptive, or maternal presences—and active fathers have mastered the many practices of loving generosity that are

central to Franciscan poverty. We need to look to them for wisdom and formation. We should discover ways to bring this care to our social worlds, especially to the most vulnerable. Although moms may have started this notion of poverty, I'm thankful to the Franciscans for recognizing it, elevating it, and developing a systematic theology so that we may make a generous poverty manifest in our hearts and world. ❖

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St. Clare's Basilica: *(continued from page 15)*

The frescoes in the vaults above the altar present images of saints in heavenly glory while lower wall spaces were used primarily to present the stories of holy people throughout the ages. Some of these wall spaces include images of the funeral of St. Clare with quite expressive and animated scenes of the people of the time involved in that liturgical and civic event. The scheme allowed the average viewer to view her or himself as involved in the events and dramas of the Bible and saints in an age when few people were literate. Although most could not read letters mainly due to the enormous cost of writing books by hand, this lack was compensated for by the fact that all could read images, colors, and symbols—frequently in a way better than contemporary viewers.

A high point of her life is depicted just before death when, according to the witness Sister Benvenuta in the Process of Canonization, the saint is covered with a textile of "heavenly substance" by the Virgin Mary herself. This scene is so exceptionally important on the dossal that the Blessed Virgin is depicted twice in the same event. Given the importance of textiles for medieval women in understanding the Incarnation noted previously and typically missed in most research, as well as the significance of spousal imagery in frescoes, this event could readily be interpreted as Clare being clothed

with the Incarnate Word himself—for Jesus the Christ unites his heavenly divinity with his earthly humanity, while now uniting the earthly Clare with his divinity. Assisting in this heavenly clothing is Christ's mother, Mary, who gave him his first earthly clothing and now prepares the earthly Clare for her heavenly union with her divine spouse.

The central image depicts Clare dressed in the tunic and cloak of the Franciscan movement. These items are cloth of low quality, the kind of fabric available to the poor. These drab, poor textiles help remind the viewer that God, in the Incarnation, took on the lowly estate of humanity so that humans could be caught up into Divinity. Thus, the images of Clare in her drab habit and the image of her being covered with the textile of "heavenly substance" are meant to be taken as examples of conformities between her and Jesus Christ. This is a challenge to all Christians: to make Christ present in their lives and to recognize him in the poor, whatever role one might have in society.

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This article is adapted from the booklet, "The Basilica of St. Clare: The Story Behind the Story," by Joseph H. Schwab, OFM. ❖