

A "Beggar's" Gift: A Low Budget Affair

Sister José Hobday

Sister José Hobday is a Seneca elder, a prominent Roman Catholic leader, and a Franciscan sister who adheres fully to St. Francis' radical ideal of holy poverty. She is a consummate artist in the arts of teaching, writing, and storytelling; she is also a mystic and contemplative; she is an earth warrior and elder guide on the wisdom path; and above all, she is an impassioned servant of the poor, especially poor Native Americans....

Sister José -- who often signs letters "Your Sis, José" -- for many years has written wonderful books, among them Stories of Awe and Abundance. The selection here comes from that book and originally from Praying magazine, for which she was a weekly columnist for ten years.

-- Mary Ford-Grabowsky

One morning [on a low-budget trip to the Holy Land with nine other sisters], a very, very old man approached me. He looked more like a shriveled up dwarf than a man. His back had a hump; his head and feet were bare. He wore only a dirty white rag wrapped around his body. When he smiled, I saw he had two teeth. He held out a bowl. At first I thought he wanted money. Then I realized he was offering food. I looked in the bowl and saw an awful looking mixture of chicken bones, an animal skin, grain, and a milky-looking liquid. Smiling, he pulled a dirty little spoon from the bowl, and, with anticipation, invited me to help myself.

I didn't know what to do. The stuff in the bowl looked awful. It didn't smell any better. Finally, I tried the spoon but got very little of the mixture out of the bowl with it. I experienced a momentary sense of relief. But I could see the man still looking at me. His sense of anticipation showed no signs of diminishing. Slowly, I put the bowl to my mouth and half drank and half ate – and half gagged. When I finished, I smiled, and he smiled, and then – and I'll never forget this – he offered it to me again. I forced myself to take another helping. We smiled and nodded in a kind of semi-bow – and he walked on, thank goodness....



Almost immediately three guards descended on me. I thought they had come to nab me for violating a code of some kind. But they commended me for taking the beggar's food. The man frequently came to the square to offer people food, they said, but no one ever accepted it until I did. As we talked, the guards, who seemed touched by what I had done, asked if they could do anything for me. I said I wanted to get into the mosque, then closed to visitors. No, no, they said, only dignitaries could get in and they had to have a pass from the security chief. Would they take me to see him? Reluctantly, they did. Reluctantly, too, he gave me a pass.

Inside, I saw a thing of beauty – lovely tiles and windows, the words of the Koran gracefully carved into the walls. Worshippers said Morning Prayer. As I watched, I had a profound sense of the holy. I would call it a religious experience. Afterward, I insisted on going back and thanking the chief. He expressed surprise, saying no one had returned before to thank him for a pass.

Over the years, in reliving this experience, I have had these reflections:

1. Following in the footsteps of Jesus will lead us to the poor;
2. The poor will lead us to God, as my acceptance of this poor man led me to a religious experience in the mosque;
3. Even the lowliest among us have gifts to share and, I suspect, their gifts often become the ones we really need, even though we almost automatically discount them;
4. Nothing surpasses sharing food, in church or out, for experiencing our oneness with each other and with God....