

Lady Pica Breaking Chains & Holding Hands: A Story of Domestic Abuse

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One of the many blessings in my life as a friar is having spent some time ministering to pilgrims, as a spiritual guide at the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. Occasionally, some of us friars had formed the bad habit of using the upper basilica as a hallway, to avoid the crowds in the lower square and more easily access the via San Francesco. While taking this easier route is often frowned upon, during the hot days of summer it remains a constant temptation.

Early one afternoon I was passing a few scattered pilgrims in the upper church, as I headed out for a gelato. Just under the fresco depicting Francis stripping himself in the town square, a woman recognized me as the friar who had guided her group through the basilica earlier that day. Waving me down, she asked why I had described this moment of young Francis stripping himself of his clothes with modern images. I explained how Francis' handing his clothing to his father, Pietro Bernardone, was akin to a wealthy teenager of today also giving up his or her cell phone, credit cards, wallet, and house key. Such an action then and now signifies a radical trust in God.

We then had a short discussion about how good art, like good literature, is timeless in its ability to speak to the human condition of every generation. In the case of these paintings, it has been the responsibility of the friars, for almost 800 years, to interpret such beauty in a way that touches these timeless truths in the context of the everyday life and circumstances of visiting pilgrims.

I described the paintings as being like the dialogue of a Shakespearian play, remaining the same down through the centuries. Such as *McBeth's* experience of the death of a friend, which leads him to conclude that absolute power corrupts absolutely. The Franciscan retelling of such truths necessarily changes the costuming and setting, in the same way a modern interpretation of a Shakespearian play more readily touches the minds and hearts of viewers today. She nodded in agreement, telling me that she was from Los Angeles, and the 1996 movie *Romeo + Juliet* did just that by placing the Bard's tragedy in the context of the gangs of LA.¹

To underscore my analysis of the perennial nature of the messages found within the fresco, she directed my attention to the hand of Francis' father being restrained by another figure, so as to stop him from physically striking his son. I'll never forget her words. She looked at the painting

¹ *Romeo + Juliet* 1996. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117509/> (accessed May 5, 2019).



and asked, “His father abused him, didn’t he?” She did not need me to answer, for the fresco had already done so.

Accompanying her to the center of Assisi, we discussed the relationship of Francis and his parents, including how Francis’ father would lock him up in their house. We also spoke of Francis’ mother, Lady Pica, who would then free Francis after her husband’s departure. Arriving in the Piazza Comune I asked if she

wanted to see the church built over the house of Francis’ parents, which preserved what is believed by many to be the “cell” in which Pietro had locked his young son. With a nod of agreement from her, we turned down a side street and approached the Chiesa Nuova when, just outside the doors of the church, she stopped to look at the statue of Francis’ parents, Lady Pica also holding a broken chain and Pietro holding Francis’ clothes.

She approached the statue, touched the chain, then stepped back and looked at how the two figures were holding hands. Pointing at their hands she asked what happened to Francis’ parents and I explained that history is silent on this point. We simply don’t know. She then asked if I would wait for her while she visited inside the church.

Emerging from the church, she returned to the statue of Lady Pica and Pietro, telling me that it is also good art, because it’s timeless. She saw the confusion on my face and explained, “The chain, the clothes and credit cards, the hand holding, history keeps repeating itself over and over again.”

I remembered this afternoon in Assisi, when in 2017 the Academy Awards nominees were about to be read for best supporting actress. The announcement was prefaced with a brief commentary about how all the rolls of the nominees had one thing in common: They were all roles of opposition. I thought of Lady Pica holding both a broken chain and the hand of her husband, Pietro, in that small Assisi piazza.

The nominees were read...and the Oscar went to...Viola Davis, *Fences*.

Fences is a coming of age movie in the context of the cycle of damaged black manhood. Accepting her award for best supporting actress, Davis began her speech with these words, “You know, there’s one place that all the people with the greatest potential are gathered. One place, and that’s the graveyard.”² She went on to say that it is important that we consider the kind of stories that we want to tell. That we need to exhume the bodies from the graveyards and tell their stories of great potential. Stories of those who never saw their dreams come true, who loved and lost.

² OSCARS <https://oscar.go.com/video/90-stories-from-90-years-2/viola-davis-storyteller> (accessed May 5, 2019).

Davis said that we must exhume and exalt the ordinary people! *Fences*, the movie that brought her the award, did this because it was, "...about people, words, and life, of forgiveness and grace."³

I wonder if we Franciscans have truly exhumed and exalted the ordinary life of Lady Pica. After all, she doesn't even make an appearance in the frescos of the basilica, where the "Academy of Art in Assisi" denied her a supporting role in the life cycle of her son. Does her absence make it easier for us to not tell the whole story of Francis' life? Lady Pica and Francis, theirs is a story of those who suffered domestic abuse and, based on the life of Francis a real probability is that they likely offered forgiveness and found grace.

When I think of the countless times that I've given tours in the basilica and stopped at the fresco of Francis stripping himself of his clothing, never did I once mention the phrase "domestic abuse". My focus was always on Francis' trusting in God. Have we really exhumed and told the entirety of their story, or do we simply note it as a curiosity or an obscure footnote in the bigger story of their lives? Lady Pica's statue, her holding both a broken chain and the hand of her husband, is a start, but the scene of domestic abuse in Francis' life is a story "about people, words, and life, of forgiveness and grace" that is not commonly shared.

In 2002 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops updated their 1992 pastoral letter, *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*. They point out how, "Violence against women in the home has serious repercussions for children...who grow up in violent homes (and often) become abusers themselves. The stage is set for a cycle of violence that may continue from generation to generation."⁴ Somehow, with the strength of Lady Pica, opposing without hating, such a cycle did not take hold in Francis' life. Can Lady Pica now become for us Franciscans the patron of breaking chains, breaking the cycle of violence, and of finding forgiveness and grace today?

The pastoral letter not only offers practical suggestions for the ministers in the Church, but also for both abused women and the men who abuse. In addition, there are suggestions for using liturgy to draw attention to violence and abuse.⁵ An entire resource was developed for the preaching of the scriptures, which reminds us to, "be aware of the fact that possibly some form of domestic violence may impact a third of those who will be listening...on a given Sunday. Speaking about the Gospel values of love, respect, kindness, and gentleness to others is necessary. Something as simple and pastorally sound as a reference to domestic violence lets

³ Ibid.

⁴ *I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women A Pastoral Letter*. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/domestic-violence/when-i-call-for-help.cfm> (accessed May 5, 2019).

⁵ Ibid.

people know that it is okay to approach the minister about the matter, for help.⁶ With this in mind, the next tour I give to pilgrims in Assisi will be different.

In the stories of our lives we pass by so many people. Choosing to hurry down the varied hallways or short cuts open to us; we chance not taking the moment to really look up and appreciate the timeless work of art that each person is and to recognize in silence and other signs a suffering from domestic abuse. To better do this, we Franciscans might consider exhuming and exalting Lady Pica as an award-winning supporting actress in our Franciscan narrative, to help to bring forgiveness and grace to broken families of today, including our own.

Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-7233
<https://www.thehotline.org>

(Include hotline in Italy for Italian version)

⁶ *Suggestions for Preaching about Family Violence*. Rev. Thomas Johns for the Domestic Violence Awareness Project, Diocese of Cleveland, Women in Church and Society, <http://www.usccb.org/about/laity-marriage-family-life-and-youth/womens-issues/preaching-tips.cfm> (accessed May 5, 2019).