



LADY PICA BREAKING CHAINS & HOLDING HANDS: A STORY OF DOMESTIC ABUSE
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Occasionally, some of us friars would use the upper basilica of St. Francis in Assisi as a hallway, a short cut, to access more easily the via San Francesco. Years ago I was passing some 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 with more modern images, such as Francis handing over his credit cards and cell phone to his father, Pietro.



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 then 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.

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, to stop him from physically striking his son. I'll never forget her words. She pointed and asked, "*His father abused him, didn't he?*" She did not need me to answer, for the fresco had already done so.

Our conversation continued as we walked up the via San Francesco, discussing the relationship of Francis with his parents. We spoke of how Francis' father would lock him up in their house and how his mother, Lady Pica, who would later free Francis. Arriving in the Piazza Comune I asked if she wanted to see the church built over the house of Francis' parents, which has preserved what is believed by many to be the "cell" in which Pietro had locked his young son. Just outside the doors of the church she stopped to look at the statue of Francis' parents, Lady Pica holding broken chains and Pietro holding Francis' clothes.

She approached the statue, touched the chains, 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 explained to me how the statue, like the fresco in the basilica, is also good art because it too is 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.

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." She went on to say that it is important that we consider the kind of stories 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. 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."

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. Based on the life of Francis, there is also a real probability that they offered forgiveness and found grace. One thing we do know for sure is that within the community of friars, Francis always insisted that leadership be maternal. Somehow, with the strength of Lady Pica opposing without hating, a family cycle of violence did not take hold within the life of the fraternity of friars.



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?

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 signs of suffering in others. 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 the broken families of today, including our own.