

The Madre by the Church
More than honoring your own mother
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If you walk in downtown Buenos Aires after dark, you see them. They're on every street.

Some are sitting on the sidewalk, the plastic bags open beside them, slowly and patiently sorting through the garbage in search of something they can trade. Plastic bottles, over here. Cardboard boxes and paper, this stack. (Be sure to fold the cardboard neatly, or the recyclers won't take it.) Glass over there, but check the wine bottles thoroughly because you might be lucky enough to get a sip or two yourself.

When you finish with this bag, be sure to re-close it carefully and place it next to the others in a neat row, because the *policia* are always watching and if you make even the tiniest mess, they bust you and won't let you back into the neighborhood for weeks. And then what can you do? What can you do?

Some are specialists. Nothing but cardboard for these guys! They have three-wheeled bicycles with giant reinforced plastic containers to carry away the rich men's waste.

These workers are all clean. They are sober. They are professional. Once in a while they take a break, every three or four hours, and splurge on a soda at a kiosk. They're careful to return the bottle. Their daughters are with them, maybe eight years old, lifting and balancing impossibly large bundles. Here in Argentina, the land of beef, these children aren't big; they're just strong from their labors. Do they have dolls, these girls? Do they even know how to play?

It's best to just look away. Everybody else does. Nobody likes what they see, but it's a way of life. It's just how things are. They've been that way for years – since "the crisis," as it's called. I always thought that a crisis was a moment, a minute, an hour, not more than a decade. The government sings a fool's song, always full of promise, then turns the reins over to a cohort or a wife while friends are given oil concessions and ownership of airlines. And makes more promises for the future.

You think it's finally behind you when you're a few feet away from the hotel. But you're next to the church, and that's where the really bad cases are. They sleep there because even the police won't make them move from holy ground.

They aren't winos and they're not disruptive. They're just sort of rolled into balls, blocking as little of the narrow sidewalk as they can manage. They are just people who got caught in the policies of financial institutions and governments, the same groups that gave us the sub-prime crisis and the Great Recession. Only their crisis is real, it's every day, and soon it will be winter in Buenos Aires, and there isn't going to be any help.

That's an old woman there. I saw her on the way to eat my steak dinner; she was asleep already at eight o'clock. But she looks up as I approach, and she has a smile on her face. Do you know what beatific is? It's the expression the artists try to put on the faces of the Mother in the church next door, but never get quite right. Not like this.

She is probably only in her mid-sixties, and I think she must have combed her hair a day or two ago, trying to maintain some degree of dignity. Her face is a kind of chestnut brown, and there's a tooth missing somewhere, but it doesn't matter. Somehow, she knows before I get there. She knows to look up. She knows that I have a bill in my hand. She smiles and she mutters something that is thanks without words. For some reason I find myself saying, "*Vaya con Dios, Madre.*"

Twenty pesos is only about three US dollars, but she probably hasn't seen that much cash money in... well, she can't remember any more. She just lowers her head again, still grateful, still polite, not making a scene or a problem.

I go on the other ten steps to the hotel entrance, but I have to stop and regain control. That face!

I'll be four thousand miles away from Mom on Sunday. She's 89, and she can't see enough to brush her hair or keep from smearing the lipstick onto her cheeks, but she has a soft bed and hot food and nurses when she needs them. But Madre has nothing, no one to call her or send her flowers or take her to brunch and make a big to-do over her. She wears all the clothes she owns. She's lost her mind a little, what with the way things have gone, and perhaps that's for the best.

You can't solve all of the world's problems, I remind myself as I stand outside the hotel. You can't distribute cash to a few unfortunates and help them for more than a little while. You have to tackle the big issues, and hope that it trickles down to the people on the street.

I feel in my pocket and find a 100-peso note. It's only a few steps back into the other world, where Madre slumps on the sidewalk. She cannot possibly have heard me, but she looks up and gives me that special smile and holds out her little hand as I reach down. I tell her it's a 100, because I don't want her to make a mistake and spend it like a smaller bill. But it doesn't matter; everything and anything is the same to her. It helps.

She hunches down again and sleeps. I go into the hotel, feeling better. Mission accomplished... the mission of making myself feel better.

Wait a minute, I know what I can do! I can tell that nice young lady at the front desk to help! I'll give her \$500, and tell her to take care of the old lady, give her a room, get the other folks at the hotel to pitch in and get her cleaned up and back on her feet! What's \$500 to me? It's nothing, just one day's wages. To her, it could make all the difference!

But in the end, I know it can't. Isn't there something more we can do? Those of us with mothers?

Submitted by Kevin Allison, March 22, 2023

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