



Lil' Red Wagon

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Julia Greeley Denver's Model of the Works of Mercy

by Fr. Blaine Burkey, O.F.M.Cap.

Devotees of Julia Greeley are thrilled that the Archdiocese of Denver chose the city's own Julia Greeley as the local face of mercy for Catholics to model during the international Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Pope Francis, in his establishing the Jubilee Year of Mercy, said, "It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy." He went on to say, "We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. Mt. 25: 31-45)." The pope added to that list all the other works of

mercy towards those in whom Christ himself is present.

Virtual everything known about Julia Greeley revolves around her practice of these works of mercy. Concrete examples that follow, mostly in words of folk who knew her, are extracted from a 143-page book titled *In Secret Service of the Sacred Heart: the Life and Virtues of Julia Greeley*.

Julia Greeley was an emancipated slave who spent most of the last 28 years of her long life in Denver showing mercy to countless individuals, practically all of whom were members of a race that had made the early years of her life such painful ones. When she died on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 7, 1918, all of Denver was surprised by the huge crowds that continued to file past her body at Loyola Chapel on Ogden St. and attended her funeral in Sacred Heart Church on Larimer St.

Feed the hungry, Give drink to the thirsty, Clothe the naked

"She went out on the street with gunny sacks filled with wood, coal, clothes and food and medicine and would make her rounds to the desperately poor for whom no one else provided. She took care of and administered what supplies she could beg for them. Policemen and firemen would give donations to her and recommend her wherever she went because she was taking care of the forgotten poor." (Sr. Irene Lally, May 6, 1974)

"Her charity was so great that only God knows its extent. She was constantly visiting the poor and giving them assistance from her own slender means. When she found their needs so great that she could not help them with her own goods, she begged for them. (*Denver Catholic Register, June 13, 1918*) An editor aptly spoke of Julia as setting "herself up as a one woman St. Vincent de Paul Society." (*Paul H. Hallett, Oct. 13, 1982*)

Jesuit pastor-superior at Sacred Heart needed a cook. "Julia supplied. At the end of the month the grocery bill was astounding. Father phoned

the grocer and said: ‘Must be some mistake.’ Grocer presented itemized bill. It was correct – and high. Father asked Julia: ‘Did we order all this stuff?’ ‘Oh, yes.’ ‘But what happened to it?’ ‘Well you know that widow. I had to give her some groceries. Then the family with the drunken father. I couldn’t let his wife and chillum starve,’ Julia was actually surprised Father had to pay. She thought the priests got everything for free.” (*Eleanor Castellan, ca 1974*)

“Whatever else she had, she gave away. Nobody asked for help in vain from Julia Greeley. She was victimized many times by charity frauds. But Julia’s rule seemingly was that it was better to give than to be too careful and deny assistance to someone who needed it.” (*Denver Catholic Register, June 13, 1918*)

Besides her close affiliation with the Jesuits at Sacred Heart parish, Julia was also a secular Franciscan connected with the friars at St. Elizabeth Church, and as such was buried clad in the habit of a Franciscan tertiary. There was a gentle irony to Julia’s being buried by her Jesuit friends in a Franciscan habit, which was caught by one of the Jesuits: “Here was the secret of her influence: She had taken Christ literally, as had the Poverello of Assisi. Like him she had given away all to the poor and had gone about making melody in her heart unto the Lord.” (*Fr. Eugene Murphy, S.J., 1943*)

Shelter the homeless

Julia lived in various boarding houses, and it is doubtful that she ever took homeless folk to her boarding house, but she did all she could to make more liveable the shelters that poor people already had. situations.

“She had even been seen going through the streets at night with a mattress on her back.... Father McDonnell tells of her calling him out of bed at midnight to carry a bucket of coal and a basket of food to a destitute family in the neighborhood.” (*Denver Catholic Register, June 13, 1918*).

Visit the imprisoned

“She went to jail to visit people. Passed out Sacred Heart leaflets to them.” (*Sr. Antonita Klein, April 10, 1974*)



Visit the sick

“When Julia heard of a sick child she would go there and make the mother rest while she herself would sit up all night with the child. She had a way with children, and they loved her. As she crooned softly, it didn’t take long before the baby fell asleep.” (*Eleanor Castellan, ca 1974*)

When Mother Pancratia Bonfils, foundress of Loretta Heights Academy, died, her obituary included, “A few days ago, old ‘Black Julie’ ... appeared at the hospital where Mother ... lay facing death. Julia asked to see Mother Pancratia. The physicians had left strict orders that day for no one to see her. Mother Dolorine told Mother Pancratia that ‘Black Julie’ wanted to see her. ‘Send everyone else out of the room,’

Mother declared. ‘Let old ‘Black Julie’ in if everyone else in Denver is excluded. Her affection for me is too clearly shown from the long walk she must have made to visit me.’ And old ‘Black Julie’ toddled into the quiet room.” (*Denver Post, Oct. 12, 1915*)

Julia was once unable to find work anywhere except as a cook at hotel, which turned out to be a brothel. During her two weeks there “a prostitute, a fallen-away Catholic girl was dying. Julia ran to the church and brought back a priest who attended her. He called to Julia to come to the room and the bed posts were shaking & the bed was jumping from side to side. This was felt by Julie [to be] a fight with devils.” (*Marjorie Urquhart Simpson, June 23, 1978*)

Bury the dead

“One of Julia’s least known but kindest deeds was the surrender of her burial plot to a deceased elderly Negro. The ex-slave owned a lot at Mt. Olivet cemetery and had planned to use it as a last resting place, but when word reached her that the remains of the old Colored gentleman... were headed for potter’s field, she insisted on giving up her plot.” (*Denver Catholic Register, April 13, 1939*)

Instruct the ignorant, Counsel the doubtful, Admonish the sinner

At first sight, it might seem Julia did nothing to model these three works of charity. But nothing is further from the truth. To instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful and admonish the sinner were at the very center of the immense effort she put into distributing all over Denver the Sacred Heart Messenger and the Apostleship of Prayer leaflets, Catholic literature which she herself was unable to read.

“No other Denverite has equaled her record in distributing Sacred Heart League leaflets. Denver is a big city and very widespread, but she used to visit every firehouse and hand out leaflets to the Catholic firemen. There was not a fireman, Catholic or non-Catholic, in Denver who did not know old Julia, for she never missed a month going the rounds with the

leaflets. She took copies of the Messenger of the Sacred Heart to every firehouse monthly, and often gave the boys there other Catholic literature. As regular as clockwork every year, she got fifty subscription to The Messenger of the Sacred Heart and sold something like 200 Catholic almanacs. And she could neither read, write nor count!” (*Denver Catholic Register, June 13, 1918*)

The firemen were not the only recipients of her literature. “I remember Julia Greeley as she knocked on our back door faithfully every month to distribute the Sacred Heart leaflets of the Apostleship of Prayer.” (*Sr. Ellenora Louise Hilbers, Mar. 22, 1974*) Rose Ann Honeyman reported the same. She also took them to the police stations (*Sr. Anne Gertrude Cronin, ca 1974*) and jails (*Sr. Antonito Klein, Apr. 10, 1974*).

Bear wrong patiently, Forgive offenses willingly

Throughout her life, Julia was often badly treated: from the slave master who blinded her one eye with a whip, to the ex-governor who made it difficult for her to find work and then unjustly called her “a lewd and unprincipled woman” as one of his 24 major reasons for divorcing his wife, to the parish women who wanted her kept out of sight. These in no way kept her from responding with love.

“Julia, whose eye was put out by a slave owner, gave a wonderful lesson to black and white that forgiveness, not revenge, is the Catholic Christian response to injustice. (*John Erger, Mar. 15, 1995*)

When asked in court why she left employment with the Gilpins, she had the opportunity to say how badly the ex-governor had treated her. Instead she said simply, “I left because I was tired of staying. I didn’t care to stay any longer.” (*Julia Greeley, case 1726, Denver Superior Court, 1887*)

Julia rented a small front bench in the left side of the church. “Julia could look pretty tacky in

hand-me-downs, and she had big feet and shoes that hardly fit, and she'd be flopping them up the aisle. When the wealthy women complained to Fr. Barry, he said emphatically, 'As long as I'm pastor here, Julia is going to keep her pew.' When Julia heard about this, she went to Father and said she could come to some other Mass. He said, 'Julia, you going to keep your regular seat and come to Mass like you always do, because I know you want to. Julia can sit any place in this church she wants to'." (*Eleanor Castellan, ca 1974*)

"Julia told my mother one time that she often had heard people say that she looked like a fly in a pitcher of buttermilk in these white churches." (*Sr. Mary Anthony Haberl, Nov. 4, 1977*)

Comfort the sorrowful

When there was a death in the family, you could always find Julia working in the kitchen. If the family was poor, she would go out asking for clothes so they would look nice when they went to the funeral. She made friends with everyone rich and poor." (*Eleanor Castellan, ca 1974*)

Pray for the living and the dead

Members of the Apostleship of Prayer, known also as the League of the Sacred Heart consecrate their daily work to the Sacred Heart, the font of all God's mercy, and thus join their daily prayers for a specific monthly intention. The leaflets which Julia distributed named the month's intention and explained the urgent need to include it in prayer.

Since Julia was illiterate, one has to believe that someone informed her each month of the general content of the leaflets she was recommending to others, perhaps at the monthly meetings of the promoters, and that she also was consecrating her own daily activity to the intentions set forth by the Apostleship. This surely was one of the secrets of her own spirituality: to place all of her day's activities into the secret service of the Sacred Heart.

"The one thing that stands out in my mind is her great love for the Sacred Heart." (*Sr. Catherine Regina Taylor, April, 1974*)

...The only known photo of Julia shows her holding a small girl who is holding a rosary. "So anxious was Julie for her little charge to be a practical Catholic that she placed a rosary in the infant's tiny fingers when she was four months old and diligently attempted to teach her to pray." (*Denver Catholic Register, Mar. 9, 1939*)

"She lived with a family that had abandoned the practice of religion. Through her prayers and example, all of them returned to the Sacraments." (*Marguerite Graves Stephens, no date*)

When Mother Pancratia died, "Julia went to the Sacred Heart rectory and arranged to have a High Mass sung for her soul. 'She was good to me,' she said. 'She told me that I would be white in heaven'." (*Denver Catholic Register, June 13, 1918*)

The Dedication of the Portiuncula chapel in Assisi was a Franciscan feast on which the faithful at one time were able to gain numerous plenary indulgences for the Poor Souls by visiting a Franciscan church. Pope Honorius III gave this privilege of mercy to St. Francis of Assisi in 1216, and the friars are celebrating the 800th anniversary of the "Pardon of Assisi" this year on July 11.

"Every Aug. 2, Julia was at St. Elizabeth's Church on 11th Street [*now St. Francis Way*] from the time the doors opened till when they closed. She spent the day there gaining plenary indulgences for the Poor Souls." (*Fr. Pacificus Kennedy, 1974*)

"On August 2, Feast of the Portiuncula, Julia would cross the street from St. Elizabeth's church to Mrs. Fisher's grocery and cafe to get some something to eat. On one occasion the kitchen girl had already finished the dishes and tidied up. 'Oh, get something for Julia anyhow,' Mrs. Fisher told her. 'All right,' said Mary, 'but you'll have to pray for me, Julia.' That prompted Julia to say, 'Mary, I'll put you in a canoe with a lot of others I pray for. But I'll pray special for

Mrs. Fisher, all by herself.” (Rose Fisher, ca. 1974)

Respecting the dignity of others

Julia’s love also extended to a 15th work of mercy not on the standard list: her respect for the dignity of others.

“Her charity was as delicate as it was great. She realized that white people, no matter how poor, might feel a little sensitive in receiving assistance from an old colored woman, so she went at night to their homes to deliver the goods she had begged, in order to keep the neighbors from seeing her.” (Denver Catholic Register, June 13, 1918)

“Julia lived in one room at 28th & Walnut, behind people who were always drinking, quarreling, etc. Everyone wanted to know what went on there. Julia kept mum. ‘That’s their business, not mine’.” (Eleanor Castellan ca 1974)

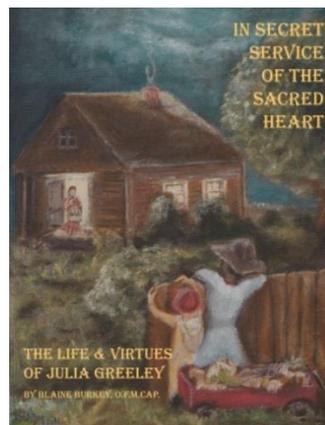
“Sodalities and clubs provided pleasure in the monthly socials in the school hall... The girls in whom Julia became interested, she learned, could not dress so well as the others and vanity prevented them from attending... She elicited the interest of some girls and young women in a far part of the city. She asked the more fortunate not to wear their pretty clothes for too long a time, but to give them to her, so that “her girls” could go to nice dances. One day there was a wedding dress to supply. A young matron gave up hers which had, for sentimental reasons, been packed away. Julia’s ‘joy’ was more constructive than almsgiving.” (Rose Mary Hagus, Apr. 13, 1939)

And finally, a tale of thoughtfulness from her own mouth, told during the annoying divorce trial which pulled her back to Denver from Laramie, Wyoming. Julia testified, “Once I was out of place, and did not have any place to go, and slept in the shed where the donkey [Col. Gilpin’s donkey] was kept in. One night because the place where I was staying at they went to bed early, and I wasn’t there, they was all in bed, and I didn’t wake them up. I just slept in the stable that night.”



In Secret Service of the Sacred

Heart ► A slightly-revised second printing of the Guild’s study of **Julia** came off the press just before Christmas. It contains an update on precisely which of Julia’s eyes was destroyed by the slave master and introduces several of Jamian Ajamu Jacobs’ drawing of various episodes of Julia’s life. Each printing has been for 1,000 books.



Book Vendors ► Besides the Guild’s own web site at www.juliagreeley.org and the Capuchins’ site at www.capuchis.org, one can also find the book on sale at the following locations:

- Archdiocesan Black Catholic Ministry Office
- The Book Bar, Tennyson St., Denver
- Cabrini Shrine, Golden
- Capuchin Provincial Offices, Denver
- Gerkens Religious Goods, Denver
- John Ergers Religious Goods, Denver
- Josephite Center, Baltimore
- Thomas More Parish Gift Shop, Centennial

Put on Your Thinkin’ Cap ► It is now only 24 months till the centennial celebration of **Julia’s** death on June 7, 1918. Suggestions on how to celebrate this great event will be welcomed by the Guild officers.

Holy Cards Now Available ► The Guild recently printed two cards remembering **Julia**. One contains **Julia’s** photograph, a short biography, and the prayer for her intercession;

the other has the new icon and the prayer. One copy of each will be sent gratis to anyone sending the Guild a **self-addressed self-stamped** envelope. Multiple copies of either can be obtained for a small cost by special arrangement with the Guild.

Add to Your Anniversaries Calendar ►

- Feb. 24: **Julia** received into the Secular Franciscans as Sr. Elizabeth (1901).
- Mar. 28: “In Secret Service...” published (2012).
- Apr. 5: Sr. Prudence Allen told an Archbishop’s lecture audience **Julia Greeley** should be canonized (2011).
- Jun. 7: **Julia** died (1918).
- Jun. 26: **Julia** joined Catholic Church (1880).
- Aug. 1: First meeting of **JG** Guild (2011).
- Aug. 2: **Julia** gained Portiuncula indulgences at St. Elizabeth Church (annually)
- Nov. 17: **Julia**’s nameday as Secular Franciscan (Feast of St. Elizabeth of Hungary)
- Nov. 17: First issue of the Lil’ Red Wagon (2014)

Volunteer Possibilities ► The Guild really could use help in order to accomplish its mission. Here are some things volunteers could do to help Julia’s cause – edit and publish the *Wagon* – work at increasing membership – build up our mailing list – where possible, replace postal addresses with email addresses – design and print cards, fliers, leaflets – greet people at Guild events – recruit vendors for the book – help keep vendors supplied – share your one’s own imaginations

Testimonials Needed ► The Guild is anxious to have on file reports of any favors people feel they have received through **Julia**’s intercession! Lest any details be forgotten, please submit them in writing to the Guild. Having these on file will one day enable archdiocesan authorities to know there is a real interest in her cause.

Keep the Wagon Rolling ► **Julia Greeley** Guild’s newsletter is meant to tell of the spread of her fame and to encourage her friends to introduce her to new friends. Help us grow our mailing list by sending us email addresses of friends who would like to receive the *Wagon*.

Help Us Save Postage ► If you received this newsletter by postal service, you could help us save money by sending the Guild your name and email address.

Memberships ► Also help us build our Guild **paid** membership by joining the **Julia Greeley Guild** and inviting others to join. A membership application form can be printed at <http://www.juliagreeley.org/guild.html>

Information ► For more on **Julia** and her fame, visit the Guild’s web site at <http://www.juliagreeley.org>. Enjoy there a short video about **Julia** made by Channel 9 News in February of 2013. To view the archdiocese’s video of “Julia Greeley: Our Model of Mercy” see <https://vimeo.com/151101683>.

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