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6 November 2003

Can You Spare a Little Change? A Lesson in the Art of Begging



The sun stood at 1 o'clock and produced a sweltering heat. The tourists wore shorts, T-shirts, and halter tops, and they packed [Ponte Vecchio](#). Many gawked covetously through windows at the glitter of 18-carat golden jewelry. Others ambled past the shops that lined both sides of the ancient bridge over the Arno River which flowed west-to-east through Firenze. Some stopped to negotiate a deal, but most sallied languidly through the torpor of this [Ferragosto](#), the 15th of August, the height of vacation season in Italy.

The city we were visiting was Firenze, known to most Americans as Florence. Renowned for spawning geniuses like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, Florence was home to the de Medici dynasty, the pre-renaissance ruling family in this area of north central Italy. Its [centerpiece](#), the plaza Piazza della Signoria lies adorned with priceless statues, a lovely fountain, and palaces like [Palazzo Vecchio](#) and [Palazzo Uffizi](#) where Botticelli's [Birth of Venus](#) and other art treasures reside. Ponte Vecchio constitutes the most famous of several bridges that cross the Arno River. It lies about three blocks southwest of the plaza. Tourists throng both the bridge and the plaza in the late summer.

One may stand in the center of Ponte Vecchio by the arches and railing and look east or west at the green river and the vista of the ancient city's earth-tone buildings gracing its shores. Because roofs shade the sides of the bridge, visitors and wanderers gather there for a respite from the heat, to absorb the lovely views up and down the river, to sip from the water spigot, and to chat with foreigners from near and far.

On this day Maria and I took such a rest and sat on the stone railing. Into our presence walked a man and his dog, obvious vagabonds. The man wore a beard and a sweatshirt that read "Bastard Inside & Out" in Italian. His hands bore grime and callouses, and nails long, jagged, and black. Yellow and brown stained his teeth from years of smoking and lack of care. Months of day-long exposure to the elements had leathered the skin on his hands and face. His dog stood about 18 inches tall and wore scruffy, beige-colored fur. Master and dog alike needed a bath badly. The man held a rope he had sloppily tied around the dog's neck to keep the dog from straying. And the dog seemed only too eager to stray, pulling and straining against the rope to go anywhere but there.

I greeted the man and asked him his dog's name. "Pepé", he said. I mimicked him the best I could. Not satisfied with my pronunciation, the man told me repeatedly how to say "Pepé", with the accent on the second e. The more I tried, the more vehemently he vociferated. Finally, he shrugged me off as

though he considered me hopelessly incompetent with the simplest of words.

Then the man looked up at me sheepishly, timorously, and haltingly, and asked “Can I have two Euros for some food?”

He had asked as though he knew I would say no. I thought it time to give him a little lesson, in begging.

I explained to him that while he might make money begging, he would make much more by showing a bold and friendly nature, and by asking the question in a more professional and confident manner. Then I showed him how to do it, and insisted he drill it with me. I told him he would have to get it right before I gave him any Euros.

“You smile really big, hold out your hand, palm up, look straight into the eyes of the prospect, glance at your hand, then look back at the prospect, and say ‘**Hi, can you spare a little change?**’. Your voice must rise at the end so the prospect will know you expect a yes answer to question. And as you ask this, you must slightly nod your head up and down to encourage the yes answer you expect. Your prospect will usually find you irresistible, and you will get more money than ever before. Be sure to thank your donor and bow appreciatively.”

The first time he asked me, he did it disastrously. He didn’t smile. He timidly slurred his words much worse than his Italian accent required. He didn’t hold his hand out. His voice did not rise at the end of the question. And, he did not thank me.

So, I drilled him, over and over. We worked through each gesture, the smile, the rising voice at the end, the exact question, the clarity, the confidence, the erect posture, the outstretched hand, the expectant nod, the bow. In about 20 minutes, with a crowd having gathered around to watch the spectacle, he had mastered it as well as I could hope. And, he beamed with pride. From all appearances, he had changed from a diffident street curmudgeon into a proud professional. To culminate and reward his final training demonstration, I enthusiastically reached into my pocket, pulled out a shiny 5-Euro coin, and placed it gently into his grimy palm. He bowed deeply in gratitude, thanking me effusively and sincerely.

Then he turned to the first person to his left in the small crowd, all of whose members had seen me hand him 5 Euros. He earned a donation and big grin from that woman. And, one by one, he went through the crowd and earned his keep as a professional beggar, repeating identically his words and gestures for each prospect, precisely the way I had taught him.

Before he finished with his new patrons, Maria and I left to do our shopping. “It’s all about learning how to ask an innocent question,” Maria said as she eyed a pair of golden ear rings and matching bracelet in the shop window. “By the way, Darling, can you spare a little change?” she asked with a smile, a rise to her voice, a nod, and a twinkle in her eye. We headed in to greet the shop keeper as I reached for my wallet.

We never learned exactly how much money the man earned from that crowd, and we never saw the man or Pepé again. But I shall always feel glad I helped groom a *pair* of new professionals - in the art of begging.

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