

27th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Stir Faith into Flame”
Bishop Frank Schuster

OK, let’s have a pop quiz. He was born in the year 1581 to a poor family. He nevertheless found education with the Franciscans in his town. In his teenage years, he worked as a tutor for younger kids which helped finance his continued education. His vocation to become a priest came early as he was ordained a priest at the young age of 19 in the year 1600. His early years as a priest were not without hardship. During one of his travels, the ship he was on was raided by pirates. This ended up with him being sold into slavery. It was a fate he had to endure for two years before being freed. The experience of slavery could have influenced him in many ways. It could have embittered him, it could have pushed him into a more worldly frame of mind, and so forth. Being a slave had an opposite effect. The experience moved his heart to become ever more charitable and merciful to those whose lives were marked with suffering. He dedicated his life to care for the sick and the poor. He was successful in founding hospitals in places where hospitals were needed. He was able to gather around him likeminded people to expand their efforts. He founded the Ladies of Charity and the congregation of priests known as the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission. Which saint am I referring to? I am referring to St. Vincent de Paul. His witness to a life dedicated to serving the poor and marginalized is meaningful to us all and helps us know the heart of Jesus who came to serve not to be served.

Here is another one: Her name was Agnes. She was the youngest of her siblings in her family. She enjoyed being part of her parish’s youth group and was drawn to Christ at a very young age. She decided that she wanted to follow Christ by becoming a sister. She taught catechism and geography in a Catholic High School for the Sisters of Loretto. One day, in 1948, she encountered a woman, dying in the streets. She stayed with her until she died. Filled with compassion for the poor, she received permission to leave her order and start a new order of sisters who would dedicate themselves to the ministry of caring for the poorest of the poor in the most dangerous places of the world. No mystery here. You know whom I am talking about. Her name is St. Mother Teresa. How does a young boy born in poverty become St. Vincent de Paul. How does a young girl named Agnes become St. Mother Teresa? Have you ever asked yourself the question: What do these people have that I don’t have?

There was a young man named Francis, born in Glentana, Montana. During the depression, he tried to earn a living by selling magazines across the country for a company that promised a good commission. When the company failed to pay Francis for his work, he almost died of starvation and thirst, thousands of miles away from home. He worked odd jobs, lived hand to mouth, rode the rails from town to town, learning telegraphy during the night. He eventually got a job as a telegrapher for the railroad. He fell in love and got married to the daughter of a conductor, had three children, worked night shift for decades so that he would have enough money to send his children to Catholic School. You probably don’t know him as well as I do...He’s my Grandpa Frank Schuster, not a canonized saint, but nevertheless a saintly person in my life whose example guides me still.

My friends, all of us have amazing people in our lives, don't we? We all know people who have given us an amazing example of how to live our lives. Have you asked the question, what do these women and men have in abundance that I don't have? Clearly saints like Mother Teresa, Vincent de Paul, Lorenzo Ruiz, Kateri Tekakwitha all have some things in common. To begin with, they have faith. They have awesome faith. They have the faith to move mulberry trees. Secondly, saints are people who lived the faith they received in baptism to put other people's needs before themselves. Indeed, they are people who would lay down their lives for others.

Thirdly, all of them share a profound respect for human life, from conception to natural death, and every stage in between. This is something to remember in the Month of October and calls us to uphold the sanctity of human life in our areas of influence like they did. Saints and the holy people we have known are people who understood that the Lord and their Catholic faith are first priorities in life. Everything else flows from that faith. Can the same be said of us?

To that point, remember how Habakkuk, in the first reading, talked about what faith looks like? It is the kind of faith that carries people through destruction, violence, strife and clamorous discord. And he should know as he was writing during the chaotic and devastating era of the Babylonian exile. Furthermore, Jesus said two things about faith in the Gospel reading, didn't he? First: A little bit of faith, even the faith the size of a mustard seed, can carry us a long, long way.

Secondly: faith is not a birthright, but rather a gift from God. This is why faithful people are also humble people, seeing themselves as servants of God, allowing the warmth of Christ's love to flow through them to others. We want that warmth for ourselves and so, again, we stand with the disciples in the Gospel asking Jesus to "Increase our faith". An answer comes to us through St. Paul who tells Timothy in our second reading, "Beloved: I remind you to stir into flame the gift of faith that dwells within you." Stir into flame that gift of faith dwelling within you.

My friends, there should never be a day or an hour or a situation that should cause us to abandon faith. I get that a lot as a priest: "Father, this that or the other thing happened to me, I am losing faith." And I get it. Grief can really hurt. At times like that, I think it is helpful to gently remind ourselves how Vincent found faith even in slavery. Mother Teresa found faith on the streets of Calcutta. The holy people we have known also give us an example, like my grandpa who found faith during the Great Depression. Habakkuk found faith in the trials and tribulations of the Babylonian Exile. St. Paul, Timothy and the Apostles found their faith in Jesus Christ, despite persecutions that would end up claiming their lives.

The witness of the saints challenges us to reexamine what our faith looks like. Do we place God first in our lives? Do we consider others as more important than ourselves? Do we respect the gift of life the way we should? Do we have the faith, courage, and conviction to move whatever tree or mountain that weigh heavy on our hearts? My friends, what are the obstacles that you need to move right now in your life? Name them in the silence of your heart. I now invite you to hear St. Paul whisper into your ear again, the beautiful advice he gives us in the second reading, “remember the gift of faith God has given you through Christ our Lord”, remember that gift of faith. Now, “stir it into flame!”