

If you haven't read or heard today's Mass readings for this 27th Sunday of the Year, particularly St. Paul's Letter to Timothy and St. Luke's Gospel, please read them first and then return below for my thoughts.

Mary McCarren died a week and a half ago. She was buried this past Wednesday. None of you would have known her. She lived in Eastchester, New York, and of all the dozens of parents in our neighborhood when I was a kid, she was the last to die. She was one hundred. I knew her well because she was the mother of my best friend, Billy.

Mary was a woman of great faith - one of so many extraordinary parents of my youth who, along with my own parents, gave me the greatest gift I've ever received: faith. She had a hands-on, pitch-right-in-there-and-get-your-hands-dirty kind of faith. She helped everybody. During World War II, when about twenty, she volunteered at New Rochelle Hospital. At our parish, St. Catharine's, she greeted everyone to Sunday Mass for an astounding 70 years. I especially loved the fact that no "senior" in my old neighborhood was ever alone on a holiday. They were all at her dining room table.

She was too humble to think of herself as extraordinary. But what faith she inspired in us! Jesus made his home in her soul. Like the words we just heard from Jesus, Mary would simply have said, "We have done what we were obliged to do." And that means be there for others.

I've been so blessed to know so many like her over the years. I owe my faith to people like Mary as well as so many of you. You "increase my faith." If we want to increase what faith we already have...we need to surround ourselves by people of faith.

Last Wednesday I spent a little time with those who come here and prepare food for the *Mustard Seed*. That kitchen downstairs is a place where faith lives. Our volunteers do mundane things, like shopping, mashing potatoes, making brownies and scrubbing pots. They do it because they know they're feeding Christ in the homeless. They inspire me. And because of them I want to do more.

The apostles say to Jesus, "Lord, increase our faith." How many have said, at one time or another, "God, increase my faith." It might come out as "God, give me strength," or "Lord, help me" or "I don't know, Lord, how I'm going to handle this without you." It's all the same. I've never once heard anyone say, "Lord, I have enough faith." No, we say, "give me more."

So what is it...*faith*? The assurance of things for which we hope. Like justice or peace. Ultimately, there will be peace. And, it's a belief in the God we cannot see.

There's so much mystery in life! So many challenges! So much we don't understand. But faith convinces us that, ultimately, God will be true to the promises He's made to us - and set things right.

And we have the power to give this gift to others. Think of faith as power. It's a power that lifts us up when we can't see now all that God has in mind for us. Faith connects us to God's power. And the power of God is the power that creates the whole universe. That's why Jesus says you can say to a mulberry tree: "be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would obey you." Faith is being hooked up to a power infinitely beyond us - which leads to our becoming free.

Free because you put things in perspective, not giving too much importance to temporary things, things that enslave us, material things,

looking for approval from those around us, or worldly success. Faith relies on the greatest power in the universe.

33 years ago, as I was completing a parish assignment in Westborough, I buried a parishioner and close friend. Bob Schraven was only 42 when he died of an unsuccessful liver transplant.

He was a wonderful faith-filled man: brilliant, funny, musical, holy and brave.

On a Sunday night he got the call to report to the hospital in Boston. At long last, a donated liver was waiting for him. When that call comes, they give you two hours to get to the hospital. He called me and told me that he and his wife, Joanie, and their three young daughters were coming to the rectory first, to ask my blessing. When they arrived, the whole family knelt in prayer in the living room.

Because Joanie, also 42, was sick with breast cancer, and herself dying, I drove Bob to Boston, where the surgery took place. He lingered a couple of days because of blood transfusions, knowing he wasn't going to live, but very much at peace. He accepted his certain death by hooking up to that power greater than his, his faith. And in peace he died Wednesday morning, the very day his daughter, Katie, was to be confirmed in our parish.

No one would have been surprised if Katie had postponed her Confirmation. Everyone would have understood. But the whole family was there for Confirmation: Joanie, who would die just two months later. Katie getting confirmed. Kelly her sponsor. And Kristen, the altar girl for the Mass. Brave!

Only because they had built up lives of faith over the years could they summon the courage to go through with Confirmation on the very day

their husband and father died.

If you want to increase your faith...surround yourself by people of faith. We need them in our lives. People like the Schravens and Mary McCarren and Mustard Seed workers and so many others help us see the larger picture. And their faith sure helps me.