

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**It has been said that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. The evils that we are experiencing today certainly seem to challenge the truth of that statement. The horror of the terrorist attack in New York City; the devastation wrought by the recent hurricane; the wars engulfing much of the world—all these evils certainly seem beyond our control.**

**Another relatively new crime wave is washing across our nation, indeed throughout the world. It is identity theft. I hope none of you have been victimized by this insidious crime that creates misery for those affected. Identity theft occurs when someone uses information about you without your permission. They use your name, address, credit card or bank account numbers, Social Security number, even medical insurance account numbers to steal from you. More than 15 million Americans were victims of identity theft, with more than \$107 billion stolen, from people like you and me. This is a threat to all of us as we innocently go about our daily lives.**

**Now why am I spending so much time talking about a lost or stolen identity? It is because, aside from the economic loss, to lose one's identity is one of the most tragic things that can happen to a person.**

**Tonight St. John reveals to us our true identity: “Beloved: See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”**

**As I suggested in my message on Sunday, “We can only truly know who we are if we know whose we are. The world may look at us and see a bunch of nobodies, but if we know whose we are and live as the children of God that we really are, the world eventually does take notice.**

**For your consideration, I would like to tell you the story of a dear friend for whom I had the highest regard. Franny was the son of a prostitute who grew up in the tenements of the Bronx in New York City. He would often have to sleep in the filthy corridor outside his apartment because his Mother was entertaining a “friend”. He was mocked and jeered at as a child because of his Mother's behavior. As soon as he turned 18, he left home and joined the Navy. Still, somehow, his reputation, or that of his Mother, followed him.**

**One day, aboard ship, he went to Mass. On his way out, for whatever reason, the Chaplain asked him, “Who are you, Son? Whose boy are you?” Franny felt the ground moving under him, and it wasn't the movement of the ship. He simply lowered his eyes to the ground and stood there speechless.**

As the Chaplain looked down at him, studying his face, he said, "Wait a minute. I know who you are! I see the family resemblance! You are a son of God! With that the Chaplain put his hands on Franny's shoulders until he was looking him right in the eyes, and said to him, "Son, you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it!"

That encounter changed Franny's life. He started serving the Chaplain's Mass every day and eventually became his assistant. As his time in the service was coming to an end, he told the Chaplain his story, and he didn't know where to go when he left the Navy. The Chaplain told him, "Go to Norristown, a classmate of mine is the Pastor there. I'll call him and tell him to expect you."

So Franny settled down in Norristown, started doing odd jobs for the Pastor around St. Francis Parish, and eventually started his own business as a painter and paper hanger. Eventually he met Mary, who had served as a nurse in the Navy; they married and started raising a family; and bought a home in the East End of Norristown in St. Patrick's Parish. There he continued his service to the Church, serving as Sunday sacristan, usher at any Mass that needed one, fixing whatever was broken, even to unclogging toilets. No job for the Church was too menial and all were done with good humor.

By the time I arrived at St. Patrick's as a newly-ordained priest in 1972, Franny and Mary, their four sons and one daughter, who lived a half-block from the Church, became the go-to people for whatever was needed by the priests. Back then, besides the normal parish work, the priests at St. Patrick's served as the chaplains to three hospitals, as well as Montgomery County Prison. Franny made sure to invite us to stop in for a drink after we finished our hospital rounds each night, and he and Mary always had sandwiches or pizza ready for us so we could relax a little at the end of a long day and night.

However, he never neglected his family. His five children worked side-by-side with him, both on his jobs and in the Church. Mary's Mom lived with them until she died. And he made sure his own Mother was well cared for until her death.

Franny not only cared for his family and gave back to the Church, but he got involved in the community. He had served on Borough Council for many years, and people, both Republican and Democrat, were urging him to run for Mayor of Norristown. However, other friends were urging him to run for District Justice. He asked me what I thought he should do. Knowing that Franny often was juggling three jobs, even as Mary was working as a nurse, to provide for the Catholic education of their children, who would soon be starting college, I asked him, "Which job pays?" He said the Mayor's job was pretty much an honorary position that offered a meager expense account, but no real salary; whereas the District Justice position offered a salary and benefits." I said, "Franny, it's a no-brainer. Go for District Justice?" He said, "But I'm not a lawyer. I don't even have a college degree." I said, "Well the job description doesn't require any of that. What you

are is a fair and just man, and that's what is needed.' He decided to run for District Justice, not so much for the money, but for the health care benefits and the pension that would provide for Mary when he was gone.

Franny ran on both the Republican and Democratic tickets and was overwhelmingly elected—again and again and again. He lived to see his son, and namesake, Francis, Jr., who graduated from college with a degree in criminal justice, elected to replace him when he retired. Young Francis remains to this day the District Justice in Norristown.

There has never been a funeral like Franny's before or since in Norristown, or perhaps any other town. At least half of the Church was filled with bishops and priests and nuns. The rest included community and business leaders, police officers from all across the County, and hundreds of people filling the Church and spilling down the block. Route 202 North through Norristown was closed down for the procession from the Church to the cemetery and included hundreds of police officers on motorcycle, cars, and horseback, a canopy of ladder fire trucks from all over the County stretched the two miles of the entire route, which was crowded with hundreds, if not thousands, of people lining the highway.

But that's not the end of the story of this man, once known only as a son of a prostitute, who came to know himself as a child of God. His first-born son is the Business Manager today at St. Patrick's; as mentioned above, his namesake, Francis Jr., is the District Justice for Norristown; his third son is the Police Chief in Whitemarsh; his fourth son is Msgr. Kevin Lawrence, the Pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Phila.; and his daughter is a member of the Borough Council in Norristown. His grandchildren too have gone on to lives of service in the military or as teachers or nurses. All of his offspring have chosen to follow in their Father's footsteps in living lives of service because he taught them by his heroic example what it is to be a child of God. I offer this story of Francis J. Lawrence, my friend and hero, who is one of All of the Un-named Saints whom we honor this day.

“Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself and herself pure, as he is pure.”