

## Francie.

The first thing I had to do when I started working on this was to concede up front that I'm not going to do her justice. To my mom and dad, my uncle, my aunts, my brothers and cousins, to all of you and to Francie, I apologize in advance. I'm going to fall short. Grandma Francie lived too honorably, too generously, too independently, too well and, frankly, too long for me to make a dent in her legacy in seven or eight minutes this morning. We could each spend an hour up here and not run out of tributes, memories, stories, and thoughts of what Grandma Francie means to us, of the time we spent with her, of the example she left for us, of the part she played in making each of us who we are.

On behalf of her family, we are grateful to Father John Iffert for coming from St. Mary's in Mt. Vernon to lead this celebration of Francie's life in Christ in Father Oliver's absence. We're honored to have you here, Father John, and I really regret that you didn't know her better. This Church exists because of people of faith like Frances Skorch. And people like these who are like they are because of people like her. So since you're probably the only one in the building who didn't know her like we knew her, I'm turning the tables a bit and addressing this to you. Let me tell you a little about our Grandma Francie.

See, the thing about Francie was this: she got older, but she never seemed to age. Like Dorian Gray, somewhere there must a portrait of an old woman who looks like Francie should have looked at 94, without the twinkle that was always in her eye and the gratitude that was always in her heart. Through illness, tragedy, boom and bust, she stayed the same. She knew profound and simple joy in her lifetime, mostly the result of humbly doing good things for other people. Her three children gave her eight grandchildren and eighteen great-grandchildren to date. Her first great-great-grandson arrived just a couple of weeks ago. He won't get to sit on her lap, but she'll be a powerful part of him.

Francie knew great joy in her life, but she knew equally profound sorrow. She lost a son and very nearly her daughter, something no parent should have to do, but she never lost her faith. She grieved a grandson by marriage, though she made no such distinctions – family was family, and that was that. One by one, she lost her siblings and most of her contemporaries. She mourned her husband of nearly 56 years, Grandpa Mike, with whom she swore she fell in love when she was eight and eventually married at twenty, and then defied reason and common sense by choosing to live alone on the farm after his death, supported by a faithful network of family, friends, and neighbors that knew they could count on her as well. And, I believe, still can.

She battled cancer in the early eighties, when I was a junior at SIU-Carbondale, and we feared we might lose her then, but she battled through that and stayed with us for another full generation – ironically, my son is a junior there today. She survived the great frosty mushroom episode of 1996, when by the grace of God, the skill of her Doctor Kelley, and her dear friends Amanda, to whom she was speaking when the lights went out, and Josephine, who called the house out of the blue that morning to see if Francie needed a ride to Mass on the Vigil of All

Saints and found Amanda distraught at her side, her 80-year-old body fought off what probably should have been a fatal toxic onslaught and came out pretty much unscathed. You can call it coincidence or good luck if you want, but I don't believe for one second that it was. She still had so much she needed to do here.

Even in her nineties she would dress to the nines for a wedding or dance and flash the same coy, equally angelic and devilish smile of the teenaged Francie who left southern Illinois when she was sixteen to clean houses in Chicago until she got lonesome and came back home. And through it all, she got older, but she never seemed to age. Which as far as I'm concerned gave the rest of us permission to do the same whenever we were around her. After all, how could I possibly be forty-eight years old when, except for the regular aches and pains of which I probably had more than she did, my grandmother never seemed a day over 55?

Even today, something *Field of Dreams* magical happens when you turn off Corgan Road into Francie's driveway. You instantly become the most carefree age you can remember. For the past few years, on days when I had a meeting or some other reason to head to the southern part of the diocese, I would build in an extra hour or hour-and-a-half to just stop in and visit. (Father John, that does not leave this room!) Of course, I couldn't tell her I was coming lest there be four courses simmering on the stove, and it couldn't be anywhere near mealtime or she'd start busting out the leftovers. Over time those stops became far more important to me than whatever I was ostensibly heading off to. We'd talk about Church, health, family, the future, and I swear to you, for that hour I would completely forget that I'm almost half a century old and regularly catch glimpses of Grandpa Mike's hairline in my rearview mirror. Except for those amazing family free-for-alls at Christmas and on her birthday, I think that's what I'm going to miss most. Oh, and she would always offer me a beer. "But grandma," I'd say, "I'm going to a Church meeting." "Better take two then," she'd tell me.

Whether it was shooting our bb guns at tin cans when we were ten, throwing rocks over the pond from the fence by the house, fishing for bluegill with a cane pole, or taking Francie's obligatory you-may-need-to-make-a-second-trip produce tour of the garden, when we were sitting on the front porch or in the living room reminiscing, all those things came back on every visit, which typically went like this:

Pull up in the driveway and wait for clearance from Smoky or Dallas to exit the vehicle and approach. Francie would not be in the house, of course, eventually appearing from some corner of the property carrying a bucket full of something and her walking stick. First stop, the memory garden on the side of the house where Francie's hand guided by God's could shove a random shoot, start, sprig, seed, or, in one case, the stem of a cut rose from a funeral arrangement into the ground and have it take root and flourish, a regular reminder for her of the many friends and family who went to God before her. A few more examples of her green thumb around the yard, including the front yard itself, actually, which for years doubled as a botanical garden, would inevitably lead to a recollection of the lemon tree she grew there in Scheller, Illinois, and the prized newspaper clipping about it that was as yellow as the fruit it produced.

From there, surrounded by the proverbial herd of cats from which she would always offer to send a couple home, it was off to the chicken house, where for a while Francie was accompanied by an 18-year-old gender-confused hen named Oldie that, as it got older, stopped laying eggs and started crowing like a rooster in the morning and following her around the yard. The *hooster*, not a scientific term, was the subject of another article in the local press, prompting some questions about whether or not this “delightfully spry 87-year-old,” as she was described, had secretly retained a publicist.

Next are the gardens, high and low, and the cases of vegetables she wouldn’t let you leave without – radishes the size of potatoes, potatoes the size of yams, yams the size of watermelons, watermelons the size of – well, you get it.

And then it was off to the pond, where long before there was Nemo, Francie had “Whitey,” a massive albino channel cat that trolled the shore, breaking lines, bending hooks and acting in large part as if he were the sportsman and we were the ones being outsmarted. You don’t want to think about that too long.... “You need to come fishing,” Francie would say on every visit. I wish I had.

Of course, at every stop on the tour there was an offer of a glass of iced tea or some chips, a sandwich or a piece of pie, some windmill cookies or a soda. Her chicken and dumplings was the Holy Grail of Francie’s kitchen, and we’ll never taste any that are as good.

I could go on and on, as could the rest of you, but it all just leads to this: Grandma Francie lived her life the way the Gospels say we’re supposed to. The things that were supposed to be important – her family, her neighbors, her Church, her animals, her gardens, and just generally leaving this place better and more beautiful than she found it – were important. The things Jesus said shouldn’t matter – owning, owing, keeping up, putting on – were not. As complicated as it could be sometimes to live so simply, Francie pulled it off with grace and gratitude.

In March 2004, when our son Jonathan was in middle school, he was assigned a family history project that required him to interview the oldest member of his family about their life and times. In our family, of course, that was his great-grandma Francie, who at the time was *only* 87. Because we suspected that her answers transcribed on paper would reveal only a small part of her story, that the real blessings would be in the inflections and the expressions of the subject, before Jon began the interview we asked Francie if she’d mind if we videotaped the conversation for posterity. For once, and only because one of her treasured great-grandchildren had asked her to for school, for 53 minutes and 38 seconds of some of the most treasured video we’ve ever taken, Francie Skorch, charming and downright adorable as ever, allowed herself to be the center of attention.

At the time, of course, the content of the video was still fresh in our minds, so when the project was finished and the next one commenced, we filed it away. Last Sunday afternoon, for the first time since it was recorded, I sat down and watched that dvd again. As you can imagine, it was a hundred times more poignant and revealing than I recalled. Francie talked about her time in

and affection for Chicago both before she got married and after. She told the story of how she met and fell in love with Grandpa Mike. She reminisced about Christmas in the country, before electricity, and the dawn of radio. She touched on the misery of the Depression, and her worries about World War II before Grandpa Mike got his deferment for working in the steel mill. She identified the day she got married as the happiest day of her life, and she talked about how she treasured the rings and bracelet her Mike had made for her.

But then Jon asked her to describe the high point of her life and, as only our Grandma Francie's could, her face lit up and she said this: "Having them three children. Just thinking about what my three children brought into this world. Can you see all that running around here? Yep. I often sit and think – I say, I have three children, look at the grandchildren I got. Like Joan says the one time we were sitting here, 'You are the fault of all that!'" And then she giggled that charming, knowing, precious (I don't know – is "cute" appropriate?) giggle of a grandma that got older but never aged.

So you see, Father John, that's the Francie Skorch we celebrate and commend to almighty God this morning. We are all confident that God keeps His promises, and I'm sure the gates were wide open when she got there. And that things will be a bit more lush there this spring! As I read Francie's obituary and the litany of those she leaves behind – Mom, Uncle Dave, the memory of Uncle Martin; her eight grandchildren; her eighteen great-grandchildren; and her newborn great-great-grandson, it's hard to think of her without thinking of the parable of the sower and the seed in Mark's Gospel:

*"A sower went out to sow.  
And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path,  
and the birds came and ate it up.  
Other seed fell on rocky ground where it had little soil.  
It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep.  
And when the sun rose, it was scorched and it withered for lack of roots.  
Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it and it produced no grain.  
And some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit.  
It came up and grew and yielded thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold."*

As Jesus says when he explains the parable to the disciples, "those sown on rich soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." With all I know of God's place in Francie's life and her place in His, of her love for the soil and the seed, it didn't surprise me a bit that, on this Feast of Saints Titus and Timothy, that's today's Gospel reading. You can call it coincidence or good luck, but I don't believe for one second that it is. *"Those sown on rich soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."*

God bless Francie Skorch, and God bless all of us who miss her already!

- David Spotanski  
January 26, 2011