

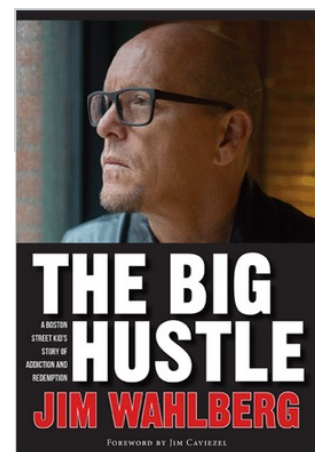
'I don't think I would have lived much longer in the streets': How faith saved Jim Wahlberg

Before Jim Wahlberg could legally buy a beer, he was behind bars in a Massachusetts state prison for armed robbery.

"I was in and out of detention centers, foster homes, halfway houses, all by the time I was 11," Wahlberg said in describing his turbulent life growing up in Dorchester, a working-class neighborhood in Boston.

By the time he was 22, Wahlberg was already serving his second prison sentence for a home invasion. An encounter with St. Teresa of Calcutta, who visited the state prison in 1988, marked the beginning of Wahlberg's road to sobriety, conversion and redemption.

"That was very powerful, and a defining moment in my life," Wahlberg, 55, told Our Sunday Visitor in a recent interview.



Wahlberg also tells that story in his new memoir, ["The Big Hustle" \(OSV, \\$27.95\)](#), which is scheduled to be released Sept. 4.

A tattoo on his right bicep – 5-9-88 – marks his sobriety date. Second only to God, Wahlberg credits Alcoholics

Anonymous with saving his life.

‘Being less than’

Alcohol cast a dark shadow over the Wahlberg home growing up in the 1970s and '80s. Wahlberg, the fifth of nine children, remembers his father as a hard-working but emotionally distant figure who drank heavily and gambled nearly every day.

“Booze is a tyrant in the family of an alcoholic,” Wahlberg said.



Courtesy photo

Wahlberg grew up with his siblings, including Donny and Mark – both of whom went on to become famous recording artists and actors – in one of the poorer, more racially segregated sections of Boston. The neighborhood was mostly Irish-Catholic, held together by robust parishes that helped to at least create a sense of solidarity.

“Everybody was basically poor,” Wahlberg said. “There was a familiarity. We were all in the same boat. Everybody was poor. I kind of think we didn’t know what we didn’t have. Everywhere we looked, people were in the same circumstances as us.”

Wahlberg and his siblings became aware of class differences when their father hit a big enough payday with his bookie to buy a house in a more upscale part of Boston. The other kids

there had nicer clothes. The Wahlberg home was the only house on the block with nine kids and a large work truck out front.

“We were immediately aware of what we didn’t have,” Wahlberg said. “I think kids are sensitive. Kids are emotional, and kids can be mean. It wasn’t just our own insecurities. In many situations, we were made aware of what we didn’t have. It was difficult, and I think it certainly contributed to my feelings of being less than, embarrassed and ashamed.”

‘It’s about survival’

Wahlberg looked for something to make those feelings of inadequacy go away. Though they grew up in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood and occasionally went to church, the Faith itself was not an important part of the family’s life.

“Yes, we were technically Catholic, but this really was just a case of checking off boxes, or submitting to ceremonies or declarations of faith in a rote and passionless way,” Wahlberg writes in his autobiography.

Without God in his life, Wahlberg tried to fill the void by running with older kids in the neighborhood who were into drinking, drugs and petty street crime. Wahlberg was 8 years old when he first chugged a can of beer. He learned his street smarts at home.

‘WHAT ABOUT THE KIDS?’



OSV, through its production company OSV Films, is partnering with Jim Wahlberg's Wahl Street Productions to release "What About the Kids?," a feature film about drug addiction as seen through the eyes of an 8-year-old girl whose parents are addicted to opioids.

For more information, including a trailer and how to attend the film's virtual premier on Sept. 8, visit whataboutthekidsfilm.com.

"With nine kids, a limited amount of food, supplies and warm boots in winter time, you learn how to put yourself in a position to get access to the good stuff," Wahlberg said. "It's the same thing out in the streets. It's about survival."

Wahlberg came of age in a time of urban decay and when Boston was being convulsed by bussing controversies and racial tensions. He associated with older kids who were constantly in fights, some of them racially motivated. Barely 10 years old, Wahlberg said he was "drunk and high all the time."

"I was stealing from people, taking items I wanted or money to get the things I wanted to get," Wahlberg said. "You end up in this cycle of feeling terrible, feeling like a bad person, like you're not as good as everyone else. Then you chase something to make that feeling go away, and for me, alcohol and drugs gave me that feeling."

Said Wahlberg, "But then, alcohol and drugs turned on me too, and I couldn't get away from them."

'God had his hand in that'

In sixth grade, Wahlberg had his first brush with the law when he was arrested for assault and battery. Amid troubles at home – his mother had kicked his father out of the house – Wahlberg's rap sheet grew to include arrests for public drunkenness and disorderly conduct.

At 17, Wahlberg was sentenced to serve five years in state prison for armed robbery. Six months after being released from prison, Wahlberg broke into a police officer's house. The officer and his partner found him drunk and passed out on the kitchen floor.

In the six months leading up to that break-in, for which he would receive a nine-year prison sentence, Wahlberg said he consumed as much alcohol and as many drugs, especially cocaine, as he could. The night he got arrested, Wahlberg said he had decided to shoot up heroin.

"I don't think I would have lived much longer in the streets," Wahlberg said. "I think God had his hand in that. The cop whose house I broke into could see I needed help. He went into court and said, 'Why don't we get this kid some help? He's a mess.'"

At MCI Concord, a medium-security state prison, Wahlberg, Inmate #44563, came into contact with Father Jim Fratus, the prison chaplain who offered him a job as the chapel janitor. Wahlberg saw the priest as an easy target whom he could hustle for extra privileges. But little by little, Wahlberg found himself attending weekend Mass at Father Fratus' invitation.

"Turns out he was hustling me," Wahlberg said.

Mother Teresa's visit to MCI Concord on June 4, 1988, changed the course of Wahlberg's life. Her example of kneeling and praying with the inmates during Mass – foregoing a chance to sit in a fancy chair with the cardinal-celebrant – left a

lasting impression.

[“I knew I was in the presence of somebody very, very special,”](#) said Wahlberg, who subsequently received the Sacrament of Confirmation while in prison. The experience motivated him to stay sober and commit to a life of recovery after his release from prison.

‘I needed to feel his presence’



Courtesy photo

Wahlberg got married, moved to Florida and had three children with his wife. Though sober, his faith life waned to the point that he was “going through the motions” and not always attending Sunday Mass. That changed a few years ago when he attended a men’s retreat, where he described feeling the Lord’s presence in an especially tangible way.

“It knocked me down to my knees,” Wahlberg said. “I’ve been blessed to continue to do the work of cultivating my faith, and to bring other men to that retreat, to be part of and witness to what God is doing in their lives, seeing their lives restored, their marriages restored, their families restored. It’s incredible.”

Needless to say, life hasn’t always been easy for Wahlberg, who writes in his book about the terrible day that he

discovered his oldest son was hooked on drugs. But through it all, including his son's ongoing recovery, Wahlberg credits his Catholic faith with sustaining him.

"For the longest time, I would pray in a simple way, 'God, help me,' but there wasn't a relationship there," Wahlberg said. "All along, that's what I needed. I needed a relationship with God. I needed to feel his presence. I needed to understand all that was given up for me to live."

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.