

## **Traveling Companion: Moving on down the road**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

Like country singer, Willie Nelson, I am on the road again. I am moving. I am heading south of Interstate 10 for the first time in over twelve years. It is ironic that I am heading back to the place I started off as a priest, twenty-eight years ago, Our Lady of the Gulf in Bay St. Louis. What is even more ironic is that my first pastor, Monsignor Gregory Johnson, now retired, lives in the area. Now, I will be his pastor. In the intervening years, I know my hair has become more salted and hopefully, my wisdom and maturity has become more seasoned. It is reassuring to know that some people in that parish still remembered me and even called to congratulate me.

As I reflect on the road journey, I realize that one moves both physically and emotionally. Obviously, the physical part of moving is momentarily painful but palatable. Physical moving allows one to do some closet cleaning, providing an opportunity to get rid of the things one thought one could not do without but eventually discovered otherwise. It provides an opportunity to get rid of the "stuff," that once was important but now forgotten and is discardable. It provides an opportunity of giving up the physical environment, its sights and sounds to embrace another one.

The emotional journey is the more complex and difficult one. Spending twelve years in a parish means we put down emotional roots. We makes close friends; people we get to know beyond the passing acquaintance of a Sunday greeting; people who walk with us through the trials and tribulations, the joys and accomplishments of parish life; people who were stalwarts of stability, support and encouragement; people who try our patience in the messiness of everyday; people who not only affirmed us but also challenged us to maximize our potential and gifts.

We begin to realize that the success or failure of a priest isn't reflected in a paycheck or the size of the weekend collection, or his standing with diocesan officials, or the plaques he may have placed on buildings. It is all based on the intangible, graced moments and opportunities that he seized; the seeds he planted, watered, nurtured and at times, brought to fruition; the times he revealed God rather than played God; the times when his weakness became his greatest asset because it left room for the grace of God to work.

We begin to realize that it is both a privilege and responsibility to be invited into the depths of people's lives and hearts; to celebrate their new beginnings and their final partings; to walk with them through their brokenness and remind them that God is to be found even in the chaos and brokenness of their lives; to be trusted with deep, dark secrets that will always remain secret so that healing and wholeness can be born; to be a patient listener, slow to judge or give advice; to share a meal and build a friendship around the altar and the family table; to be accepted as being human, trying to share a divine invitation and mandate; to be a question mark, not only to oneself but to others, challenging people to think and act more divinely.

The late Cardinal Hume, said, "a priest is an ordinary man called to an extraordinary ministry. Like everyone else, he is himself in search of God and in need of redemption. Although he lives much of his life in full sight of the people he serves, the priest is regarded as, in many respects, a man apart."

Ok! Enough musing! It's time to get on the road again. Goodbye Hattiesburg! Hello Bay St. Louis.