

Traveling Companion: A People Adrift

Fr. Michael Tracey

On Wednesday night, I sat in the recliner in my living room, reading “A People Adrift – The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America” by The New York Times religion editor, Peter Steinfels.

The book is an expose of some of the crises and their symptoms affecting the Catholic Church in the United States in this century. The author covers such controversial and crisis-ridden areas as the clerical sex abuse scandals; the problem with inclusive language in the Church; the marginalization of women; the clerical caste system; the role of the laity; the Church and society; the liturgical renewal and its interpretations; the Church as institution and its impact; the battle for Common Ground; church leadership and the future of the church.

Steinfels indicates, among many statistical data reports, that in 1965, there were 58,132 priests. In 2002, there were 45,713. In 1965, there were 944 ordinations. In 2002, there were 479 ordinations. In 1965, there was one priest for approximately every 800 Catholics. In 2002, there was one priest for approximately every 1,400 Catholics. Because priests are aging, there is one non-retired priest for approximately 1,900 Catholics.

To many, such statistics remain just statistics but their truth became crystal clear to me on Wednesday night.

While reading the book, my Parochial Vicar knocked at my door. He came in, sat in my large rocking chair and asked if he could talk to me. He told me how he had been struggling with his priesthood. Having been a priest for several years, he confided that he was not happy in the priesthood. He had been wrestling with his vocation for a long time. Finally, he had come to the conclusion that he needed to leave the priesthood. I was relieved to know that he was not leaving because of pedophilia.

I listened to his struggle and told him that I respected his decision, knowing that he did not make it lightly but did so after much discernment and prayer. I told him that he would be welcome to drop by anytime no matter where the future may take him. He informed me that he was packing up all his belonging, putting them in his truck and leaving later than night. He thanked me for being understanding and patient with him during his three month appointment with me. We shook hands and he left.

Obviously, I didn't sleep that night as I wrestled with so many scenarios. The next morning, I took my still processing thoughts with me on my 5 a.m. bike ride along the beach as the north wind lashed against my exposed face. No one else braved the cold for a jog or walk that morning. I didn't need any distractions as my head played its unfinished symphony.

The questions were more vocal than their forthcoming answers: How will I tell the people at church this weekend? Will people jump to conclusions that pedophilia was involved when it was not? How can one priest – me - minister to over 1,800 families and three schools as well as a hospital and nursing homes? How can one priest say six Masses every weekend? What about funerals and weddings? Will people understand? Will they be willing to realize that it cannot be “business as usual” in the parish from now on?

The same questions and scenarios will be playing out in your parish soon. The crisis will knock at your parish door. We have no choice but to open the door, let it speak to us and have the courage to act.

“Crisis” come from the Greek, “krinein” meaning to cooperate, to separate, to divide. Crisis in the Church is not something that happens in some nebulous place but in our own backyard, our parish. As Catholics, we must cooperate with each other, recognizing and utilizing our gifts and talents as we try to separate the peripheral from the real issue so that, together, we can divide our God-given responsibility for building up the Body of Christ.