

## **Traveling Companion: Back on board again**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

Walking amid the din of music and conversation at our recent parish Crab Fest, I was stopped by an older gentleman. I had never met him before. He pushed out his hand to greet me and said, “Fr. Tracey, I really enjoy your columns in the Catholic newspaper.” I just nodded my head and said I appreciated his comments.

Having found his opening, he continued to tell me his life’s story. He was from a neighboring parish, was in his 70’s and was now very happy.

Don recounted how he had been away from the church for over twenty years. His wife had walked out on him, and being desponded, he gave up on church. He had asked about an annulment during that time and was told that he needed to hire a Catholic lawyer to plead his case. Obviously, he was fed erroneous information or misunderstood what he had been told.

Some time later, he remarried and is still married to his present wife who is a Methodist. A short time ago, his first wife died. It provided him with an opening for a return visit to the church.

“I never lost the faith,” he continued. “I went to Catholic schools in New Orleans and the Sisters who taught me made sure you knew your faith. Even though they were tough, they were fair. I really believe, ‘once a Catholic, always a Catholic.’”

He then recounted how, each year, he goes on retreat to the Manresa Retreat Center in Louisiana. That yearly experience has continued to fortify his faith and put things in perspective for him.

He continued to tell me how his pastor, gradually and patiently, ushered him into various forms of involvement in his parish. He emphasized how each step nurtured his faith, from simply serving as a cross-bearer for processions to eventually teaching C.C.D. to the children of the parish.

Now he was eager to take another step in experiencing and sharing that same faith. He was preparing to go with a group of young people from his parish to serve for a week at our mission in Saltillo, Mexico.

“I hope I am not boring you with all this,” he asked. I nodded for him to continue. I could hear the enthusiasm in his voice and see the happiness in his face. Finally, he introduced me to his wife, who stood to the side.

As I stood there and listened to Don, I was conscious of the many and varied ways God continues to work in people’s lives. I realized that everyone has a story of how God calls, moulds and shapes their lives in surprising ways.

As I reflected on the Sunday readings and in particular, the gospel, that weekend, I noticed another example of the hand of God at work. The gospel recounted for me Luke’s story of Jesus commissioning the seventy-two to go out to the places he intended to visit, reminding them that “the harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers to his harvest.”

So often, I have to remind myself, especially when I feel overwhelmed in my priestly work, that it reminds us that the harvest is ready. It is our task to become the reapers. God has already done the groundwork in people’s lives. He has readied the hearts and minds. It is up to us to gather them into his kingdom.

When I think of Don and his journey, I see the hand of God at work in his life, as the Lord sent opportunities and people to harvest his life.

Perhaps, all of us, in our own unique way, can parallel a part of our journey with the Don’s journey as the Lord continues to bring us back on board again.