

Raveling Companion: A Humbling but Interesting Experience

Fr. Michael Tracey

I like to greet people before and after Mass, even at the Masses I do not celebrate. Through this experience, I not only get to know the people who attend Mass and make them feel welcome but I also begin to notice who is missed from Church on a particular weekend.

On a recent Sunday, I stood at the back of Church, ready to greet the people as they left a Mass I was not celebrating. What happened during that encounter made me chuckle, coupled with a generous amount of humility.

A woman, probably in her early sixties, dressed in a royal blue suit, approached me with gusto and bravado. She spluttered out, "Father Pete. It is good to see you.!" Before I could muster a comment or answer, she had me locked in a bear hug and planted a big kiss on my cheek. Almost out of breath by her interlocking grasp, I didn't have a change to recover when she turned to a young woman who followed close behind her and said, to me, "Father Pete! This is my daughter from California. You know her!" Before I could extricate myself, the daughter grasped my hand and shook it with excitement and enthusiasm. Both exited the church with excited chuckles.

I didn't have the heart to burst the euphoric bubble and reveal my true identity. I just smiled inwardly and went on greeting other parishioners as they exited church.

I could only imagine the conversation between mother and daughter as they disappeared into the humidity outside. "Wasn't it great to see Father Pete again! He looks good, doesn't he! The parish must be agreeing with him. I think maybe he grew a little taller and possibly lost some weight since I last saw him. I will have to tell my friend that I saw him and that he looks great. And the amazing thing is that he recognized us after all this time."

Some months ago, I wrote about how my name had been changed to Father Raymond Michael Tracey in the nuptial announcements in the newspaper. On other occasions, I have been asked if I have a twin a priest in a particular diocese or maybe a brother a priest in such a diocese. I have to answer in the negative.

Sometimes, a person may call on the phone and ask "To whom am I speaking?" If the person calling has not prefaced the question by introducing themselves, I usually say, "A priest." Then, if they are willing to introduce themselves, I introduce myself.

I remember that, in Jesus' day, people had a difficult time knowing him. He often asked this followers, "Who do people say I am?" He eventually asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" Obviously there is no comparison between the two of us, just a similar question in the asking.

I know that teenagers spend some time searching for their identity. In various ways, they ask themselves, "Who am I?" Many spend years searching for their identity as well as the niche that is hollowed out for them in life. The search for identity is a search for uniqueness that complements gifts and talents that are not easily discernable or discoverable. It always starts with the statement, "I am..." but so often it takes a lifetime to complete such a sentence.

I am contemplating getting one of those picture ID's made, having it laminated with the name on it and hanging it around my neck like a dog tag. Then, if someone comes to me confused about my identity, I can easily look at my name tag and set them and myself straight.

Finally, I need to check the byline of this article and see who wrote it. Otherwise, it might lead to another instance of mistaken identity which could lead to another humbling but interesting experience.