

Traveling Companion: “Is the bishop Catholic?”

Fr. Michael Tracey

Sometimes, people accuse me of having a vivid imagination. In fact, I enjoy such an accusation because it is true. I do have such an imagination. Some people ask me if all the people and events I write about are real people and events. The answer is “yes.”

Some people say and do the most unusual things and even get into the most unusual situations. Often when I think I have heard it all as a priest, along comes something or someone that reminds me that there is still more to hear. A recent encounter is fitting proof of such a statement.

A woman calls to ask to have her children baptized. There are three children involved, ages 6 years, 7 years and 11 years old. It seems some years earlier, in fact, in 1990, she had her other children baptized at our church and given them names associated with Elvis Presley’s family, names such as Lisa Marie and Priscilla Ruby.

She mentioned that they had already decided to have them baptized at our church in two weeks time. Obviously, she was just telling us that she was going to show up on a certain named Sunday and expect us to baptize them. There was no question of arranging such with the priest,

When told that she couldn’t just show up and expect to have her children baptized without attending a class; she indicated that they would not attend a class. In fact, her husband said, “we’ll pay whatever it costs.” Obviously, he meant, we should name a price for the baptisms and he would make a deal with us. When we told him that baptisms are not performed in exchange for a monetary sum, he got frustrated and handed the phone back to his wife.

We asked the wife if any of the children had any health problems or were in immanent danger of death and needed immediate baptism, she indicated that such was not the case. She indicated that one of the children was having bad dreams, could not sleep and was doing poorly in school. Obviously, to her, baptism would be a magical cure of all that troubled the child.

We indicated to the mother that, because of the ages of the children, the children should attend the Rite of Christian Initiation for Children. We indicated that this course would start in September. Her immediate response was, “We are not going to wait until September and we are not going to any class.” She was pretty defiant.

She even wanted to know if our Pastoral Associate was going to baptize them or did they need a Father to do it.

Obviously, she felt we were putting obstacles in the way of her having her children baptized. Why were we making it so complicated? Why were we making it so difficult for her? Could we not simply let her show up with her three kids and let the Father pour a few drops of water on their heads and all her problems will be solved?

Finally, we reminded her that if she did not like our policy or approach, maybe she could call the bishop and he might be able to advise her. We gave her the bishop’s phone number and immediately, she asked, “Is the bishop Catholic?”

We were totally dumbfounded by her remark about the bishop. Our rectory came alive with, not only shock, but surprise and we had no choice but to laugh at the incongruity of the situation. Sometimes, one comes across situations that defy, not only logic and imagination but, nevertheless, they are true.

I wonder if some strangers will show up in church on Sunday with three children, aged 6 years, 7 years and 11 years and say to the Father, “You are supposed to baptize these children today.” It should be interesting!