

Traveling Companion: No ordinary monkish Joe

Fr. Michael Tracey

In an age in the Catholic Church when clerical sex abuse scandals make the daily headlines; when priests are automatically seen as “guilty” without an investigation or trial, it is difficult for priests to have much hope or support. Like a plane that crashes or that is diverted because of a bomb threat, we only hear about the “bad” priests who make the headlines. The rest of us just go about our daily challenges without any great fanfare or seeking of recognition. It seems “bad news priests” command the headlines while the majority just continue to minister to their people. After all, as in any notable profession, there are the silent, strong, resilient, courageous, serving ones who continue to make the headlines where they really count – in ordinary people’s lives.

Recently, I read a “New York Times” runaway bestseller. I wondered, because of the nature of its topic, why it was such a bestseller. Maybe it says more about the goodness and giftedness of people that our world needs most.

The book, “Father Joe – the man who saved my soul,” is written by Tony Hendra.. At age 14, Tony Hendra was having an affair with a married woman when her husband dragged him off to see a Benedictine monk, Father Joe. This was the beginning of a lifelong friendship for the two. Tony Hendra became a successful humorist and satirist (he was one of the founders of National Lampoon) and drifted away from the church into a lifestyle of sex and drugs. Father Joe’s calm demeanor and wisdom helped bring Hendra back to the church and to an understanding that the only sin was one of selfishness.

As I read through the book, I found myself discovering how simple, yet profound thoughts became fodder for my own journey and inspiration.

Tony writes, “Thinking I’d been engulfed by darkness, I’d instead found enlightenment and strength of purpose. The way ahead would be a steeper, stonier path that led to grimmer, tougher places, the real world, hard issues, life as it was really lived. There would be more tests, more doubts. But doubts were normal, even to be embraced. By questioning where you stood, you moved forward.”

Further along in the book, he shares part of a sermon he heard, “Life is rather like opening a tin of sardines. We are all of us looking for the key. Others think they’ve found the key, don’t they? They roll back the lid of the sardine-tin of life, they reveal the sardines, the riches of life therein, and they get them out, they enjoy them. But you know – there’s always a little bit more in the corner you can’t get out. I wonder – is there a little bit in the corner of your life? There is in mine.”

Father Joe, the monk from Quarr Abbey in the south of England shares a lifetime of wisdom with Tony during his many visits to the Abbey. He quotes that wonderful passage from Meister Eckhart, “When God laughs at the soul and the soul laughs back at God, the persons of the Trinity are begotten. When the Father laughs at the Son and the Son laughs back at the Father, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and that love is the Holy Spirit.”

One day, both were discussing change when Father Joe said, “The world worships a certain kind of newness. People are always talking about a new car, or a new drink, or house, but these things are not truly new, are they? They begin to get old the minute you acquire them. New is not in things. New is within us. The truly new is something that is new forever: you. Every morning of your life and every evening, every moment is new. You have never lived this moment before and you never will again. In a sense, the new is also the eternal.”

Yes, I like the ordinary Joes whose simplicity and depth of faith and wisdom empower us in the extraordinary.