

Traveling Companion: My empty nest syndrome

Frt. Michael Tracey

Some weeks ago, I traveled to Naperville, outside of Chicago, to preach at a parish there about the effects and challenges we face as a result of Hurricane Katrina. While there, I met some wonderful people and was impressed with their concern and giving spirit.

I also met with a group of high school young people and their advisors who wished to spend their spring break helping the people of our parish. I updated them on what to expect when they arrived and offered them some room at my house during their stay.

We picked up five adults and twelve young people at Gulfport airport on Friday morning, fresh from their early bird flight from Chicago. On the way to Bay St. Louis, we drove them along the beach through Gulfport, Long Beach and part of Pass Christian and then onto Menge Ave, I-10 and into Bay St. Louis.

On arrival in Bay St. Louis, we nourished their bodies as they prepared for a week of hard work; cleaning out people's homes; hanging sheetrock; mudding and other necessary chores to help with the rebuilding process.

For the next week, they walked, talked, worked, sweated, showered, suntanned, and eventually slept; only to rise early the next morning and join us for our 7 a.m. morning Mass.

They slept on tile floors, on carpet and air mattresses as their tired bodies recovered some much needed energy through sleep. Prior to retiring each night, the group had a sharing and listening session. I enjoyed sitting in their midst listening to their perspectives on the day that had ended. They shared experiences of people they met and helped during the work day. They talked about the faith of the people they encountered. They spoke about the gratefulness of the people they helped as well as the food they received from generous parishioners.

As I took them back to the airport and on their way home, I began to treasure the moments we spent together. At a time when young people are often perceived as selfish and unconcerned, it is heart-warming to work with young people who choose to do for the least of our brothers and sisters because of the hurricane.

Spending my first night alone in the house again, I began to read some of the letters the young people left behind. Christine wrote, "Where shall I begin? Well, let me say you are a brave man for letting us stay at your house for a week. Your hospitality was greatly appreciated and I will never forget all your sermons. I've learned so much this week from you and from myself. I'll never forget what I've seen in the past 7 days and the people I've met. You are a true inspiration to me and I look forward to reading your book."

Some of what vivacious Allie wrote included, "I came to BSL with a very open mind. But never ever would I have imagined what I have lived through this week. I am amazed at your vitality and ability to lead your parish the way that you do. It's obvious that you are their rock and that they truly need you to survive their struggles. I see God ever time I look at you. It's incredible to just look at someone and be so filled with God's presence. Your homilies have touched me. Through such short and simple homilies you have helped me to sort out a lot of different thoughts. It's something I haven't connected with in awhile and I'm glad you are the one to help me do so. I'm glad I could at least make a dent in the reconstruction of your beautiful town."

One morning, at 5:45 a.m. the group climbed one of our church towers to view the spectacular sunrise. They brought hope and sunshine into the lives of all they met. Maybe, now, as I embrace my empty nest at home, we can also celebrate an empty tomb that makes every day an Easter day.