

Traveling Companion: Claude and Fr. O'Leary

Fr. Michael Tracey

My "Gulf Pine Catholic" articles generate a diverse response. Recently, a gentleman approached me and said, "Are you that priest who writes for the Catholic paper?" My cover was blown and I affirmed him. Often emails, letters, chance meetings with people who read my columns, bring comments, impact statements and suggested topics for future columns. It is heart-warming to know how a God-given gift that is shared can impact so many lives.

Recently, I received an email from a woman. She suggested that I check out a certain web link that she included. I did and I was presently surprised.

The true story revolved around an Afro-American named Claude and a priest in Jackson, Mississippi called Fr. O'Leary.

Claude married when he was seventeen His bride was also seventeen. He worked in the fields for a landowner. One day, when he was 19, he was out plowing in the field when another worker ran to tell him that his wife was screaming in the house. Claude went to investigate and found a man attacking his wife. Overcome with rage, he grabbed an axe and killed the intruder. The intruder happened to be the favorite employee of the landowner. He was arrested, sentenced for murder and condemned to die in the electric chair.

In prison, he noticed something on a string around another prisoner's neck. The other prisoner said it was a medal. The owner of the medal was Catholic. He threw the medal to the ground and stomped on it, cursing God and life as he did so. Claude picked up the medal and later began to wear it. During the night, Claude had a dream of a beautiful women, telling him to call a Catholic priest.

Fr. O'Leary arrived, listened to Claude's story and decided to give him instructions in the faith. He found out that Claude could not read or write and had never been to school. The only way Claude could know which end of the book was up or down was by looking at the pictures in the book. Eventually, Claude was received into the Catholic Church.

Soon, the time arrived for his execution at five minutes past twelve, midnight. His last wish was to have a party with Fr. O'Leary and his cellmates. Fifteen minutes before his execution, the Governor gave a two-week reprieve. Claude wondered why and asked "What have I done wrong these past weeks that God would refuse me my going home? Why? Why must I still remain here for two more weeks?" But he was to find out later.

Fr. O'Leary reminded Claude about the prisoner who had hated him intensely. This prisoner had led an immoral life and was also destined for the electric chair.

Two weeks later, Claude was executed. Fr. O'Leary said, "I've never seen anyone go to his death as joyful and happily. Even the official witnesses and the newspaper reporters were amazed. They said they couldn't understand how anyone could go and sit n the electric chair actually beaming with happiness."

Two months later, the cellmate who hated Claude was to be executed. He was asked if he had anything to say. Finally, he shouted, "Sheriff, get me a priest."

Soon, Fr. O'Leary was back. The execution chambers were cleared and Fr. O'Leary heard his confession.

Moments later, the sheriff turned to the condemned man and asked, "Son, what changed your mind?" The prisoner responded, "Remember that black man, Claude..."

Playwright Eugene O'Neill once wrote that "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue."