

Traveling Companion: A matter of convenience

Fr. Michael Tracey

I usually park myself at the back of church before our weekend Masses. Then, I have an opportunity to greet the regulars and watch out for any visitors who may be joining us for Mass.

Last Saturday evening, I adopted my usual stance at the back of church. An elderly gentleman, probably in his late seventies, approached me. He walked slowly with the aid of a walking cane. I had not seen him before at church.

He stopped and asked, "Are you the pastor?" I indicated that I was. His next question puzzled me. "When are you going to restore and clean up that church sign outside?" I wasn't sure what he meant. Our regular church sign was destroyed by the hurricane. I asked him, "What sign?" "That sign outside," he indicated. "That sign outside in front of church that is tied up with wire," he volunteered. "Oh! The historical marker," I suggested. He agreed. I told him that maybe the Mississippi Historical Society might provide us with a new sign in the future." He wasn't amused by my non-committal answer. Then he pressed his point, "I used to live here. I graduated from Stanislaus fifty years ago. When I was here, that was the sign that was outside this church. I am not interested in a new sign from a historical society. All I care about is the sign that is out there now." Getting a bit perturbed by his antics, I felt like saying, "I will get a scrubbing brush and some wire wool and you can go out and restore the sign." Instead I bit my tongue and filed his comments into my file 13 reservoir. I knew that, in my continuing plans for recovery, restoring the sign was not a high priority. Obviously, for him, it was a priority.

The incident reminded me of some other incidents. Some years ago, a young girl from Gulfport called. She was interested in getting married in our church. Obviously, the long aisle and ambiance of the church appealed to her for her wedding. Our wedding guidelines included information about donations for use of church. Out-of-town folks were asked to donate more than parishioners. The young bride-to-be, who was also studying law, was surprised by the amount of the donation request for out-of-town folks. Some days later, she called with a curious but predictable question: "How do I become a member of your parish?" I sensed the kind of bait that graced the end of her hooked question. Unlike the gullible fish, I didn't bite.

Of late, seeing that we are in the political season, I have noticed another trend. I observe carefully the print advertisements of politicians and would be politicians. I notice their background, educational achievements, experience background and, especially, their membership in a church, if noted. I am especially curious when people state that they are members of our particular parish. Many of such persons have long-standing profiles in the community.

When I find that, when someone states that they are members of our parish, my curiosity begins to peak. Do they go to church here? Have I ever seen them in church? Are they on our parish roster? Did I ever see them at church even at Christmas and Easter? Of course, I may have seen them in church. I have seen them especially at high profile funerals.

I have also noticed that some who are running for office, all of a sudden, can have a surge in religious fervor. Maybe they are praying for some divine intervention to push them over the top in the vote tally.

Then, there are the others who, without fanfare or status seeking, are regular, committed and faithful. They don't need to publicize or restate their religious preferences. Their presence is their witness.

Through all these reflections and experiences, I wonder. For many, is their religion a matter of convenience rather than a matter of commitment!