

Traveling Companion: Disaster and divinity

Fr. Michael Tracey

Dr, Laurie, Professor of Religion at the University of Mississippi called some months ago and asked if she could come and interview me. My curiosity asked, “How did you get my name?” She informed me that a parishioner had passed on my name to her. She told me the person’s name, and I then asked the nature of her project. She told me she was doing a paper, to be published later, as well as a presentation on “Disaster and Divinity.” I asked her to explain some more and she did.

Her title intrigued me. I sensed the main focus would be the coloration between the idea of faith and disaster, as well as what kind of impact a disaster has on one’s faith. I had reflected on a similar topic for “The Washington Times” newspaper several months earlier. Obviously, being in the middle of a disaster zone since Hurricane Katrina, I had gained some valuable and personal insights into the coloration between the disaster and the idea of God, faith and religion.

Dr. Laura arrived, be speckled, enthusiastic and ready to glean some wisdom for her research paper.

We sat at a conference table, as she passed me her business card. Again, she explained the purpose of her paper and how the idea evolved. She asked if it were okay to tape the conversation. For the next hour, we chatted.

We talked about several ideas; about loss, grief, pain, despair, hope, faith, determination, support, lessons learned; things let go of.

We reflected on people’s journey in the aftermath of the hurricane. We talked about the various emotions that surfaced – the anger, guilt, fear, confusion, doubts, despair, hope, impatience, as well as the insuring questions these emotions generate.

We also talked about how the devastation wrought by Katrina affected relationship with God. Some people could not go near our parish church in its denuded state. They preferred to remember it in its former glory. They couldn’t hope or understand that new life could possibly arise from the ashes. Others, realizing that they lived a strained or distant relationship with God, felt an initial tinge of guilt and decided to return to church. Still others, paralyzed by the trauma of the hurricane experience, created their own cocoon of isolationism.

We talked about the kenosis that people experienced as a result of the hurricane; the emptying of the material and personal things in their lives as well as the divesting of some of the comfort zones of religion.

Without the trappings, the creature comforts, the routine, the control, the schedules, the predictability of a previously organized life; people found themselves in a sea of doubts, drifting aimlessly in unfamiliar territory.

Obviously, we talked about how such divestiture impacted people’s relationship with God. In one sense, people were confronted with their own vulnerability and mortality. Certainty was replaced with a questioning spirit which led one deeper into the heart of one’s purpose, existence and future. Control was replaced with a chaos that yearned for some order or direction.

Finally, she asked about my own personal journey of faith in the aftermath of the hurricane; how was my faith tested? What did I learn about myself, my attitude to life, to others and to God? I had reflected on these questions many times since the hurricane and I continue to gain new insights into myself, my priorities, my gifts, my attitude to life, my openness to being surprised by God.

Soon the interview concluded. She promised to sent me a copy of her presentation after she presented it. Obviously, I will be interested in her approach and especially her conclusions.

When she left, I continued to reflect on the correlation between devastation and divinity. I also realized that the devastation of Calvary did in fact lead to resurrected hope.