

Traveling Companion: When words fail...

Fr. Michael Tracey

I finished celebrating Saturday evening Mass and anticipated a nice quiet evening in my favorite recliner. It was a busy day with four Masses which included a morning Mass, over 60 First Communion children, a Nuptial Mass, Confessions and a Vigil Mass.

The phone rang. The hospital needed a priest. A young man had been killed in an ATV accident.

As I drove into the Emergency Room parking area, I noticed about twenty or thirty young people chatting in various groups around the parking area. The receptionist ushered me into the emergency room. Immediately, Casey met me. He mentioned the groups of young people outside in the parking lot and asked if I would be available to meet with them, not at the hospital or funeral home but maybe at someone's home. I agreed.

As I entered the cubicle where Josh's body lay, I noticed five people gathered around his lifeless body. After some introductions and a short prayer, we stood in silence and shock, glancing at the body of a dead sophomore. His body was covered with a white blanket and several towels and face cloths. His divorced mother and father and his father's new bride-to-be stood vigil, deep in their own sorrowful thoughts. Frequently, the father would take a face cloth and bury his head in it as he poured out his soul and tears on it.

As I pulled my chair closer, the father began to talk. Some weeks earlier, his father had died. Danny had built a tomb for his father and had decided to build one for himself also, beside his father's. "Now," he said, "Josh will be buried in my tomb." He went on to talk about his upcoming wedding to his new girlfriend who stood across from him. "Josh was going to be my best man." As he said this, his tears became more frequent as he lowered his head and buried it in a face cloth.

Between intermittent conversations, silences prevailed. Then Danny rose from his chair, took a face cloth and positioned it on the left side of his son's bloodied head. Then he placed his head down beside that of his son and allowed more tears to flow.

Some time later, as I was about to leave, he said, "I was there for First Communion this morning. Josh was supposed to be there but didn't make it because he stayed with a friend last night and didn't get up in time. Please ask your parishioners to pray for us." I assured him and left to meet with the young people who had gathered earlier in the hospital parking lot.

I reached the home where the young people had gathered. The street leading to it was filled with cars and trucks. On my journey there, I wondered what I could say to a group of young people who were in shock at the death of one of their closest friends.

As I neared the house built on stilts, I noticed small clusters of young people gathered around the expansive front yard. Immediately, I was met by a youth minister from another church. After brief introductions, someone gathered all the young people together. I estimated that there were around fifty young people there as well as several adults, coaches, and the High School Principal.

I nodded to the youth minister to begin. He began with a prayer, asking for God's guidance, mercy, understanding and comfort at this time for the young people and Josh's family. Then it was my turn.

What do you say? Nothing will take away the pain, the grief, the loss, and the tears. No words will bring Josh back. For many of these young people, this was their first encounter with death. As teenagers, before now, they felt invincible and indestructible. Now they found out differently. As I spoke to them and prayed with them, I reminded them that they should never take anyone or anything for granted; that they needed to appreciate everyone in their lives and let them know how much they appreciate them. I reminded them that they saw Josh at school on Friday, on Monday, it will be different. When words fail us, we have to dig a little deeper. Even when we do, we may end up with more questions than answers; questions that can only be attempted to be answered through the prism of faith.