

Traveling Companion: Is there anything I can do for you?

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Since Hurricane Katrina, I have been asked hundreds of times, “Is there anything I can do for you?” by parishioners, people on the phone, people who drop by, people who are complete strangers. I know the vast majority of my fellow priests have been asked the same question hundreds of times also.

It is heartening and humbling to know that people, genuinely, care enough to ask and just as sincerely want to help.

As priests, we all know why people ask this question, given the effects and trauma of Hurricane Katrina. But, what we find difficult to do is to answer it completely and honestly. We often dismiss the question or give a cursory answer. You may wonder why we do that and why your pastor does it when you ask him the same question. Well, the answer is deep and difficult. Let’s try and understand it

First of all, we need to think about expectations. Being a priest, like any profession or calling, brings with it a series of expectations. A priest is expected to or perceived to have all the answers, or, at least, most of them. There is also the perception and expectation that priests are strong, especially emotionally, and, so when he faces the havoc, trauma, destruction and overwhelming sense of helplessness following a catastrophe such as Katrina; he wants to make sure that people continue to see him as strong. He tries to live up to their expectations, but, deep down inside, he may be really confused, hurting, overwhelmed by the task of rebuilding. Still, people need to continue to ask their priest: “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Secondly, there is the trauma that people are experiencing following the hell of Hurricane Katrina. They have their own horror stories of destruction and despair; survival and stage fright. The priest has his own same stories, that are often multiplied hundreds of times but he doesn’t want to burden you with them. In his estimation, your story is more important than his. Still, people need to continue to ask their priest, “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Thirdly, there is the question of pride. Priests don’t want to be perceived as weak, as struggling, as confused, as overwhelmed especially in the enormous task many of them face in trying to rebuild their parish and faith community. They don’t want to burden people with their own burdens. Still, people need to continue to ask their priest, “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Fourthly, there are the outside forces which impact the priest’s rebuilding task. One such force is dealing with diocesan officials, insurance, contractors and the disharmony between the groups and the parish. The priest may wish to proceed with the rebuilding but his efforts are stymied by lack of direction, and the placing of obstacles in the way of recovery by people who do not have to work on ground zero day after day. The priest doesn’t want to tell you about such frustrations because he might be branded as a maverick, not a cooperator. Still, people need to continue to ask their priest, “Is there anything I can do for you?”

So, in the light of Hurricane Katrina, people need to continue to ask that most basic question of their priest. In doing so, they will allow the priest to be a vessel of clay; a human being; a searcher for answers; a wellspring of good will; a builder of relationships and a discoverer of inner resources and strengths he may never know he had. Maybe, some day, when you are persistent, your priest will be free enough to answer honestly the question: “Is there anything I can do for you?”