

## **Traveling Companion: Barber Shop Trio**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

When a person moves to a new town or city, there are certain standard relationships they have to establish: with telephone company, electric company, doctors, church and of course, hair stylists or, if one is a little more old-fashioned and of the male species, a barber.

Recently, I had to establish a relationship with the latter. It was quite an experience. I drove up, remotely locked my car, opened the door and was greeted with “you left your lights on!” I advised the short chubby man with his silver bi-focal glasses, that the lights went off automatically. He ushered me, with a sweep of his hand into a chair, without saying a word.

Between the barber and the door stood a space heater. On one side of it, sat a man in his late fifties with his rear end to the fire. At the same time, he held a coffee cup in his hand and on occasion spewed chewing tobacco spray from his mouth. The barber sat in a revolving chair behind me. He just made one comment, “Regular haircut!” I agreed. Then, he followed it with a question: “Straight or rounded in the back.” I answered him and he began his tonsorial duties.

On the other side of the barber stood a be-speckled gentleman, probably in his late forties. He nervously moved around the room as he pulled on the last vestiges of a cigarette.

No one spoke to me from there on. This gave me an opportunity to invade their conversation space as I listened amid the din of the electric clippers. Periodically, when allowed by a barber who whirled me about from side to side, while he sat in his comfortable chair, I was able to take in the surroundings. The walls cried out with pleas for lost animals, with notices of property for sale, a calendar that pleaded to be changed and old crumbled up newspapers along with a box of opened floor tiles.

The conversation between the men drew me into horse racing. I listened to their visits to the Fairgrounds in New Orleans, to their winnings and rare loses. I listened to their sadness at not having placed a bet on a sure winner that would have netted them at least a thousand dollars. They talked about the balance in their bookie checking account. The conversation was rarely interrupted, except for the gentleman who released his chew into the coffee cup. They made plans to attend a race meeting the next day. One went to the racing forms and together they began to handicap the horses that were running the next day. They discussed the jockeys, the owners and of course, the form of the horses.

Soon, it was all over – my haircut experience. My head was a lot lighter. My pocket only nine dollars lighter but my experience immeasurably amused by the racing banter.

While I was there, I got a glimpse into the world of betters and prognosticators, into a haven where patrons gather, not to compare notes on haircuts, but on horse forms; into a world of a small barber shop with few frills and less thrills; into a world as fast disappearing as a horse racing toward the finish line; into a world that has its own religion that binds people into a family of hopeful winners and mute losers.

For a fleeting few minutes, I inhabited the world of high rollers and high stakes instead of the high anxiety of family troubles and individuals crises. For a fleeting few minutes, I escaped the sadness of death-embracing tragedies and individual crises of faith. I escaped the bad news bearers and the crisis ridden, debt-visited problems of people.

Obviously, I have no intention of immersing myself in the horse-racing scene but I may go back again when the odds are right for another tonsorial experience.