

Traveling Companion: I'm sorry for bothering you!

Fr. Michael Tracey

Following Saturday evening Mass, I was about to settle into some leftover stew, when the rectory's second phone line rang. I answered and said, "Hello!" Not knowing what kind of phone call it might be and possibly anticipating it being a sales call, I waited. The caller was a gentleman. "Are you a priest?" he asked. Not sure what might be coming next, I simply said, "yes." Then the gentleman said, "What is your name?" I hesitated for awhile in answering him because I was not, as yet, sure about the genuineness of the call. Eventually I told him my name. He never volunteered him and I found out later why. Then, he said, "I am in trouble." I waited for more information and eventually it came. "My family left me," he blurted out. "What happened," I asked and then continued, "Could you tell me more?" There was another pause at the other end of the phone. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry for bothering you?" "Did they divorce you?" I interjected. There was silence at the other end of the phone line and finally he repeated, "I'm sorry for bothering you." I answered, "You are not bothering me." A shorter silence then ensued and then I heard a click and he was gone.

I felt numbed by the whole experience, but that short conversation with an unknown, hurting man, father and husband. My mind filled with a quandary of questions. What prompted this man to call? Obviously, he was hurting. What was his hurt? I could surmise. Obviously, it was about his family; a family torn apart, probably by divorce or by some other torment. Why was he not able to talk about? Did he lose courage when he started talking? Was the whole experience too close to the heart or too painful to speak about it then? Why did his sudden burst of courage in making the phone call wave so quickly?

Some questions still haunt me about my own involvement in this brief telephone encounter. Did the gentleman sense that he was actually disturbing me and that I might be in no mood to listen to his tale of woes at that particular time? I suppose, for me, that question is still part of my own examination of conscience. Will I ever find an answer for it, I am not sure.

Another question that haunts me about my involvement in this brief telephone conversation is: could I have probed more and encouraged him to talk more freely about his hurt, whatever it may be? Why didn't I seize the opportunity when it was presented to me? Did I fail to recognize such an opportunity?

A more probing question that also haunts me is: did I let slip a graced moment to help a suffering, struggling human being? The story of the Good Samaritan came to mind. While most of us would like to be seen as the "Good Samaritan," maybe I was really the "priest" who said the wounded man lying by the roadside of life and passed him by on the other side of the road?

That simple, one-minute phone call will continue to haunt me for a long time. I hope it will make me more sensitive to the people who are "bothering" me. I hope I will be able to see such moments, not as a disturbance and a nuisance but as a graced moment.

The whole experience made me realize that life presents us with many graced moments that will never be repeated; with many of the "extras" in the ordinary of each day that are pregnant with the seeds of possibility; with gems of wisdom learned from the diamonds in the rough that the Master shares with us daily.

Finally, that one-minute phone call has provided me with a script for another article that teaches all of us that, deep down, "bothering" people remind us that in the mess and madness of life, there is a sacred potential for ministry and redemption.