

Traveling companion: A Conversion Experience

Fr. Michael Tracey

Before I celebrated our Sunday evening Mass, I checked my email. I noticed an email from someone I hadn't heard from before. I read: "Father Tracey, Sometimes I ponder if a priest or deacon wonders if his homily touches anyone or if he wonders if saying Mass makes a difference. I'd like you to know that your homilies have made a great difference in my life and I look forward to Mass as the highlight of my week.

It seems that each prayer in Mass, each reading, each homily you share touches me. I feel stronger with each Mass. I am a lifelong Catholic and have always taken my faith very seriously, but have somehow not been able to integrate it always into my 'secular' life. There have been times when I have been more successful than others. For the most part, I have been content to attend Mass, but not really to participate in it. That has changed recently. Most notably at Mass on Christmas Day.

At that Mass, for the first time, I did something simple but meaningful for me. I participated in that Mass by passing the collection baskets and bringing the gifts to you. Two days later I was a participant in another life changing event, which is described in the attached newspaper article. As I stood in the flames that day and witnessed the terror in the parents of the deceased children I thought a lot about God, about my own children, and about you. While rescuing the little girl, I prayed for strength and courage. Later, while trying to console the distraught parents I prayed for them to be comforted. I heard a message that day.

You see I was prepared. True, I was prepared by being the only one there trained in fire suppression and I was aware enough to find a fire extinguisher and fortunately I knew how to use it. But more importantly, I was prepared with an internal faith, untypical courage, and a willingness to respond to an unseen external push at that moment. I was not alone.

Life is a journey and sometimes we stray. Lately, I feel that I am coming closer to finding the right way again. I just want to say thanks to you for you truly have made a difference. There's a lot more to my story. It's full of complications and the results of poor choices, perhaps. Maybe some day, I'll have a chance to share more of it with you as I try to find the right path. For now thanks again. Jim."

I read the article from "The Tennessean" newspaper he had attached to the email. The heading said, "Man saves girl trapped in rig." A tractor-trailer crashed into a car, killing five people. The newspaper article went on to state, "it is a scene he'll never forget – chaos, confusion, a mother's anguish as she watched her children die, a man with smoke wafting from his beard, a young girl in ring of fire, helpless and seconds from death. People desperately working against the approaching flames."

The article goes on to quote Jim, "I was able to put out enough of the fire so she (9 year old girl) could see her way out. She took three steps, and we met halfway. I grabbed her arm. She was wearing yellow sweatpants. They were burned off from the knees, and the middle of her shirt was burned away. She took a few steps, and yelled 'Ouch,' we grabbed her arms, walked 10 feet and sat her down. The tank of the truck started making noise, so we had to move again. When I looked back, I could see the imprint of her little footprints in blood."

I have emailed Jim and some day, we hope to meet and hear the rest of his conversion story.