

Traveling Companion: Accident or design?

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The elderly lady stopped me on my way down the aisle to hear confessions and get ready for Saturday evening Mass. Excitedly, she said, “I met your sister!” With an air of puzzlement, my logical mindset kicked in. I have one sister in Ireland and two in England and none of them have been to the United States of late.

Then the woman began to explain how she met my sister. Still, a little puzzled by her explanation, I accepted it and moved on.

The next morning at one of the Masses, two other ladies approached me with the same statement, “I met your sister.” During some interrogation on my part, I found out the rest of the story.

One of our retired priests led a group on a tour of Ireland toward the end of May. On A Sunday evening, the retired priest concelebrated Mass with the pastor of a cathedral parish in the south of Ireland. The group attended the Mass. The pastor acknowledged and welcome the group from Mississippi. My youngest sister happened to be in the audience as she and her husband had traveled to that area for a long weekend vacation. The place was around 200 miles from their home. As soon as my sister heard that there was a group visiting from Mississippi, she asked them if they knew me, her brother, who was a priest in Mississippi. Of course, many of the group said they did and, in fact, several women from my parish told her that I was their pastor. I was amazed at the encounters. Was it an accident or a design that such encounters took place?

More recently, I experienced another incident that made me wonder if it was an accident or design. A young couple from the Gulfport area got married recently in our church. The minister officiating at the wedding ceremony was a transitional deacon who will be ordained a priest for the Memphis diocese on June 6th. On the surface, there seemed to be nothing earth-shattering or significant about the incident. However, a certain irony came into play.

Some years ago, in the last century, when I was assigned to St. James parish in Gulfport, I baptized a baby boy called “Kevin.” Nothing dramatic about such a baptism either. However, a young man on his way to the priesthood informed me that he had a picture of a certain priest – namely, yours truly, holding him at his baptism. This young man now wanted to meet that priest again.

Following the wedding ceremony, I met with him. I also met his parents and his sister whom I had also baptized. We chatted for a while and were about to part our ways when he produced a camera and wanted to take a picture with me for old time and present time sake.

I thought about a bridge being built through pictures and encounters. I’m sure the picture of me holding him at his baptism was taken with a very elementary and unsophisticated camera. This time, the camera was different. He produced his iPhone and handed it to his father to take the picture. It reminded me that, in spite of how sophisticated we have become between a baptism and a wedding, there was something more special at stake.

As I related the incident, I reminded our congregation that maybe some day one of the little boys I baptized at the parish might be ordained a priest and serve the people in our diocese. Is it wishful thinking? Is such an encounter accidental or by design? Who know?

Somehow, I wonder if God puts us in people’s lives for a reason and a season. Sometimes the reason may not be that obvious and the season may be just momentarily. I also wonder if God puts us in situations that are not of our choosing but, nevertheless, become situations where God can use our giftedness to bring about a greater good that we might ever have imagined.

Now that my curiosity has peaked, I will be on the watch for incidents and encounters that may become more designed than accidental.