

Traveling Companion: Everything you ever wanted to ask a priest but...

Fr. Michael Tracey

I always like to surprise people, to keep them guessing, to keep challenging them to think “outside the box.” So, on the weekend of May 2nd, we celebrated “Good Shepherd Sunday” a little differently. Usually on such a day, the homily is about vocations and the challenge to invite people to consider the call of the Shepherd for people to tend the flock.

After I read the gospel, I left the sanctuary and watched people’s reaction. Obviously, they expected me to stay at the pulpit and preach from there. So, I introduced the idea of Good Shepherd Sunday as a way of thinking of the theme of vocations in the church.

I said that we were going to try something totally different; that it might bomb out but I was sure it was worth trying and may make a difference. I started with the statement, “Everything you ever wanted to ask a priest, but were afraid to.” I could hear gasps and other outbursts of emotions. Still, I plodded on at all four of my Masses and waited for the questions to surface. I was not disappointed.

The questions were many and varied. Here are just some of them that surfaced during the Masses that particular weekend: “How do you handle people’s criticism?” “Why did you become a priest?” “How did you end up in Mississippi?” How has the recent clerical sexual abuse scandal affected you?” “What would you like to see more of from your parishioners?” “How do you do it all without feeling overwhelmed?” “What are people’s expectations of you as a priest?” “What is your favorite Scripture passage?” “How can you keep a secret?” “How do you cope with loneliness in the priesthood?” Do you get to go home to Ireland often?” “What is your handicap (in golf)?” “How do you encourage parents to promote the idea of a vocation?” “Do you think a married priesthood is the answer to the shortage of vocations to the priesthood?” “Are you happy as a priest?” “Have you ever been involved in a deliverance, an exorcism?” (The young woman who asked this question indicated that she had.) “What do you do to relieve the stress that comes with the job?” “When you want to get away from it all, what do you do?” “Do you get the same salary as the bishop?” “What pastimes do you have?” “You came to anoint my son at his home three years ago when he was dying and that experience changed everyone who was there that day.” “Did someone really fold up a dollar bill in the shape of a shirt and put it in the collection?” (Obviously, the questioner was asking about my previous article, titled, “A Dollar for my Troubles.” The answer was “Yes.”) Do you ever get nervous? Would you ever like to be married?” “Could a person receive all seven sacraments?” (from a grade school student) “How do you fit in with the right of succession?” “With all the people that want to see you, do you ever say to yourself that there are some you would prefer not to come?” “When you heard you were coming to Bay St. Louis, what did you think?” “Do you like being a priest?” “We hope you don’t retire soon and leave us.” What kind of prayer life do you have and what form does it take? “Can I ask you a personal opinion: What changes would you like to see in the church today? “What was the weirdest question you were ever asked?”

Following each Mass, people spoke of how refreshing the approach was and thanked me for being their shepherd.

Obviously, I could write an article about each question I was asked. But I do not wish to overburden you. Instead, maybe you should take some of the questions I was asked and ask your pastor about them. Maybe, you will discover someone that is real, human, happy, excited and in love with his priesthood. Maybe you will discover someone who, like the Good Shepherd, hears the voice of his sheep and is there to nourish and guide them.