

Traveling Companion: You look familiar

Fr. Michael Tracey

I was at Sam's in Gulfport the other day. I was minding my own business. I had picked up what I needed at the end of an aisle. Out of the corner of my eye, a shadow passed, pushing a cart. The shadow stopped momentarily as it passed the aisle; then reversed to where I was standing. Then I heard a voice say, "You look familiar." I glanced up to see a middle aged man, holding on to a buggy that had a container of paper towels in its belly.

I knew I wasn't that familiar to this stranger because I knew he didn't see my mug shot among the illustrious ten most wanted at the local post office. Obviously, I had never met this man before, even though some of my memory cells are slowly atrophying.

I sensed it was highly unlikely that he might have seen my mug shot in Gulf Pine Catholic and he possibly wanted to tell me about one of my articles in the paper.

Then this man said, "Are you a priest from Minnesota?" Obviously, I was not and let him know. I wasn't even dressed like a priest. Maybe I had a twin there but that was highly unlikely. "Never mind," he said and began walking away pushing his cart. I could hear him across the aisle trying to explain his embarrassment to his wife.

Out of curiosity, I rambled down the other aisle and met the couple face to face. The gentleman engaged in custody of the eyes as he approached me. I simply said, "Hi and wished them a nice shopping experience." I met silence and passed on.

At least, the man got part of his question right. I was a priest, after all. Of course, I didn't let him in on the rest of the secret.

I surmised that the couple were from Minnesota and were probably Catholic. I'm not sure how much wiser they were about my identity.

Minutes later, I was in another store taking care of business when a tall gentleman caught my attention as he passed on the other aisle. He simply said, "Hi! Father Tracey." Obviously, I looked more familiar to him from some encounter. I didn't recognize him but acknowledged his greeting and moved on.

A few days later, I was at K-Mart checking out when the cashier asked, "Did I see you on TV?" I simply shrugged my shoulders and said, "Not that I am aware of."

We look "familiar" to many people. We encounter "familiar" people every day. We rub shoulders with "familiar" people daily at work, shopping or through passing acquaintance.

Many times, we are "familiar" with our faith. We know when to stand, sit, kneel at Mass. We even have a false familiarity with the notion that Ash Wednesday is a holy day of obligation. At least, we never miss the opportunity to get our yearly, familiar ashes to remind people of our identity as Catholics.

Other times, we are not as familiar with our faith as we should. Once we have made our Confirmation, we often assume that the gifts of wisdom, knowledge and understanding, given by this sacrament, are total and complete. Some even try and keep familiar with their faith by committing to join the rest of us in church at Christmas and Easter.

In Jesus' time, many people were familiar with him. They were impressed with his talks, in awe of his miracles, and curiously followed him. Even the Scribes and Pharisees were familiar with him. They were experts in ascertaining the nuances of the Law but had difficulty with the Law of Love.

Toward the end of Jesus' life, many of the people who were so familiar with him, decided, because of his unfamiliar and timely end, to abandon him.

So, the next time someone stops me and says, "You look familiar," I will simply acknowledge the recognition with "and you look familiar too."