

## **Traveling Companion: Can I give you a hug?**

Fr. Michael Tracey

Marion called and left a message on the answering machine. She was experiencing a “crisis of faith” and wanted to talk about it. She also left work and cell phone numbers.

I returned her call, introduced myself and asked when it might be convenient for us to get together to discuss her “crisis of faith.”

She arrived at our office trailer on Saturday morning at 10 a.m. She announced her presence as she opened the trailer door and shouted a “Hello!” I answered her and ushered her into my office compartment.

Marian, dressed in a sky blue dress, sat across from me. I began the conversation with some general questions about where she was originally from; where she worked and how she ended up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. She volunteered that she was from California originally. She had spent some time in the service and was stationed for a time in Germany. She took a bus tour from her army complex to London with another group of military personnel. She found an empty seat beside a young military gentleman and they conversed during their journey across Germany and France into England. She finally fell asleep.

Some months later, she married her traveling companion. Years later, both left the service and eventually went to work for different companies at Stennis Space Center in Hancock County. Her background is in computer programming.

As she sat down in my trailer office, she began to open up and we moved toward the real reason why she had called for an appointment.

She volunteered that she had a three year old daughter. “One night, I was putting her to bed and tucking her in. I began to think about what kind of future I was passing on to her. I wondered about what kind of values and morals I would pass on to her. I realized that I wasn’t a great role model for her in those areas.”

She went on to share how she had lapsed in her faith. She was a product of Catholic schools, had drifted from the church and practicing her religion in college and later, while in the service. Now, that she was married and had a daughter, she began to realize how much of a vacuum filled her life.

I assured her that the Lord had been patient with her and had helped her realize that when the moment arose, he would be there for her.

Assured that I was not going to chastise her for her lack of practice of her faith, she continued to share her story, and especially what she felt was missing in her life. I encouraged her to start attending Mass again and to avail of the opportunity to attend the R.C.I.A. process in the fall.

An hour later, she was ready to leave but, before she left, she wanted to see the church. We entered the church in its state of disrepair since the hurricane. As we stood in the middle of the floor studying the surrounding stained glass windows and the rest of the beauty in the church, I reminded her that, while, on the outside in her own personal life, she was filled with the debris of doubts and disengagements. Now, as she looked around at the inner beauty of the church, she began to realize that she also had her own inner beauty.

I chatted with her about some of the destruction that the church experienced through the hurricane. I let her know that, in spite of it, we were celebrating Mass there. I invited her to join us any weekend, telling her that the Lord is present, even among the debris in our lives.

As she quietly, listened and continued to observe her surroundings, she turned to me and said, “Can I give you a hug?” I agreed! There was no need for any further words.