

Traveling Companion: How long do I have to...

Fr. Michael Tracey

I was in the middle of dabbing some moist ashes on the foreheads of the throngs that showed up for their “ashes” on Ash Wednesday, when I noticed her. Emily, a five year old girl bravely approached me for her ashes.

Every morning, I noticed her father drive up in his red pick up truck, get out and walk with his little girl, hand in hand, into school. I was impressed with the wonderful relationship father and daughter had at such a wonderful and impressionable age.

As I was about to place the ashes on Emily’s forehead with the usual, “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel,” she stopped me. Her mother stood proudly behind her. Emily began by saying, “Can I ask you a question?” and before I had time to respond, she blurted out her question: “How long do I have to wear this on my forehead? When can I wash it off?” I told her that she could wash it off the next morning when she got up. She seemed satisfied. She pulled back her black hair from her forehead and received the ashes with joy.

Emily’s question provoked some reflection on my part. We live in a society that promotes a discipline of cleanliness. We are encouraged to wash our hands after bathroom use and before meals. We are even fined for dumping trash on our highways. We have become more ecologically sensitive, both on a personal as well as a concern for respecting the natural resources.

Returning from my early morning bike ride the other morning, I encountered a slow-leaking puncture in my back wheel. The ride became more bumpy as time went on. The wheel rocked over the expansion joints in the concrete on the walking path. The loud thumping became a distraction because my thoughts began to be enveloped by it. I pumped the tire up when I returned but, later found out, that more drastic action was needed. I put the bike in the trunk of my car and headed to a bike shop in Gulfport to get the puncture fixed. With a little lighter pocket, I returned in satisfaction, knowing that my early morning bike ride would not be inconvenienced. I could have procrastinated and not got the puncture fixed immediately. Yet, the challenge and early morning discipline, hopefully, would be more redemptive.

Some things that happen to us are aggravations and inconveniences; others become more life-changing and even life-threatening. They are crosses of various sizes, shapes and durations.

Recently, I watched a parishioner and artist spend countless hours restoring the life-size crucifix in our church. She laid out the corpus on a table and worked for hours filling in the years-induced cracks, the chipped plaster, the dulled paint. She said that, working on the cross, gave her countless blessings. For her, the tedious work was redemptive.

As I thought about that, I realized that, maybe, I should dwell more on the redemptive nature of the cross. Still, my mind continued to be flooded by questions: I heard the questions of others, asking, “why did God allow the recent tsunamis in Asia?” I heard questions like, “what about the evils that we commit and that are committed against us?” “Why would God create a world in which human beings do terrible things?” The questions were obvious, but the answers were not forthcoming. Somehow, I heard God whisper a Joblike response: “But you wouldn’t understand.” I realized that this is the kind of world we live in and that, into this world, God interjected Jesus where he encountered sin and death and eventually achieved hope and redemption.

I could only chuckle when reminded again about Emily’s question and how Jesus advised us to allow the little children to come to us; children who have the ability to ask honest questions about deep mysteries and yet, children who, know what it is like to trust that people will be there for them when questions invoke realities that are not easily answered or understood.