

Traveling Companion: Out of the mouths of...

Fr. Michael Tracey

One of my daily morning rituals is to serve as traffic cop at Holy Trinity Elementary School in Bay St. Louis. There I encounter parents dropping off their children for another school day. As I maneuver in and out of traffic, opening vehicle doors and ushering children safely into school, I begin to enjoy the smiles of children. Sometimes, there are tears as some children do not want to face another school day. Still tied to Mommy's apron strings, they create their own fuss to distract themselves and others from the inevitable.

Recently, as I stood in sentry duty, one little boy – probably around 4 years old, looked up at me and, with a quizzical look, asked, "Are you Jesus?" What do you say to such an innocent child? I just smiled and left him in his innocence.

A few days later, I adopted the same position. I opened the door of a car to allow a young girl to enter the school safely. As I opened the door, a little boy, still in his child seat, looked at me and spurted out a family secret. His mother blushed and I brushed it off.

One of my regular practices at weekend Masses is to discover, acknowledge and recognize visitors at the Masses. Every weekend, I meet and introduce to our congregation visitors who have come to join us for Mass. We meet visitors from different parts of Louisiana and from many of the other States. Periodically, we meet visitors from overseas. Most often, we meet volunteers who grace us with their skills and presence in returning again and again to help us rebuild our lives and our communities following Hurricane Katrina. The whole experience reminds me, first of all, about our need to be continually grateful for our returning volunteers. It also reminds me of the universality of our Catholic faith and our need to be an open and welcoming community. The encounters are refreshing and often surprising.

Recently, toward the end of Mass as I welcomed the visitors, I noticed a little boy standing up. He had put on his jacket and cap and was ready to go home. He turned to his grandmother and said, "Grandma. It is time to go home." I just couldn't resist and I said to him, "We're almost finished and then you will be able to go home."

This past weekend, while I was discovering visitors at our Saturday evening Mass, a little boy, probably five or six years old, put up his hand, indicating that he was a visitor. He was sitting beside his mother. I turned and asked him, "Where are you from?" He thought for a moment and said, "From my mommy and daddy." Everyone chuckled at the sincerity and depth of response of this little boy.

I have no trouble envisioning Jesus spending time with and embracing children. As adults, we often adopt the adage, "children are to be seen, not heard."

I know that in church, sometimes, adults are uncomfortable and distracted by the babble of children. Often, they wonder why the parents would bother to bring the children to church when they seem to disrupt all the adults who want some peace and quiet to pray. Many times, I notice that piercing look from adults at parents whose children may be misbehaving. If that piercing look could talk, it would probably say, "Why don't you take that child to the cry room" or "If you kid is going to be such a distraction in church, why don't you leave him at home."

Personally, I love to hear the sound of children during Mass. Why? Because it is a sign of life; a sign for the future; a sign that God isn't finished with us yet so he keeps sending us children to remind us that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of children; that we need to be more childlike, not childish.

This Sunday, I will be watching out for the children at church. After all, they are reminders of God's continuing belief in us. Maybe out of the mouths of children may come things that mommy or daddy should never have said or, just maybe, things that God wants us to hear.