

Traveling Companion: In the News

Fr. Michael Tracey

Vivian, a NBC Nightly News Producer called me recently to see if I would be interested in doing an interview with them. I asked her some questions about it and, once I got some satisfactory answers, I accepted the offer.

I had a sense the interview would revolve around some aspect of Hurricane Katrina. I presumed I should be ready with some sound-bites and that would end the interview. I expected the interview to be a matter-of-fact kind of interview where one was asked: how is the recovery going? Are there any problems? How are people reacting? What attitudes do you find among your people? I was in for a little surprise.

We set up the interview for 10 a.m. on a Saturday morning. The camera crew arrived early so we chatted for a while, introducing each other and discovering they were from Miami and so had covered hurricanes before. In fact, the cameraman covered Hurricane Katrina for NBC from Biloxi.

Soon, we found Vivian was lost in the fog somewhere on her way. We directed her to the place of the interview, trying to point out some landmarks along the way, if they still existed. She finally arrived with her notepad and pen. After an introduction, I stood on the piece of ground they had marked out for me. In the background, there was a collection of FEMA trailers.

She stood to the side of the camera, out of its view and started to direct her questions toward me. She indicated that this interview was going to be the basis for a human interest story. As the camera began rolling, the first question was the obvious one: state your name and spell it for us and give us some biographical background about yourself. I did.

Some interesting questions followed: “how are you coping with the aftermath of the hurricane?” “What kind of frustrations and obstacles are you encountering?” “How are your congregation coping with the aftermath?” “Where do you get the strength to carry on in the middle of all this devastation?” “Do you think this community will come back?” “How do you give hope to these people in your congregation?” “How do you keep going yourself?” “What are you going to tell the people tomorrow at church – New Year’s Day?”

When the producer indicated that the interview’s purpose was to make it a “human interest story,” I realized the rationale in the perceptive questions.

Off camera, we chatted some more. She shared stories of some very ordinary, yet fascinating heroes and heroines, she met and interviewed during the last few weeks. She indicated that she was moving beyond “give me the facts” segments to a more human touch approach. She was in awe at the resilience of people and their determination to rebuild their lives, homes and communities.

She also mentioned that she had spend some time in England going to school; relating how the English people related to the subway bombing there; how they were determined not to allow such a terrorist attack to control them or disrupt their lives. She noted how, in America, such incidents seem to paralyze us. She asked why I thought that was so. I posited a guess by saying that Europe has had centuries dealing with wars, conflicts and terrorists attacks while American being a much younger country, do not have the same historical perspective so we tend to react differently.

We scheduled an opportunity for them to do some filming at one of the New Year Day’s Masses. As she left, she mentioned that I must have done a lot of reflecting on the impact of the hurricane. I indicated I did and gave her a card where she could read my daily blogs.

Following my few moments of fame on the NBC Nightly News, I resolved to continue, like Mary, to ponder many things in my heart.