

Traveling Companion: A Test of Patience

Fr. Michael Tracey

During the summer months at our parish, we are joined by visitors from Louisiana for our weekend Masses. During the winter months, we are joined by visitors from the North, especially Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois who may be “snow-birds” escaping the harsh winters. We try and show some Southern hospitality by welcoming them to our parish.

On Tuesday morning around 8:30 a.m., a gentleman walked into the rectory. He was middle aged, was dressed very casually and sported a salted beard. Our Pastoral Associate met him and initially engaged him in cursory chat by commenting on the weather. The gentleman acknowledged, in a calm, measured voice, that we needed the rain because the rain washes and cleans things as well as makes things grow.

Suddenly, like a bolt of thunder, the decibels of his voice rose as he asked, “Where is that Fr. Michael Tracey, the pastor.” Sitting in my office, I could sense a confrontation brewing so I went to meet him.

Immediately, I was verbally attacked. “What do you mean by locking the church?” Calmly, I informed him that the church was not locked; that we leave one door open. “I know that,” he shot back. “I was in there.”

I asked him to come with me outside as I did not want the other persons at the rectory to have to endure his tirade. I walked ahead of him to the church, pointing out to him the door that was already open. It was not enough. I went in to the church and opened another door and held it open, waiting for him to ascend the steps and come in. He didn’t. Instead, he stayed at the bottom of the steps and continued his confrontation.”

By this time, our Pastoral Associate and Secretary were standing outside the rectory door listening to the gentleman’s barrage. His voice carried far and near as the decibels got louder and louder.

He continued, “My people built this church and I cannot come in and pray here.” I told him the doors were open and he was free to come in but he continued to refuse.

Then, he launched into an attack on my recognizing and welcoming visitors to our church at the end of each weekend Mass. “There you are, asking people where they are from; making remarks and mothers with little children wanting to go home to feed their babies.” He said he didn’t go to our church anymore because of my greeting visitors. He began to expound some more and I had decided that it was useless to try and argue with him.

All I could say, in response, was, “I hear you.” I was met with another outburst, “you don’t hear me. I have mental telepathy and I know you don’t hear me. You should be ashamed of yourself. You should go into that church, prostrate yourself before the altar and ask the Lord for forgiveness for your sins.”

As the staff watching got worried about the behavior of the man, they decided to ask for some help. Our Pastoral Associate came to join me and told the man, politely, that he didn’t need to shout. It didn’t change his attitude.

I asked him several times if he wanted to come into the church and pray as I stood by the door I had recently opened. “I don’t want to go in that door. I want to go in this door,” as he pointed to a back door.”

A few minutes later, he walked toward an older model navy blue car that he had parked in front of the door he wanted to go in. He jumped into the car and sped away.

As I walked to the rectory, I discovered our secretary had called the police because of the threatening disposition of the gentleman. Minutes later, a policeman arrived but all the excitement was over and the gentleman had blended into the morning traffic.

The encounter reminded me that we never know what burdens, hurts or struggles people carry deep within. We need to remind ourselves that outbursts can often be a cry for help and should be met with patience.