

Traveling Companion: What's it like being a priest?

Fr. Michael Tracey

One morning while I was working the car line at school, Eric came up to me with his favorite basketball. This second grader looked up at me and, with his head turned, he asked, "What's it like being a priest?" I looked down at him and thought, how will I answer this inquisitive mind? I decided to be as simple as possible. I said that it was wonderful being a priest and that can help so many people, telling them about God and being there to listen to them and help them whenever I can.

Seemingly satisfied with my answer, Eric bounced his basketball on the ground and headed off into school. When he left, I wondered what precipitated such a question from a young mind. Obviously, he saw me every weekday morning helping direct traffic as parents dropped off their children for school. I know he realized I was more than a moonlighting traffic cop. He also had seen me celebrate Children's Masses and weekend Masses. I wondered if the Lord might not have planted a vocational seed in this young mind already.

The encounter with Eric really got me thinking about priesthood in general and my own effectiveness as a priest. I realized that the priesthood had undergone a pruning in recent years with the explosion of the clergy sex abuse scandal. I noted that vocations to the priesthood and religious life were very much on the decline. I encountered over the years many young people who had given some thought to priesthood but found celibacy a stumbling block. I also noted the present crisis of authority in the church in particular and in society in general. I had read all the recent books and publications on possible causes of such and tried to grasp some hope for the future.

I began to realize that, in many professions or vocations, one's effectiveness can be measured by how quickly one climbs the corporate ladder or the size of one's paycheck. While in the priesthood, as in all professions, there may be ladder climbers; effectiveness cannot be measured through titles or paychecks. At the review of the end of a day or an assignment, there is no tangible measuring rod to gauge one's effectiveness as a priest. Yet, somehow, along the way, one gets glimpses of ways the Lord has worked in peoples lives through one's ministry as a priest.

Some time ago, I went through the screening mechanism at Gulfport airport. As I exited from the air puff machine, I heard a voice say, "I know you." I looked up and one of the screeners, a lady in her forties, continued, "You are Fr. Tracey. I did a SEARCH retreat with you back in 1978." Even though I was not dressed in clerical attire, I was impressed that she recognized me twenty-seven years later. I must have aged pretty well. What impressed me was that she was able to associate a religious experience with our encounter years earlier and how it must have made quite an impression on her.

The doorbell rang Saturday morning. The odor of drunkenness hit me first as I stared at a disheveled woman carrying a stainless travel mug with more nourishment. She began her story. An hour later, she surprised herself by saying, "I can't imagine I am saying all this to a priest." She was. Some time later, she disappeared into the fog, having poured out what remained in her travel mug.

Often, priests encounter people who "can't imagine they are saying all this to a priest." Somehow, a trust is born, a comfortableness established, an insight regained and, hopefully, a healing process has begun.

This may be the best of times and the worst of times to be a priest – the best because of people's hunger for the divine and, the worst, because of the catharsis the priesthood is going through. Yet, fear is useless; trust is what is needed. I hope to continue to watch out for a little boy with a basketball and a big question because one day, he may be living that question.