

A Religious, Puzzling Experience

Fr. Michael Tracey

My patience is tried every day. Through a myriad of ways and circumstances, my patience is tempted and tested. I don't necessarily seek out opportunities to test my patience. They present themselves in many disguises daily. So, why should I test my patience through something of my own doing when others do an excellent job of it for me. Well, I did.

Some years ago, I received a 1,000-piece puzzle as a gift. I looked at it for a long time. Finally, I opened the box, spread out the pieces and looked long and hard at the chaotic pieces. As time went on, I enlisted the help of people who happened to drop by and eventually the 1,000-piece puzzle was tamed and mounted like a prize deer on my wall.

Recently, I received another puzzle. This time it was a 3-D puzzle. It had only 966 pieces so I thought it could not be that difficult. Then I looked at the side of the box. It said, "very difficult." "Ok," I thought to myself, "This is going to be a real test of patience."

The picture on the outside of the box looked so colorful and appealing. It depicted St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. I pondered it for a while and wondered if the finished product would be as appealing. I thought about all those wonderful photos on frozen desert boxes and wondered were they as good on the inside. But, seeing the nature of the puzzle and the remote chances of being able to visit St. Peter's in Rome, I decided to plunge into the middle of the puzzle.

I began by spreading the word that I had the puzzle and enlisted some "experts" along the way. They dropped by, spend a few minutes or hours being puzzled, then departed having encountered the "wall" that marathon runners and puzzle solvers encounter.

The foundational part took time as we thought horizontally and met our parameters. Then we began to think vertically and were challenged to 3-dimensionally.

During the puzzling experience, some indicated that working together on a puzzle was good therapy; that one could use puzzle solving as a means of counseling; also, that puzzle solving could be a means of cooperation, patience, support and eventual accomplishment. We remembered an old saying that said, "Life happens as you are planning other things." Its truth became evident in the process.

Two weeks later, through the help of many hands and hearts as well as the litmus test of patience, the puzzle yielded the last piece. Generous coats of Mod-Podge sealed its fate and it was ready for viewing.

So, what did I learn from my puzzling experience? Well, obviously, patience. I learned about cooperation. I learned how a non-threatening environment can bond not only puzzles together but also people's lives. I learned that life is like a puzzle. One has to build a good foundation before one can structure one's life. I learned that, even then, many of the ways we think it should unfold doesn't always match our plans. I learned that one cannot force oneself into situations that don't fit no matter how hard one tries. I learned that one has to stand back frequently in order not to lose perspective on how things are supposed to come together. I learned that one needs to keep referring to the book of instructions provided with life, even though sometimes, they seem to be written in another language. I learned that you cannot go it alone, that one needs to enlist the help of others who can carry one's life to its final completion. I learned that we all have been given the raw material we need to build a complete life if we choose to do it. I learned that if we are not careful, we may end up with some missing pieces and a life that is incomplete.

Now that I have learned all these lessons, let me remind you. In case you are thinking of sending me another difficult puzzle, don't. Life is difficult enough.