

Traveling Companion: Religious Shock from Jersey

Fr. Michael Tracey

The secretary buzzed me to say that there was a woman in the waiting area who wanted to talk to me and ask me some questions. She had just walked in from the street. Life in a parish is filled with appointments the Lord and others send our way. So many of them are not written in appointment books or palm pilots.

The woman, bespeckled, wearing a light blue-stripped shirt and gray shorts, followed me into my office. She sat down and awkwardly began to talk. Probably, in her mid forties, she indicated that she was from New Jersey originally. She also indicated that she was Catholic. I hadn't seen her at church in recent months so I asked where she went to church. She said that she worked two jobs and when she got a chance, she went to church. I didn't press her further on the matter. I didn't even ask her where she worked.

She informed me that she had been married twice already; that her first marriage in the Catholic Church was annulled. "We have the papers," she said. She remarried before a minister and moved around the country with her second husband. But that marriage did not last.

She wanted me to know of her strong ties to the Catholic Church; how, on both sides of her family, there were people who were priests and nuns. She also assured me that she said her "prayers."

Finally, she got to the reason why she wanted to speak to me. She had met a man who was a very good, Christian man, who read the Bible religiously and followed it conscientiously. They had been "seeing each other" for a few months and ventured the possibility of marriage.

She said that religion had become a "problem." She shared that, a few nights earlier, they got into an argument about religion. They were discussing children in the marriage and being brought up in a religion. He indicated that he had no problem with her having the children baptized anywhere, even in the Catholic Church. He backed up his attitude by saying that it was biblical to have people baptized. He did have problems with his children receiving Communion and Confirmation in the Catholic Church. Why? Because receiving such in any church was not "biblical." He did not attend any church but would allow his prospective wife to attend the church of her choice and have the children baptized in the church of choice but anything beyond that was prohibited.

She wished to know how she could solve the dilemma she found herself in and asked how she could help her prospective husband see things from her faith point of view. I explained some things to her both from a scriptural and traditional point of view and she seemed to grasp the connection. She indicated that she would talk to him some more about the issues.

Then she went on to talk about what she called "religious indifference." She said that she experiences both cultural shock and religious shock when she came South. In New Jersey, people saw religion as a private matter, as something of one's own business and that people, once they found out whether one was a Catholic, a Jew, a Protestant or even an Atheist, one accepted that and went on about life. She found out that, in the South, this was not the case.

She had been accosted several times by well-intentioned people who wanted to "save" her; to make sure she had "accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior." I tried to explain to her, as one working in the South and used to such mentality, the meaning and intention behind such an approach to religion. I also informed her that both she and her prospective husband needed to sit down and talk some more about the religious concerns and issues that had surfaced before they ever made any commitment to marriage. She agreed and parted.

I realized that both culture and religious shock can be met by either ignorance, escape or accepted as part of diversity.