

Traveling Companion: Church Shopping

Fr. Michael Tracey

During the holidays, I attended an Italian party. Even the invitation to attend was written in Italian. Groups of people mingled conversation and drink. Due to the presence of native Italian speakers and language teachers, the conversations were peppered with a generous supply of Italian.

As I talked with one of the language professors, I noticed the arrival of four young people – two men and two women, all in their late twenties. While the host mixed their drinks, I noticed that they surveyed the crowd. They glanced at me in my non-clerical attire, and began to whisper to each other. Making sure I discovered the source of their curiosity, I began to eavesdrop. I could hear one young man say to a young woman, "You know him. He's that priest at that church near campus. It's called St. Thomas. You know! We've been there a few times." She seemed to agree with him.

Some time later, they gathered around a table laden with leftover turkey, rolls, and all kinds of Italian pastries. I seized the opportunity to engage them in conversation when they sat down. I found out that one of the couples had returned from Brazil recently. They had gone there to adopt a baby and spent a few weeks there as part of the orientation process. I discovered that one of the couples lived in Atlanta; that both had graduated as music majors and were working there, teaching music.

One of the young women began, "I've been to your church when I lived here. Now we live in Atlanta. There are so many churches there that it is unbelievable, but they are mostly Baptist and Pentecostal. I've been to some of them," she continued, "but I am not sure of all that speaking in tongues." As she said this, a party group, with their backs to us, discovered each other and began to speak excitedly in Italian. We both looked at them and smiled.

The young woman continued to tell me that she had checked out some Catholic Churches in Atlanta, but that they were quite a distance from her home. Then, the other young woman, piped in, "If you really believe in God and want to worship him, then you will make the sacrifice and travel until you find a place where you can be at home." I was impressed by her comment.

We talked some more about churches, approaches to religion and people's expectations. I hoped that some seeds were planted.

As I thought some more about my encounter, I realized that there seems to be a conspiracy against the interior life. Maybe the times and climate in which we live, militates against the interior life. Ronald Rolheiser, in his book, *The Shattered Lantern*, suggests that there are three things that work against the interior life: narcissism, pragmatism, and unbridled restlessness. He sees narcissism as excessive self-preoccupation; pragmatism as excessive focus on work and restlessness as an excessive greed for experience. Narcissism accounts for our heartaches; pragmatism for our headaches and restlessness for our insomnia.

Maybe Sam Keen, that self-professed agnostic, in his book, *Hymns to an Unknown God*, has a point when he says that church shopping can be either a search for answers to life's deepest hungers, or a symptom of people who want faith, but not the church; the question but not the answer; the religion but not the ecclesial; the truth but not the obedience.