

Traveling Companion: Do I know you from somewhere?

Fr. Michael Tracey

Late Saturday morning, I went shopping just to get a few personal items. On the way home, I decided to stop and get something to eat. I stopped off at McDonalds and embraced their golden arches as I exchanged some money for my usual chicken nuggets.

I sat down and was about to eat when I noticed a gentleman who sat at another table across from me. Dressed in a white T-Shirt with a fisherman's logo on it, a black cap, a pair of blue jeans that supported a dangling keychain and a cell phone, I noticed his curiosity. He had a puzzled look about him, as he kept looking at me.

Finally, he blurted out, "Do I know you from somewhere? You look familiar." I shook my head in rejection because my mouth masticated on a piece of a chicken nugget. Undeterred by my response, he continue, "Do you work in some shop around town?" Again, I nodded my head and kept eating. He still remained puzzled as his brain and memory tried to match me with a person and a place. Obviously, I didn't enhance his search by inviting him to share his curiosity any further.

Eventually, he finished eating before I did and left, still in a quandary as to who I might be or where he might have met me. Maybe he appeared for ashes on Ash Wednesday. Maybe he attended a funeral I had recently. Maybe he came to Easter Mass. Maybe! Maybe! I had no recollection of ever seeing or meeting the gentleman. Also, I didn't draw any solace from the fact that he may have met me some place or known me from "somewhere."

I had just celebrated one of the morning Masses the following Sunday and was greeting the parishioners at the back of church as they left, when it happened. A hand reached out. I knew it instantly when I looked at the face.

"I knew I knew you from somewhere and now I know," he said. I simply nodded in agreement. He continued, "I'm the guy that sat and ate beside you the other day." I simply said, "I know." He continued on his way. Others took his place and waited in line to shake my hand.

The whole episode reminded me of our ability to forget with the passing of time. Our senior moments become more frequent and our ability to remember becomes more suspect.

Sometimes, I encounter parishioners who remark, "I remember when Fr. X was here" and they go on to expound on some experience they had with him.

I have come to the conclusion that there are stages of forgetting we all go through. As priests, we enter people's lives for a reason or a season and pass through. These entrances and exits have their own pattern.

When a priest leaves a parish and a former parishioner meets him later, he or she inevitably asks, "How do you like your new parish? We sure miss you." Some time later, a sporadic encounter might elicit the question, "Where are you now? Time flies and other encounters generate quizzical references of "Weren't you in our parish once?" More time passes and other encounters are referenced with, "Do I know you from somewhere?" and finally the ultimate act of forgetting is when one encounters the query, "Who are you?"

The above five stages of forgetting is true not only of priests but is also true of most people. We have the best intentions of keeping in touch but the intention and the gap gets meaner and leaner with the passing of time.

So, the next time I meet someone who asks me, "Do I know you from somewhere? I will simply nod my head and smile.