

Traveling Companion: The Straw-hat Man

Fr. Michael Tracey

The secretary stuck her head in the door of my office. Moments earlier, I heard the rectory door open and the secretary ask the stranger, "Can I help you?" I heard him say, "I'd like to see Fr. Tracey." "Your name?" asked the secretary. "David," he indicated. I knew I didn't have an appointment scheduled with a David. I began to get suspicious. I knew he wasn't a parishioner because the secretary usually tells me the person's last name also. I suspected the gentleman might be a salesman so I began to prepare my rejection script.

The secretary ushered him into my office. He was dressed in a dark pants that needed washing in order to discover its true color. He wore a plaid, long sleeved shirt and carried in his hand a straw-hat. Inside the hat he had placed a baseball cap that contoured to the shape of the straw hat. He sat down.

"Do you have any work around here?" he asked. I indicated that we hadn't but asked him what kind of work he was interested in. He didn't really elaborate. He said that he had just arrived in the area and would not be staying too long.

I asked if he were interested in going to the local Casino to see if they had any openings. He wasn't too impressed with my suggestion. He then asked if there were a fitness center in the town and I told him that there was at least two. It became obvious that he wasn't interested in any strenuous work or workout. He said, "I'd just like to clean up the place for them, get some money for a meal and maybe they would let me have a shower."

"Could I have a food voucher," he asked, as he rolled around the straw hat in his hand. I told him that we didn't have vouchers as such and that the St. Vincent dePaul group would not meet again until next week. He cast his eyes to the ground, trying to think of another approach. Then, he simply said, "I'm hungry." I gave him some money for a meal. Stuffing it in his pocket, he thanked me and got ready to leave. We shook hands and he left.

I watched him from inside the window. He had put his bicycle against the rectory wall. On the handlebars, I saw an old jacket rolled up. I realized that all his world possession simply amounted to that rolled-up jacket, the clothes he was wearing and the bicycle he rode.

As he mounted his bicycle and disappeared into the evening fog, I thought of his unencumbered lifestyle; his willing to trust in the generosity of people along the way and his complete faith in his ability to survive with the minimum of effort and the maximum amount of carefree spirit.

I remembered how laden down we are with baggage, either physical or emotional, just in case any, every, and all eventualities, may befall us. Yet, here was a man, free of life's clutter, and possessing the freedom to lay his head anywhere his bicycle led him.

Comedian, George Carlin, has a popular, yet veracious routine in which he talks about our dependence on "stuff." We collect stuff. We transport some of that stuff to the places we work, visit and live so that we will have the security of that stuff "in case we may need it." Even though the need may never arise, we still collect it "just in case." We end up never really using or needing it. Then we get brave and let go of some of that stuff, often through a garage sale, only to make room in its place for more "stuff."

I realize the Lord told the disciples to travel "light." Maybe, I need to be a little less dependent on "stuff;" travel more lightly and be more lighthearted. He also reminded me that "He had nowhere to lay his head." While I lay my head on a full, comfortable pillow tonight, at the same time, I wonder, with a tinge of envy, where David will lay his head tonight!