

Traveling Companion: Truth is stranger than Fiction

Fr. Michael Tracey

It arrived on Sunday morning. The email began, "Dear Father Mike, we are so honored to have a good Irish priest from County Mayo in the U.S.! My relatives came from County Mayo in the 1850's. I am an Irish Catholic in Oklahoma City, OK. I began studying the history of the Great Starvation seven years ago and am now in the middle of an historical novel on the famine which will be suited to young adults and also a mainstream audience."

The email continued to tell me about the fictional family, where they lived, where they attend Mass in a nearby village.

"I need to name that village. I am considering the village of Killawalla, your home town."

She then went on to indicate that she had visited my personal web site as well as my home village web site. She followed with a series of questions that she hoped would help her situate her historical novel in a more accurate environment.

She ended her email with, "isn't email wonderful? You have new and instant friends around the world. Thank you for any help or ideas."

Of course, I shared some ideas with her and we continue to correspond.

The whole episode peaked my curiosity. I wondered how someone could choose my home village name as a setting for a historical novel, given the millions of place names that dot the Internet horizon. Was it accidental or providential, I wondered.

I have received a large number of emails and letters recently from readers of my Gulf Pine Catholic column, "Traveling Companion." The greatest number of emails and letters came from people who read my "Zero Tolerance" column of July 26, 2002. In many of the emails and letters, writers struggled with their feelings and opinions about zero tolerance in the context of the clergy sex abuse scandal.

One particular group of emails got my immediate attention. They were from individuals who were victims of sex abuse, at the hands of family members, while they were growing up. They had made several attempts to approach a parent, or another authority figure about what was happening to them, but no one seemed to listen or to care. The victims continued to live with the hurt, the shame, the bitterness and the trauma ever since.

I have treated such emails with a lot of tender, loving care because I know that it took a mountain of courage for the individuals who wrote them to share what they did. I have responded and continue to respond, as we slowly build trust and, hopefully, a foundation for eventual healing in their lives. I know that the Lord has helped them to open a door and begin to trust again and that my article on "Zero Tolerance" was a crack in that door that could begin the healing process.

Today, a woman stopped by to see me. She told me that initially she had figured out her life and what was expected to happen. Then, that all changed. So many new things happened. Her brother died in his late 40's; she met a Catholic man, fell in love; joined the Catholic Church; felt called to change her perspective on life and vocation.

Sometimes, when I think I have life all figured out and choreographed, someone, usually God steals the script and writes his own. He has his own way of keeping me guessing; of inviting me to trust; of challenging my decisions.

Most times, I live life driving forward, but, so often, only realize its true course through frequent rear mirror glances.

Yes, as the email writer said, "isn't email wonderful?" But, best of all, isn't God wonderful! He keeps us guessing as he writes his script into our life's journey. And it is only by reading such a script that we can discern fact from fiction.