

Traveling Companion: And the winner is...

Fr. Michael Tracey

On Tuesday afternoon at 4 p.m., I stood outside the rectory, drinking in the humid breeze from the Gulf as I waited to usher the people who wished to meet with St. Vincent DePaul to their meeting place.

An elderly lady, supporting a ruffled head of grey, drove up slowly in a red car. I expected her to ask was she is in the right place for St. Vincent DePaul. She rolled down the car window and shouted, as she pointed to the rectory, "What is this place called?" I informed her that it was Our Lady of the Gulf Church rectory. "This must be the place so," she continued, "I have come to collect my winnings." Obviously, she was one of the winner of our raffle at our recent Crab Fest.

I noticed a gentleman sitting beside her. Before I could say anything, she informed me that he was a renter; that he had been renting from her for twenty years. Jokingly, I told her that she should give the gentleman free rent for a while because of her winnings. "Who are you?" she asked. I informed her that I was the pastor. Both exited the car and headed for the rectory.

Inside the rectory, she asked again who I was. Our Pastoral Associate informed her that I was the pastor. "I've never seen him in church before What Mass does he say?." She told her, "All of them. He is the only priest here. He says the 5:30 vigil on Saturday, the 8 and 10:30 a.m. Masses on Sunday mornings and the 5:30 on Sunday evenings." She sensed she was caught and that we realized she held a low profile at church, if any.

Moments later, I walked in. "I didn't know you were the pastor here." Looking at the Pastoral Associate, she paid me the ultimate compliment, "He is so young." She followed her comment with, "I've got old eyes and I don't look at them any more."

As she received her wining check, she said, "I'm going to put this away for a day when I need it down the road. I'll give him some in church too." All I could do was smile and nod my head as she left. I seriously doubted if she ever saw me in church or the odds of her frequenting it in future were scant.

The encounter reminded me of people's comments I received on the weekend of Hurricane Dennis when our bishop dispensed with the obligation to attend Sunday Mass that weekend. It seems, at least in our parish, that people took him very seriously and stayed away. We had more people at weekday morning Mass than we had at any individual Weekend Mass that particular weekend. People didn't go to church because they had left town because of the approaching hurricane. Instead, the vast majority didn't go because the bishop said they were not obliged to go.

The comments I received from people were poignant and revealing. One lifelong Catholic's reaction was typical. She said, "I have been a Catholic all my life. Since when do I need a bishop's permission to tell me that I had to or didn't have to go to church on a Sunday? We Catholics can make up our own mind, even in times of a hurricane." Obviously, people made up their own minds that weekend about church.

Irish novelist, James Joyce, said of Catholics, "Here comes everybody." Obviously, "everybody" is catholic so maybe when we face the next threat of a hurricane, everybody will show up for church. Then, maybe, the winner will be God.