

## **Traveling Companion: Why, so young?**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

The phone rang at 11 a.m. on Saturday morning. The hospital called. A 15 year old boy was killed in a car accident. I arrived at the emergency room to encounter a group of police officers, sheriff deputies and ambulances.

I met the family in the chapel as the emergency room doctor informed them of the tragedy. Tears flowed freely. The young boy's two younger brothers sat totally bewildered and confused amid their own tears.

Finally, we were allowed into the emergency room cubicle to see the young man. His head and black hair remained visible from the sheet and blanket that covered him. Amid a flood of tears, Louis' parents stood on either side of their first-born, stroking his face, kissing his cheeks and carrying the weight of their newly-found cross on their shoulders. They held hands tightly across the body of their dead son, trying to find some hidden strength in this moment of tragedy.

Family, friends, neighbors and Louis' peers lined up for hours for the visitation at the funeral home. At the funeral the following day, a packed church included members of his high school football team who served both as pallbearers and honorary pallbearers.

As I stood to give the homily, I faced a sea of blue football shirts. The muscular bodies ached as they tried to either hold back the tears or bow their heads in grief. What does one say at a time like this?

Our biggest question at Louis' funeral was Why? Why Louis? Why so young? Why someone who had his whole life ahead of him? Why? Why? Why? We don't expect young people to die. We expect to bury older people, not people in the prime of their life. Why? Why? Why? Everyone there were wrestling with the same question; the same "why." Everyone from his family and extended family to his friends, his teachers, his peers were all asking the same "why."

It is the most natural thing to ask "why?" We are using our God-given ability to question things and situations. Unless we ask "Why" how can we begin to discover an answer, if it is possible? The answer is not always easy and sometimes it takes a long time, and sometimes, we may never discover the answer in this life. Still we have got to ask the "why."

In order to answer our "why," maybe we need to ask another "why." Why do we bring the body to the church? Why would we bring Louis's body to church that afternoon? Why would we gather in the church to pause, to listen, and to pray? Maybe in trying to answer that question, we get a glimpse of the answer to our real "Why." Maybe our coming to church for a funeral says something deeper about ourselves; maybe about our beliefs, our hope, our trust, our faith; maybe our coming to church helps put us in touch with a reality beyond us; a God who surrounds us, lives within us and watches out for us even when we walk in the "valley of darkness."

Life is filled with moments of dyings and risings. Each day dies into night only to rise into the dawning of a new day. Each journey has a beginning and a destination. Each season has a winter of discontent and a springtime of new life. Every seed has a death experience and a flowering of new growth. Each person has a final death experience only to reap an eternity. For some, like Louis, that final death experience comes all too soon, but no matter when it comes, the resulting hope and reality is the same – eternity.

Later on, at the graveside, young people shared their tears, fears, love, pain, confusion, poems and most of all, their "whys." Logically, there is no answer. Only through the eyes of faith can we ever hope to find an answer to our question, "Why, so young?"