

Traveling Companion: Right on Time

Fr. Michael Tracey

I had just finished my homily and begun a brief silence to allow my punch line to sink in. Then I heard it. It was obvious, measured, timely, and in harmony. I just couldn't resist commenting on it. The audience relaxed and chuckled at my observations and remarks. It gave them permission to vent their feelings. They relaxed.

By now, you know what happened, I presume. If not, I will unburden your curiosity. When I had finished the homily, as if on cue, folks in the back of church in particular, emitted a series of coughs. It was as if, all during my twelve-minute homily, they were holding their breath and their sinuses and their spring coughs at bay until they could allow them to erupt like a noticeable earth tremor.

I commented in my wonderment if their cough was an indication that they were glad my homily was over or that their baited breath at my words of wisdom could not survive any longer or that it was a wake-up cough to, not only let them know they could come back to life but could relax once again. The answer was obvious.

The episode got me thinking. The first thing that came to mind was an episode in the Acts of the Apostles when Peter was preaching to a crowded audience; how a man, who was listening to him, while sitting on the window, fell asleep and had fallen down outside. I assumed that Peter's sermon was a wake-up call for the gentleman. Maybe, my homily was a wake-up call, literally or metaphorically, for the people in church that Sunday evening.

It is often said that people vote with their pocketbooks and I'm sure that is true about people who go to church. In church they also vote with their restless feet, their alarm-sounding coughs and their obvious restless gaits in an uncomfortable pew as well as their premature exits.

Another indicator that often causes me to wonder is when people coming out of church volunteer, "I really enjoyed your homily." I'm not sure how to take such a blanket statement. Was the homily as sweet as apple pie and as non-threatening as a dead mouse? Did it ruffle any feathers or smooth any wrinkles? Was it something uplifting that gave people a slice of good news, a generous helping of reassurance or a light to brighten a darkening journey?

Of course, there is the other ritual that amuses me. It even happened in church the evening of the measured coughs, following my homily. It is the practice of visitors handing the priest a parish bulletin and asking him to sign it. I remember being asked to do such, on a regular basis, in a parish in New York almost two decades ago. I got used to autographing bulletins and I realized it wasn't autographs the people were seeking but "proof" that they were in church on that particular Sunday. An obvious proof for being in church is to take home a copy of that particular parish's bulletin, but, in all wisdom, anyone can drop by a church and pick up a bulletin without really attending Mass. Hence, the added onus on the visiting participant to wrestle an autographed bulletin to let their home pastor know that they, not only attended Mass that particular Sunday, but that they have an autographed bulletin from the church as irrefutable evidence.

We all have our ways of getting our message across, at least non-verbally. If a person is boring us, our yawning should urge them to zip it up. Our body language carries its own coded messages to people we interact with, allowing them to decipher the, hidden but obvious to us, message we hope they will receive.

Next week, I promise to watch out for those message-laden timely coughs.