

Traveling Companion: Center of the Universe

Fr. Michael Tracey

Recently, I was invited to preach and talk at St. Francis of Assisi parish in San Jose, California about the impact of Hurricane Katrina on our parish and community.

The parish is nestled amid the golden hills, surrounded by vineyards, wandering deer and a United Nations mixture of people from various backgrounds and countries.

On Saturday morning, I attended a “Generations of Faith” presentation. The theme of the two and a half hour gathering was “Rights and Responsibilities.”

I was invited to sit at a table that has just two adults initially. I had just picked up a breakfast of ham and eggs, a croissant and some orange juice. Gladly, I didn’t have to worry about grits. I sat down beside a gentleman of stocky build who was in his late sixties. He was searching through a Bible placed on the table.

As soon as I sat down, he turned to me, not knowing who I was or that I was a priest and said, “Can I talk to you?” I had no choice but to listen between my food bites and munching.

He wanted to know who the person in the Bible who lost everything was. I indicated he must be thinking about Job in the Old Testament. He then started to tell me about his son who was suffering from a degenerative muscle disease and was also schizophrenic. He wondered why such a debilitating disease should visit his son, seeing that he was a very good person. He also wondered why all this tragedy was happening to his family. He confided that he could no longer pray and wondered where God was in all his mess.

He continued to tell me about his own life; how he came to the United States as a political refuge when he was eighteen years old. “I got married, had a family, was very happy and successful and was the center of the universe. Then tragedy struck us with our son’s illness and I can’t understand why.”

I began to share with him some insights from my own journey, especially in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and that life has its own way of teaching us lessons. I shared with him how we like to control things and be in charge, just like he thought he was the center of the universe. He listened intently and nodded approvingly.

I also asked him to think about another more famous person who had to carry a cross; not necessarily a cross of some earth-shattering disease, but a cross that embraced sin and redeemed it. That cross-bearer felt rejection and asked his own, “Why?” A plea of “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” Obviously, the plea did not fall of deaf ears because, later, he was able to put his life and cross into God’s hands. Maybe, even through the darkest hours, prayers can be answered.

I suggested to him that the Lord might be teaching his son something special as a result of his illness and, that he might view it as a teachable moment for himself. It might be an opportunity to enrich and deepen his own faith and prayer life.

Our conversation stalled as we were invited to fill out a personal inventory as part of the workshop. Later in the workshop, I went off to do my own presentation with the adults who were present. Following my presentation, he came and sought me out. He grasped my hand and thanked me for the insights I had shared with him.

As we parted, I sensed that it was not an accident that I was invited to sit at that particular table with that gentleman. I also realized that the Lord had sent a modern day, mini-Job, into my life to help me remind him that God, not any of us, is really the center of the universe.