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Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

### **'Tis the Season**

*Mary's perspective:*

As I get older, I am more aware of the patterns and seasons of life. Years ago, when I would approach planning the music for Triduum, it felt like a daunting task that would monopolize all of my energy. Maybe it's age, or wisdom, or experience, but I now feel a little more insightful about what tasks need to be completed, what is easy, and where I should plan to spend more time. This isn't just limited to liturgical planning. For example, we as a family have established rituals or patterns of behavior for things like seeing the fireworks on Fourth of July, or how we prepare the house for Christmas.

And so, in the ebb and flow of my duties as Director of Liturgy and Music, this first quarter of the calendar year has its own pattern. I heard someone reflect recently that she used to feel down in February because Christmas is over, it's cold outside, and life is a little hum-drum. But to reframe that, the cold outside brings us indoors as family, where we tend to play more board games or snuggle on the couch together or watch a movie with a big bowl of popcorn. In parish life, this is also the time when sacramental preparation is in full swing.

Bob and I were reflecting on how sacramental prep has changed and developed over the years. Whether Eucharist was the subject matter in religion class at school, or there were separate PSR classes for the kiddos that went to public school, in some ways, to an outsider, it could feel like sacramental preparation was a "program" that "ran itself". Maybe I'm naïve, or maybe times were simpler, but today this really isn't the case.

I know of many churches that struggle to find the right fit of expectations and formation sessions that meet the needs and time constraints of families. In the case of First Eucharist or Confirmation, it's not enough that the parents say, "I want my child to celebrate the Sacrament." The desire is the starting point, but formation is necessary. How do we help these children develop a lasting relationship with the Almighty, that will continue to draw them back to the Church, to receive Eucharist weekly and to live out that baptismal calling? Add into the mix the complicated family schedules that include single-parent homes, custody situations where one parent is not supportive of participation in the sacraments, families where both parents work and so quality time together is at a premium, and kids' activities that include practices/tournaments/shows on the weekends and after school. How do we prioritize and make time for sacramental preparation?

I know of one catechetical leader who chooses to work with students individually, in the timing that is convenient to the family. This is lovely, but time-consuming when the Confirmation class includes more than a half-dozen students. In addition, there is a communal component that is lost when each candidate only prepares alone – consider the power of a retreat where multiple candidates on the same journey share a day together. I know of one leader who offers sessions



that are published a year in advance, and post card reminders are sent to each family the week before each session, and yet still needs to offer multiple “make-up” sessions for those who miss.

How much is required or expected... of the leadership? Of the parents? Of the students themselves? Is it enough to desire the sacraments, or do we have an obligation to understand more about those sacraments before receiving them? Are we getting too mired in the human “rules” and discounting the Grace of the sacrament?

*Bob’s perspective:*

I’m going to use Mary’s questions as my starting point.

1. Is it enough to desire the sacraments, or do we have an obligation to understand more about those sacraments before receiving them?
2. Are we getting too mired in the human “rules” and discounting the Grace of the sacrament?

Before going further, I think it’s important to note that all of the sacraments are the property of the Church and therefore, as in the *Code of Canon Law* (paragraph 841) “...it is for the supreme authority of the Church alone to approve or define those things which are required for their [the sacraments] validity...” This means that the Church has sole responsibility on what makes a sacrament (and the reception thereof) valid as well as determinations in all matters – including instruction and disposition. No matter what any individual thinks, the supreme authority regarding all things sacraments rests solely with the Church. The Church is (and has always been) a hierarchy, not a democracy.

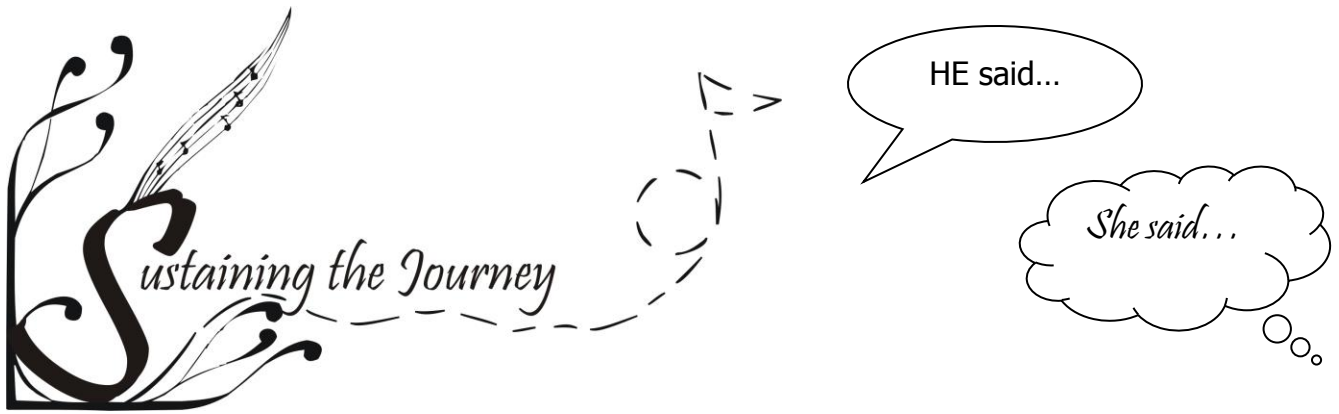
Getting back to our two questions, I’d like to use the sacrament of Confirmation as an example. Paragraph 889.2 of the *Code of Canon Law* states the following:

“Outside the danger of death, to be licitly confirmed it is required, if the person has the use of reason, that one be suitably instructed, properly disposed and able to renew one’s baptismal promise.”

Proper disposition (baptized, not living in a state of sin, etc.) is pretty hands down. Either the candidate meets the requirement or doesn’t – there’s much room for debate with that regard. However, the question of being properly instructed isn’t so cut and dried. The Catechism of the Church (paragraph 1309) says that this preparation should “...aim at leading the Christian toward a more intimate union with Christ and a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit...” (This would assume that there is some type of relationship to begin with.) Later, this paragraph goes on to say, “...catechesis for Confirmation should strive to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community...”

To me, this would infer that (in general terms barring exceptional cases) there would be a necessity for communal instruction as opposed to private instruction. It would seem that in order to awaken the sense of belonging to a community one would need to (1) be catechized and root themselves in the midst of that community and (2) be open to active participation in said community.

This being stated, I’m not sure that creating a “more intimate union” is necessarily accomplished solely by an educational program. Intimate unions are created by intimate interactions. Couples who are preparing for marriage don’t create an intimate union with God and each other by reading a text book and taking a test. Rather, they do it



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through interacting with each other in various circumstances, learning from those experiences, and then building upon them in order to move forward.

I'm not saying that there is no need for academic education. There are certainly aspects of any sacrament that need to be understood and agreed upon. For example, in the case of Eucharist it is essential to express one's belief in transubstantiation (the real presence of Christ) at least in some simple terms. Otherwise reception of Eucharist would be pointless.

Academics has a proper place, but should absolutely not be the end all and be all for sacramental formation. Conversely, relationships are not "one size fits all," nor can they stand well without the foundation of experience and knowledge. Our relationships (even with God) differ from one another and certainly evolve and change as we go through the process of life.

All of this (academic and experiential) can't fully be accomplished in a school year. It takes time. That is where the standard of preparation needs to look at the case of each individual candidate. The *Catechism* doesn't make this an over and done event. Catechesis needs to lead toward and awaken the sense of the Candidate in relationship to God and the community – not complete it in and of itself. Then comes the hard part - trusting in God's Grace through the reception of the sacrament to take it from there.