



Mary and Bob often find themselves sharing common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry. When approaching ministerial concerns from different angles, He Said - She Said is a venue to share differing perspectives.

## Critically Thinking

### *Mary's Perspective:*

I read a reflection recently that said that critics are always lurking nearby. Whether in ministry or in secular life, there will always be critical folks on the path. External critics are usually the ones waiting in the wings to say, "that won't work" or "I told you it wouldn't work." Our own inner critics threaten to deflate our enthusiasm or waylay ambitious plans. Whether internal or external, they may appear to sit on the sidelines in successful moments, because the positive fuels nothing they have to say – but they are never far away. Even during our best days, critics may put a dent in our armor. But that can have value, too. They keep us vigilant, learning, humble, trusting in a higher power, and appreciative of the good days. If we see past the negativity and reflect on the threads that cause critics to question us, we may uncover a deeper plan or better path.

I was sharing some frustrations with my husband a while ago. My rant went something like this: "We are accelerating the demise of the parish by our own stupidity, ignorance, and apathy. It's not any one singular action that pushes people away or drags them down; it's a series of poor decisions that are made ignorantly or based in stupid assumptions or on apathy. And the parish is a microcosm of the diocese, and of the Church, and of society as a whole! When decisions are made based on stupidity or ignorance, when mediocrity is the norm, when apathy is acceptable – of course people aren't lifted up or reaching higher! Why should I?" Whatever straw had broken the proverbial camel's back that day, my critical side was raging pretty loudly. I had a hard time letting go of those thoughts, and needed to unpack them to try to find the message.

At least one good thing came out of this experience... I do my best thinking when I'm out walking, and that fueled quite a few miles. If nothing else, the frustrations of life may turn into super strong calf muscles! However, I think more analysis is required to really find the message in all of this.

Consider a relatable example: a fast-food establishment is having difficulty maintaining suitable staffing levels, especially since the pandemic. They advertise employment opportunities, but don't get many candidates applying – and the ones who do have limited availability or won't work late in the evenings. The restaurant must make some important decisions. Do they stay open late anyway, utilizing a bare-bones staff and risking burn-out of the few who are willing to work late? Do they incorporate more



technology so the patrons place their own orders electronically, thus minimizing the need for customer service staff? Do they modify hours to close earlier, and thus risk losing the late-evening sales?

Perhaps the decision incorporates several of those options. They opt to remain open late on the weekends, shorten hours during the week, and implement electronic order boards so they use a smaller staff. From the restaurant's perspective, this approach is a compromise that accommodates some of the needs of their staff while balancing the potential revenue effects of shorter hours and technology costs. From the patron's perspective, now if I want a late-night snack, I can only go there on the weekends – and even if it's not late, I still have to figure out this computer order system that never quite works the way I want (or maybe that's operator error) and there's not even a human being I can actually speak to about it! Why bother coming here? I may as well just cook at home!

As the restaurant owners review their financial statements and operations metrics, they notice a decline in sales and in worker satisfaction. More customer comment cards are received with critiques or lower ratings. As the pattern continues, they eventually have no choice but to close the restaurant. Though unintentional, their decisions to shorten hours, replace certain staff positions with technology, and utilize smaller staffing teams all accelerated the demise of the establishment. I propose that this restaurant example offers a glimpse into a bigger picture.

Similar to the restaurant, we can see a trend in our parishes. With fewer priests available, many churches have combined or decreased the number of Masses on the weekend. Perhaps our parish offices no longer offer evening hours because it's too difficult to find workers to staff the office, or perhaps that's an area deemed reasonable to reduce the budget. Maybe we cut back on purchases of flowers for the environment, or we offer a "quiet Mass" to save the expense of paying for a musician. Whatever the decisions, these may have unintentional consequences. If a parishioner wants to register for a program, or perhaps arrange for a Mass intention, but they come after work only to find the office closed, they may feel frustrated. If that same parishioner wants to come to 8am Mass, but the parish has moved to a single Sunday Mass at 10am, they may feel a bit uprooted from their usual patterns. And if they do come to Mass, only to observe an austere (stark? undecorated?) environment and no music, they may begin to consider whether this parish is really a good fit for their needs. No one decision on the part of the parish pushed this person away, but the collection of choices, made out of expedience or apathy or ignorance, has allowed them to drift away. Those decisions have accelerated the demise of the parish. It's an all-too-common occurrence.

Now we have always written this blog with the intent to inspire, educate, or at least encourage mindfulness, and I don't mean to just complain. However, I do think it bears saying that many of the decisions we make as leaders have far-reaching impact beyond the experience at the moment. And



while, certainly, many necessary and difficult decisions have been made in parishes (and businesses) in this post-pandemic era, we would be remiss to assume in our arrogance that we know what's best, or that mediocrity is good enough.

Back to my rant, the idea of accelerating the demise leaves no middle ground – you are either building or destroying, whether you're talking about Church or industry, family values or the quality of your household environment. And destroying doesn't necessarily mean you're taking a wrecking ball to it; lack of maintenance leads to demise, too. The next time you're inclined to take the easy way, to settle for mediocrity, or to prioritize convenience over service of others, think about the consequences of those choices!

We, like the disciples, may be accurately described as “flawed but committed.” So, what are you committed to? Are we doomed to watching those things that we have supported for many years just waste away? How have your past decisions led to the growth or deterioration of things that are valuable to you? How will your actions today impact that which you treasure? What do you even value enough to mindfully try to grow?

In the first letter of Saint Peter (1 Peter 3:15-16), we read:

*Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame.*

Are your choices accelerating the decline? Why do you hope?

*Bob's Perspective:*

Nothing is forever except the love of God. The word *demise* may have a negative connotation to some, but it's just part of natural order: birth, growth, decline, and demise. Everything and everyone at some point in time meets their demise. Planets and stars meet their demise (as supernovas destroy entire solar systems). Governments and institutions meet their demise. Who remembers Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union? The things of nature (environment, plants, and animals) meet their demise. When was the last time you chased a pesky brontosaurus out of your garden? Human beings meet their demise. Just watch the evening news.



There are times when accelerating demise can be good, as when harvesting plants for food. If food stays on the vine too long, it begins to spoil. Its demise should have been accelerated. However, if crops are harvested too early, they will lack appropriate aesthetic and nutritional value. The good things in them wouldn't come to fruition. So, there are times when accelerating demise may not be a wise proposition.

We read in the Book of Ecclesiastes (3:1) *"There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens."* When we rush things out of their time, we risk losing the valuable benefits, experiences, or lessons that would otherwise have enriched our lives and/or the lives of others. It's not always about us.

Forcing the acceleration of demise can be caused by any number of things, including ignorance (intentional or unintentional), greed, or selfishness (ego). Unintentional ignorance is when we lack awareness or insight into a particular situation. An example would be a project falling apart at the seams because a certain element wasn't ascertained or expected. No one meant for the project to go awry, it just happened. That being said, if we don't pay attention to the history or the chain of events that caused the situation, we won't learn, and therefore, we won't grow. Lack of growth leads to decline and demise.

Intentional ignorance is choosing to not know something: "If I don't ask the question, then I can honestly say that I don't know the answer." This is illustrated by the person who is experiencing a medical issue but intentionally doesn't seek help or treatment from a doctor. The irresponsibility of intentionally not knowing can lead to untimely (accelerated) demise. That person's demise not only obviously impacts themselves, but family and loved ones, friends, professional acquaintances, and so forth – which robs them of the benefits and lessons that person may have had to offer.

Greed is another accelerant. Consider the offspring or spouse who clandestinely takes (or withholds) money from the family fund for their own benefit, or the employer who lines their own pocket at the expense of their employees. It's only a matter of time before family members catch on, and strife, mistrust, and resentment ensue. It's only a matter of time before employees get up and leave, causing the business to fall flat – possibly depriving the community of needed products or services.

Selfishness or ego, holding on to status or lording over others for the sake of power and prestige, accelerates demise. Over the years, we have all seen this at work in business, in



government, and in personal experience. When we start to believe that the good of self outweighs the good of others, we begin a downward slide. I once experienced a parish leader who was growing ineffective because he was overextended with too many other things (most of his own choosing). He was a head sports coach, the president of a community organization, a high-ranking officer in a social club, and the chairman of a major community fundraiser. Rather than coming to his senses and asking for help or stepping aside, he wound up running the yearly fundraising event into the ground because of so many missed details and poor decisions. Granted, the event had dwindled some over the years, but he in essence pounded a stake into its heart way too prematurely. It wasn't just the event that met its demise. Because of this failure, tension and strife developed in a once peaceful community, and a number of people (some of them very prominent) left and went elsewhere, and that just illustrates *some* of the fallout.

I still need to mention one more cause of the acceleration of demise. This is more dangerous than anything else I've thus far mentioned because it's a powerful poison that is so insidious and so deadly that it can accelerate demise without us even being aware – until it's too late. I'm talking about Apathy. When we see or are affected by ignorance (intentional or unintentional), when we see or are affected by greed, when we see or are affected by selfishness (ego), and just let it go by without addressing it, reacting to it, or challenging it – we, too, become accelerants of a premature demise. And that's something we should all think about.

Just sayin...

*A final thought from Mary:*

It's not always about us. I emphasize that powerful statement, echoing what Bob said, because it bears reflection.

It's not always about us. We don't always recognize the lessons of a situation because, perhaps, they are lessons for someone else – yet our role is necessary for the lesson to be fully fleshed out. We are each part of a bigger picture, and our decisions impact others' lives, whether or not we are aware.

It's not always about us. When we choose the easy route, when we cater to our desires or perceived needs, when we focus on our own pleasure or work-avoidance, our choices can have consequences that negatively impact others. If we close the office early so that we can play golf, and customers show up only to find a locked door, we lose not only the immediate revenue, but potentially future business from



that customer. If we choose to sleep in rather than practice our instrument, and then musically support Mass with less-than-stellar playing, what value statement does that make? That the assembly isn't worth the effort? That God doesn't deserve our best?

It's not always about us. Have we become so self-absorbed that we forget about others?

Even a small pebble casts far-reaching ripples on a still pond.