

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.

Is Eucharist Enough?

Mary's Perspective:

Many of us in liturgical ministry are getting impatient. We are itching to do something – anything – to feel like we can resume some semblance of “normal” in our churches. We miss people. We miss singing. We’re tired of wearing masks and seeing yellow caution tape across our pews. We long for full-on embraces instead of socially distant elbow bumps. We may see a light at the end of the tunnel, and are hopeful it is not an oncoming train!

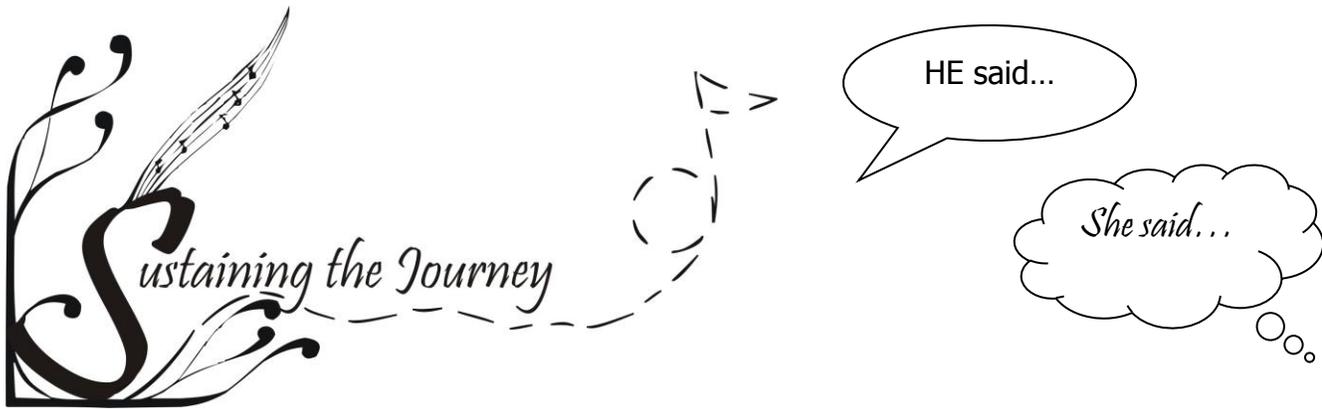
So, permit me to dream a bit... at some point, we will be in the process of re-introducing ourselves to social living. Right now, we don’t know the time, but we are cautiously optimistic that this point is coming. My question is: what does that re-introduction look like?

In my parish, attendance at Mass since the resumption of public worship in May seems to have leveled out somewhere about half of what it was prior to the Coronavirus pandemic. When it is deemed safe, or when the time is right, will more folks return? Many of my colleagues have expressed similar concerns. As we resume more social living, will people include public worship in their weekly routines? After such a long span of time, have they gotten comfortable in their new patterns? Will pancakes on Sunday morning replace going to Mass? Is the inertia and convenience of watching Mass on demand in our jammies, perhaps while doing a jigsaw puzzle or a load of laundry, stronger than the desire to return in person?

It is undeniable that some of that inertia exists. So the next logical question is, should we be doing something to encourage people to return? Will actions that we take make a difference? Not to have a bleak outlook, but certainly parishes are not immune to some of the economic concerns that have had a detrimental effect on many local businesses. If contributions have declined along with the attendance, there have to be parishes on the proverbial bubble of fiscal stability. Perhaps they have eked by over the past year, but now that life is resuming at full pace, will they survive?

Back to the question of can we, as active ministers (or people with a vested interest), make a difference in this outcome. What might encourage folks to return to parish life? I’ve had this conversation with several colleagues, and we have bounced around a lot of ideas. The general consensus is that the first hurdle to overcome is a sense of safety. When the time is right, those who have been away from parish life out of concern of a virus need to feel like it is now safe to return. We may not have a lot of impact on that – their minds will be influenced by vaccinations and herd mentality, and leadership proclaiming a comfort level.

Beyond feeling safe, the next question is: What will draw them to cross the threshold? Each community is different, so that answer will vary for each parish. Perhaps outdoor events might be the first strategy – with plenty of air circulation



and space, an outdoor festival, dinner, concert, or other event might draw attendees. Different types of events draw different segments of the community, so one might consider a Night at the Races, Family Bingo, Wine Tasting Event, Holy Hours, or presentation by a speaker – or perhaps a 2-day event with concert one night and retreat/reflection the next day (think bigger names like Matt Maher, Steve Angrisano, Dan Schutte, John Angotti, or Lorainne Hess). Depending on the parish facilities, one might consider a party in the pavilion or rosary in the grotto. Perhaps to ease into the idea of re-engaging with the parish, one might consider starting with an online approach – such as having different groups lead the rosary each week in May, with music provided by contingents of the music ministry. If possible, offer that rosary outdoors, so folks can come in person, along with online, so others can participate from home. By getting more families involved in leadership, you both grow your leadership teams, and also expose a wider range of interested participants (because different families have different groups of friends connected to them). Reinstate familiar rituals like coffee and donuts after Mass – even if that has to be adapted to a “grab and go” version.

When Bob and I talked about this, his immediate reaction was, “all of the above.” It may take a multi-faceted, well-planned approach to attract folks back to the church grounds. If the presumption is that you need to get them to cross the threshold before you can engage them in worship, then now would be a good time to start planning the re-introduction process. For those who are itching to do “something” right now, figuring out the details of any (or several) of these events would be a worthwhile endeavor. Even if we can’t fill in the exact date, we can certainly accomplish some of the legwork, such as figuring out resources and budget, costs and needs.

I would propose one more thought in this... All of the above event planning presumes we should be doing something to attract folks back to parish life. What if that is faulty thinking? Ultimately, we are a Church. We are united in community by our faith. We profess the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. All of the extra stuff is just that – “stuff” – peripheral to our primary purpose: worship. Do we need gimmicks or events to convince people that they need Christ? Are all of our events necessary because liturgy is somehow lacking? If that’s true, then should our focus be on improving the worship experience? Truly engaging preaching? Music that is so inviting that folks need to sing from their souls? Greeters so welcoming that folks can’t wait to return because of the warmth of the environment? A sense of evangelization that is enveloping and compelling?

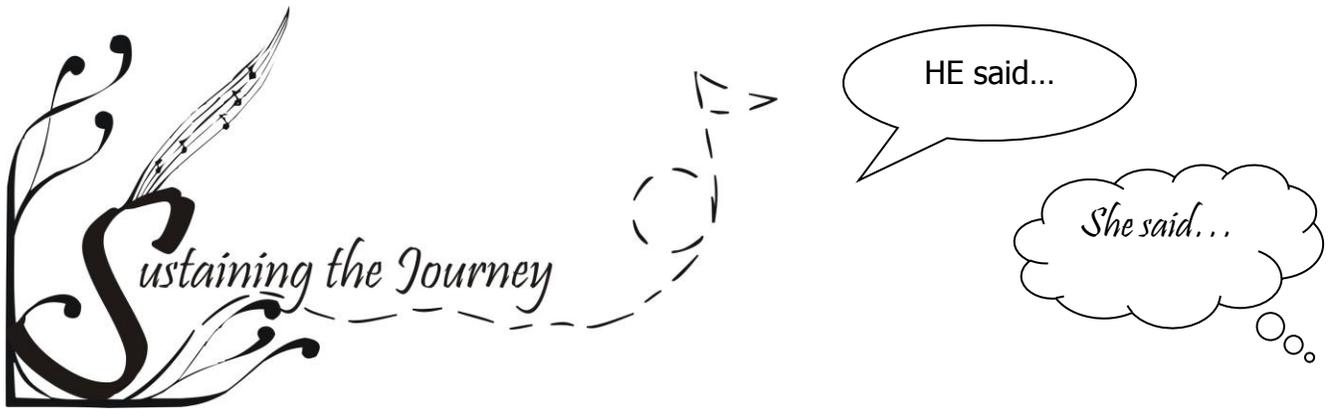
Is Eucharist enough?

Bob’s Perspective:

Is Eucharist enough?

The answer(s) to this question really depends on the existence (or quality) of one’s relationship with our Lord in the Eucharist. This by no means is a casting of aspersions on anyone, but merely a reminder of who we are and whose we are. In this case, however, let me offer a couple illustrations from my own life. These may seem at first glance to be somewhat unrelated, but hang in there – I’ll tie it all up in the end – I promise!

Illustration 1:



My Dad was one of the best friends I ever had, but he never had qualms about being Dad first and friend second. When I was about seven years old, I did something or other that irritated him. (This wasn't the only time – I was generally quite good at it). Anyway, there was a television show that I watched unfailingly. Barnaby, (a local media celebrity), was on every afternoon at 4:30 to present Popeye cartoons and other things of interest to kids my age. Because of the irritation I caused him, Dad decided to ground me from watching Barnaby for a week. That was it, nothing else...plain and simple. As with most kids, the first day of my sentence was tough, the second day was better, and by the third day Barnaby was a distant memory. I moved on. On Thursday, Dad decided that I needed to remember why my life had become Barnaby-less. That afternoon, when he got home from work, he ducked his head in the door of my room and said, "Hurry up, Barnaby's almost on, I'll warm up the TV." (At that time, televisions didn't have solid state components – once turned on, the gizmos inside had to warm up for a minute or two before the TV set would actually work.) I sat next to him on the living room couch. We laughed and joked around (as usual) as the opening credits rolled. Then he looked at me, and with a bit of a frown said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot that you're not allowed to watch Barnaby until next week." With that he walked over to the TV, turned it off and left the room. My Dad simply and brilliantly recreated my hunger. Needless to say, the flood of emotions from the first day of my sentence returned!

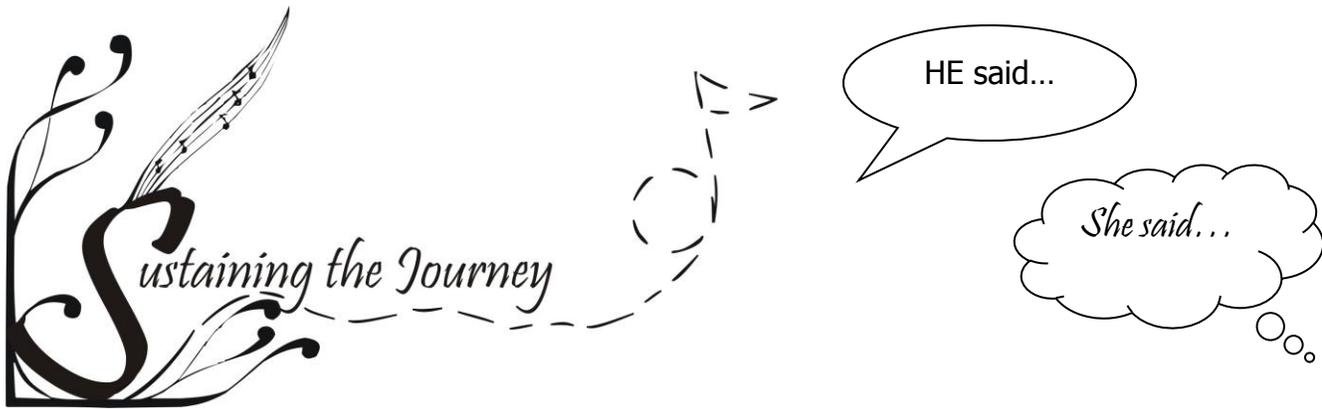
Illustration 2:

As many of you know, my wife Maureen passed away a little over five years ago. The cemetery where she is inurned is in my neighborhood. Soon after her funeral, I found many of my evening walks would take me through the cemetery. This being the halfway point of my five miler, I would sit on a bench close by the columbarium say a few prayers and share thoughts, meditate, etc. The average visit lasted about fifteen to twenty minutes. As life went on, I developed a new relationship and new interests – which is a necessary and healthy part of moving forward in one's life. Now, even though I drive past the cemetery on a daily basis on my way to and from work (and whisper a prayer as I go by), my visits only occur on holidays and a few other significant dates – and the duration of each visit averages about two minutes. While I cherish the relationship I had with my wife (notice I used the word "had"), the reality is that life has changed. In a situation such as this, dialogue gave way monologue – and physical presence no longer exists – so in many respects the intimacy of our relationship waned, replaced in some ways by warm memories and shadows of the past.

For many, these two illustrations can also apply to their relationship between themselves and our Lord in the Eucharist. In the Diocese of Cleveland, the obligation to attend Sunday Mass was suspended in the middle of last Lent (approximately March 18, 2020) – that was nearly a year ago. No public worship was held until June 2020, but the *obligation* to attend has not been restored as of this date. As in Mary's case, our parish weekend attendance has seemed to level off. In our case, livestreaming attendance has been on the increase. However, there are those who were regular attendees that we haven't heard from at all.

So what happened?

Illustration 1 shows that in a change of regularly scheduled events in our lives, other events tend to take their place. When Barnaby was no longer a viable option, I found other things to fill the time void. It wasn't until I was reminded by my Dad



that I realized the importance (as a seven year old) that Barnaby had in my daily life. Once reminded, the need again became a reality.

Illustration 2 shows the significance of dialogue and physical presence in our relationships. In my estimations, his has been the toughest thing to deal with in this COVID-Mess. In many cases we have been physically separated and reduced to telephone and internet communications with our friends and loved ones – a viable, but in some ways empty, option. Nothing beats or can replace physical presence and interaction when it comes to the health and wellbeing of a relationship. In some instances, even telephone and internet isn't possible, leaving people to feel isolated and alone.

We need to set aside quality time for nourishing our relationships. When spending time is no longer a priority, when dialogue becomes monologue and physical presence has left the influence of our lives, it is no wonder that relationships change, diminish, or vanish over time. How sad.

Where does this leave us?

The good news is that the Sacrifice of the Mass gives us the elements we need to preserve and strengthen our relationship with our Lord. The dialogue is in hearing the readings of Scripture and responding in word (and song when we are able) – and the physical presence of our Lord is in the reception of Holy Communion. In the experience and reception of Eucharist we are not only filled with the presence of our Lord, but we are nourished and strengthened to bring him to others through our words and deeds. Like the example of my Dad, it's imperative for us to remind each other of the important things in life, especially in our spiritual lives – and to help each other in maintaining or recreating (or creating) the hunger for our relationship with our Lord.