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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.

## Living in Limbo

*Mary's perspective:*

As a liturgical musician, this is the time of year when I am looking ahead to Christmas – often to the surprise of friends who point out that football season has barely even started. I recently attended a webinar that included a panel of six speakers from across the country. The point of the webinar was to discuss tentative plans for Christmas (further proof that I am not the only crazy one). Obviously, pandemic circumstances make this conversation much more on a theoretical level than in concrete planning, so the question posed to the speakers was, “if life is as it is today – social distance, masks, limited or no singing – how do we plan Christmas celebrations that are heartfelt and meaningful?”

The initial reaction of all the panelists was akin to a deer in the headlights. They each politely waited for another to speak. Crickets. Finally, one said they had a few tentative plans that were flexible and could be adapted to the situation, whatever that may be by December. Bobble heads ensued. The general consensus was to put more effort than usual in planning, and formulating multiple scenarios:

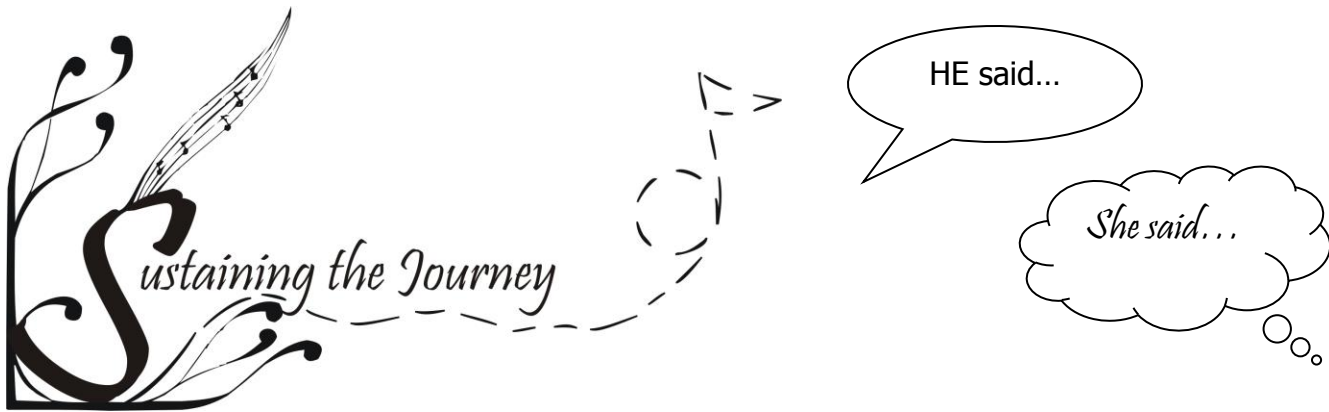
Plan A = everything goes back to how it was pre-COVID, with full communal singing and packing folks into the church.

Plan B = how things are right now, with limited participation, social distance, and masks.

Plan C = return to a lockdown state where public worship is suspended.

While Plan A may be the easiest to get our heads around, very few believe that will be the case in four months. However, if it is, most agreed they would rely on the tried and true – even if it means repeating whatever music was sung last Christmas. The other two scenarios posed more thoughtful responses. Conversation addressed the use of livestreaming, perhaps making Christmas Mass be a ticketed event, to accommodate space limitations, adding more Masses, planning extra rooms for overflow seating, etc. Musically, most felt they would pick simple yet beautiful music that could be sung by an individual or small schola. All acknowledged that the prospective of being unable to sing Silent Night as an assembly, while a very real possibility, was more than we could imagine right this moment.

This webinar really got me thinking, and consulting with colleagues. Many of them feel that this time is like a stepping stone, waiting for the next change. A period of Limbo, if you will:



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## lim-bo

*an uncertain period of awaiting a decision or resolution; an intermediate state or condition.*

Based on that, several colleagues prefer to take the wait-and-see approach. They are not inclined to make plans right now, and are simply maintaining the systems set in place in May when we resumed public worship. The thinking is, “why bother doing anything now, when it’s all just going to change again?”

There may be some merit to that line of thinking. In the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, we are beginning a new era with the installation of our 12<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Cleveland. Many students have returned to classes in person, prompting speculation that there will be a spike in cases of the coronavirus. Either of these two events alone could lead to a change in the status quo. However, my question is: what if it doesn’t?

While the concept of Limbo indicates an intermediate state, it does not impose time limits. What if our living in Limbo is not simply for a few weeks or months, but rather for a significantly longer time? What if this is it, for the foreseeable future?

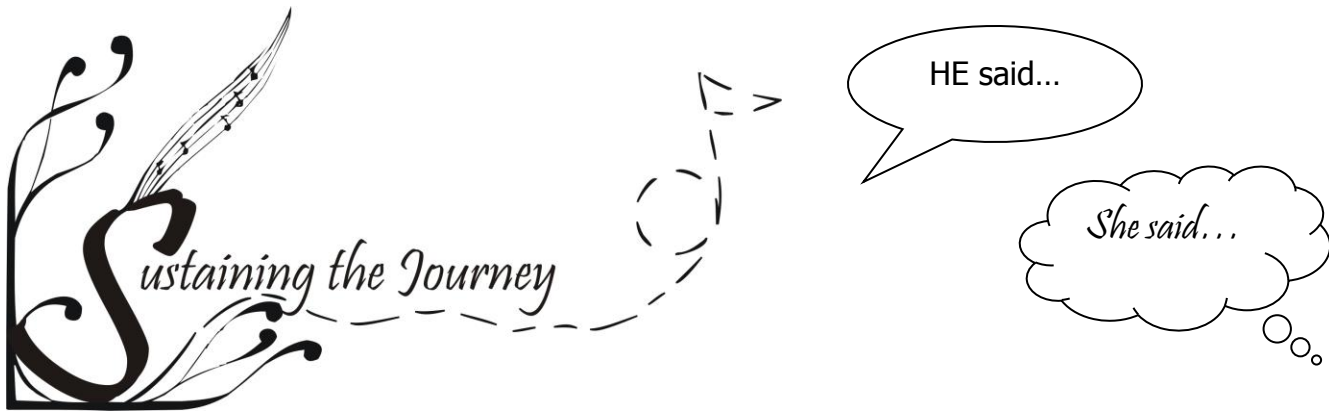
Are we missing opportunities because we’re too busy anticipating or looking for the next step? Are we so focused on what is coming, that we are neglecting the here and now? When we consider “The Year of the Mask” (to borrow Bob’s term), are we so focused on what we’ve lost that we’re not noticing what we’ve gained? If we are called to transform lives – whether you are in ministry or industry, or a domestic engineer impacting the lives of your housemates – have we put our response to that call in Limbo, too?

Yes, life is different from that to which we had been accustomed. Very different. Jobs are remote, or furloughed, or outright gone. Worship has a whole different character. School doesn’t resemble the education process we once knew. However, in some ways, this time of pandemic has forced a giant leap forward. Companies that once dabbled in the possibility of an employee working a day from home once in a while have figured out that they can still be productive without any employees crossing the brick-and-mortar threshold. Places of worship have moved from the idea that “we should increase our technology someday” to livestreaming Masses and other events daily. As print materials have been removed, digital technology ideas have taken off at rapid speed. Schools now have in place the option for providing educational resources to a much broader base of students, both domestic and internationally.

In your daily living, are you so busy waiting for the next change, that you’re missing today’s opportunities?

*Bob’s perspective:*

Maybe this Limbo isn’t Limbo at all. Our western society has grown into a high paced, innovative, multi-tasking, super-productive, well-oiled machine. We have set the bar so high that most of our lives have become busy playing “Can You Top This?” Many times we have found ourselves working day and night to make something better (whether it really needs to be any better or not). The thought of repeating a program has become almost repugnant---“Yuck...we just did that three years ago.” Many may have even started to believe that ritual is getting in the way of our creativity – making some feel trapped (or imprisoned) by the rubrics and structures laid before us. “They can’t sing, so I’ll sing it for them,”



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as opposed to full, active and conscious participation (however that's possible in this time within the given structure) being the goal.

Maybe this Limbo has been intentionally placed in front of us (or better yet, maybe we have been intentionally placed into it). Slowing us down to a crawl, or maybe even a sudden stop, has forced us to take some time to evaluate who we are and where we *think* we're going. Face it, we all wind up in the same place eventually anyway. My Pappy used to say, "Don't take life *too* seriously – how many 150 year olds do you know that are still kicking?"

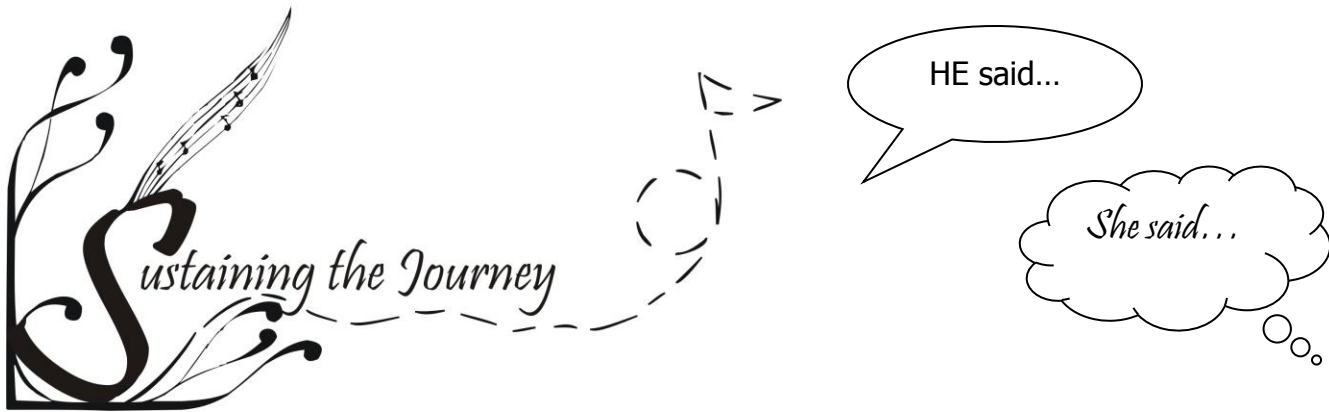
It has been interesting to note that many people who seemed stressed out before the pandemic have been even more stressed out during this time – despite the fact that they have significantly less to do or accomplish. For a while, I was definitely caught in that vortex. I heard myself saying things like, "I'm working harder now than I ever did before." And it has taken me months to settle into the Year of the Mask.

But now, the worm has begun to turn (at least in my arena). For the most part, my work days have moved back to more reasonable hours. I still work six days a week, but I no longer work ten hours a day. For the first time in decades, I have been able to spend time *each day* walking in nature, or sitting by the lake, or taking a leisurely drive, or enjoying my patio, or reading a book just for the sake of enjoyment. I've been able to spend more time with those I cherish (at least as much as social distancing will allow). I've taken time to practice music for sheer pleasure – even some repertoire from my old "bar band days" – just fun stuff for the sake of fun – which over decades I slowly abandoned because of time constraints and the (self-imposed) pressure of producing a weekly product. Has the Liturgy actually in some ways become a production commodity? Wow. I need to think more about that.

I have found over these months that I have been able to connect more with moments in the Mass that have previously rushed by me because of preoccupation with getting the next piece ready to play (thinking tempo, setting the organ, cuing the choir, etc.) I'm not saying that I don't miss all of that – I really do! But the slowness and simplicity of the current pace has significantly changed my focus (at least for the moment).

The Liturgy by its very nature includes music and song – no debate there. However, I think it needs to be said that too much of any one thing can lead to devaluation. For example, I like a good steak and a beer now and again – but if I were to have that three times a day (or even just once a day), I'm sure that my passion would be reduced significantly within a short period of time. If everything is important, then nothing is important – it all becomes reduced to equality on the same plane. **Just a thought, not a conclusion!**

I recently told a friend of my tentative plan for the return of singing to our Assembly. I imagine that on that first Sunday (with everyone still wearing masks) we would do an instrumental piece for the Entrance Chant (as we've been doing these many months). At the Gloria, we would all remove our masks – and with as much instrumentation and choral voicing as humanly possible – we would lead the Assembly to shake the rafters with jubilation and song! My friend



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responded, “That’s nice, but what if that first Sunday happens to be in Advent or Lent?” Talk about slamming on the brakes! But isn’t that what happened to us earlier this year? Wow again.

Switching gears – most importantly, in the Year of the Mask, I have found more time for personal prayer and reflection.

Maybe we shouldn’t be thinking of Limbo so much as a place or state of being. Maybe we should think about Limbo more as the Trinidadian dance game – a popular form of entertainment in the vacation island resorts. Maybe we should think of Limbo more as a vacation from the grind of the rat-race. It’s true that this Year of the Mask has forced many of us into uncertain times financially, professionally and maybe even domestically – there’s no denying that fact. But maybe it has called us to re-evaluate the things in life that are of more worth:

**1. Simplicity**

- Do we really need all the stuff that we work – or overwork – so hard to obtain?
- Is it worth all of the hours of hard work just to have a \$300 monthly cable bill?
- How fast does my home internet really have to be?
- Do we really need expensive smart phones, when a flip phone would suffice? (I had to throw that in.)

**2. Healthy Living**

- Are we diabetic or hypertensive because time doesn’t allow for better dietary habits?
- Do we work so hard and so long that we abuse our mental and physical health?
- Do we allow enough time for exercise, leisure, rest and relaxation?

**3. Spirituality**

- Beyond going to Mass, do we sincerely take personal time for prayer and introspection?

**4. Interpersonal Relationships**

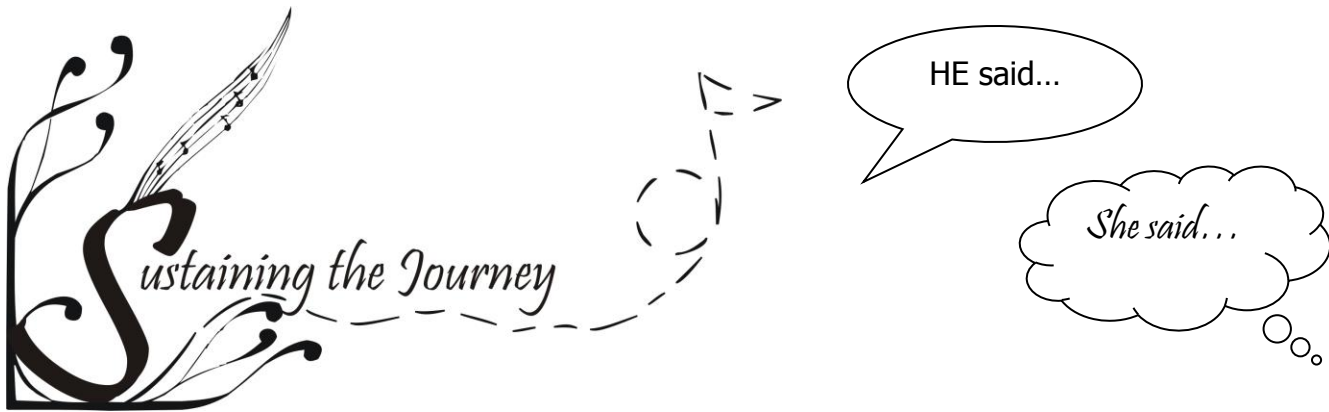
- How much quality (interactive) time do we spend with those we love?
- Do we take time to tell them (and show them) that they’re loved?
- Have we reduced our personal conversations to impersonal texting and email?

Enough said.

Amen and Alleluia!

*A final thought from Mary:*

Perhaps the glaring difference between Bob’s thought about Limbo as a “slow down, vacation-like” time and my “intermediate transitional state” is emphasis on a time limit. Bob has always been one who doesn’t get too caught up in the plan. While he is certainly prepared (an understatement most of the time), he has a fluid personality that good-naturedly “goes with the flow.” Bob is a strong believer that things happen in time for a reason. Conversely, if something



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is not happening it's because now is not its time. For example, we are writing a book. I tend to write in fits and spurts, and when a period of time passes where I haven't worked on it, I feel guilty. Like a slacker. Bob, on the other hand, believes we are not inspired to finish the book right now because now is not the time it should be finished. When the time is right, the words will flow.

Sidebar – he has good reason to believe this way, as it has been substantiated over and over in our lives! Many projects that we have embarked upon nearly take on a life of their own, when they are in sync with God's plan. It's those times when the words flow so quickly that we can't type fast enough, or the worship plan just comes together seamlessly after feeling like there's been a physical blockage stopping the progress, or even blog entries that he stewes about for days and then suddenly inspiration hits at 3am and the blog is written by 4:30am (remember, email time-stamps!).

So perhaps the real message of this blog is to acknowledge that we *are* in an uncertain period – Limbo of sorts – but also that this time offers a rare opportunity to re-balance our lives to place emphasis on those things that truly matter. We don't know how long that will last. Maybe the time constraint doesn't matter. Perhaps it will continue until we have accomplished what we are supposed to do in this time, whether that is to revisit our spiritual lives, or improve the quality of relationships, or finish writing that book. I know that I am impatient. Maybe I shouldn't get so hung up on how long this time will last, but rather focus on the quality of how I spend this time, making the most of it.

Finally, perhaps a flip-phone would suffice – if everyone simply stayed with it. However, I believe that being in the minority by owning/promoting/espousing a flip phone has the potential to make one miss out on good-natured interactions, utilize helpful features like GPS-driven directions, and generally make one appear OLD.

Like “grumpy old man old,” not “wise old owl” old...

Oh, and a “Trinidadian dance game” really is a thing (IT'S LIMBO DANCING) – I looked it up on my smart phone.