



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.

What do you know?

Mary's Perspective:

As often happens, several conversations throughout the past couple of weeks have raised a common thought in my head (and have provided fodder for this blog). Permit me to expound...

Before I begin, please know that what follows is not a critique of, nor criticism about, parish faith formation programs. It is an observation, and reflects my own opinions. I have witnessed a lot of smart, educated, faith-filled Church leaders minister over the years, and I also recognize that providing a comprehensive faith formation program to school-aged children and adults poses an incredible challenge.

I was chatting with a volunteer who teaches PSR (Parish School of Religion classes – offered to students who attend public schools where theology or religion classes are not part of their school curriculum), and who recently switched from working with one of the younger grades to working with older children. He observed that there was a lot of disparity in what the middle schoolers knew about their faith. At a time when 13-year-olds are learning pre-calculus and foreign languages, many of them struggle to answer questions about the most basic of tenets. While he didn't expect kindergarteners to be able to recite the commandments or the Hail Mary on day one, he felt a bit disillusioned about the level of knowledge and understanding displayed by the eighth-grade crew.

I have also experienced a number of adults, including ordained clergy, who appear to have a limited vision of what the Church teaches and how that fits with current understanding of science, archaeology, technology, and morality. In some cases, adults have drifted away from the Church (whatever faith tradition) because they have discovered that there are a lot of studies, texts, and teachers whose work does not substantiate the narrative put forth by their faith tradition. In other cases, the primary connection that adults have to the faith traditions with which they were raised is weekly attendance at worship services, and those worship services no longer spiritually feed or sustain them.



I work in a Catholic parish in a mature neighborhood, where fundraising has become a necessary consideration in order to cover operational expenses and maintenance of aging facilities. Prior to the pandemic, we had a basic formula for effective fundraisers. However, post-pandemic, the old “tried and true” doesn’t seem to be working. Folks are much more conservative in how they spend their money, and many are afraid of large-group gatherings that could expose them to potential virus infection. A co-worker and I were lamenting that we need a creative new strategy. My response was this:

In my happy world, the worship experience at our parish is so vibrant, welcoming, and spiritually fulfilling that folks gladly open their wallets and contribute to the collection basket. They would support what spiritually feeds them. If we feed them well, they provide strong financial support, and we don’t need to rely on fundraisers.

Alas, my happy world doesn’t exist. Or at least, not here and now. One could look into the book [Rebuilt](#), to explore a parish that intentionally changed their focus to bring the vision of my happy world to fruition. Fr. Michael White and Tom Corcoran drew on the wisdom gleaned from thriving mega-churches and innovative business leaders while anchoring their vision in the Eucharistic center of Catholic faith, and the book presents a compelling and inspiring story of how they brought their parish back to life. (The cynic in me wonders how things are now, ten years after they sparked a firestorm with their first book.)

Bob and I were discussing generational differences in how we learned about our faith, and what aspects received emphasis. He is of the Baltimore Catechism era, where the tenets of faith are boiled down into questions with simple, memorized answers. I grew up with less emphasis on catechism and more on relationship with a loving God. Regardless of how you were raised, I guess the question nagging at me right now is: where are we now?

For those who attended a Catholic school, perhaps religion was a part of the educational curriculum for 8 or even 12 years. For those in public schools, perhaps religion classes occurred weekly – sometimes in very coordinated and articulate ways; other times taught by loving volunteers with little more than a willing spirit and a teaching guide. Whether the roots of your learning are strong, or perhaps not containing much depth, what happens once you are not in school? Does it stop there?



Some turn to regular religious reading or deep dives (pardon the pun) into documentaries on archaeological digs. Others may attend a talk or workshop or class here and there, while the weekly homily is the sole source of “continuing formation” for many. As with any endeavor, if we don’t use it, we lose it. So, realistically, our theological understanding and faith development could be declining to the point that we know little more than we did 25 years ago. Are you comfortable with that?

For those who attend worship services regularly, I’d like to know why. What feeds you? What would feed you more – so much so that you want to open your wallet to acknowledge that you are being spiritually fed? How have you grown since your regular formation classes stopped? And for those who don’t attend services regularly, why not? What makes it feel not worth the effort? What could be done differently that would make you want to come more regularly?

How do we create my happy world, where fundraising is for the “extras,” and where folks gladly attend worship services to be renewed, restored, and missioned out as disciples? What needs to change? And how do we feed the next generation (and this one, for that matter), so they don’t have a 25-year gap?

Bob’s Perspective:

Mary mentioned that I was grew up with the Baltimore Catechism. That’s true. When I was young, because Dad was at work and Mom was in the midst of taking care of my brother who was very ill, I spent many hours at my grandparents’ house, which was right across the street from where we lived.

Grandpa was pretty easy-going and at work most of the time. Grandma kept my visits very structured. There was ample time for playing with my friends. There was also time built in for practicing my penmanship (you’d never know it today), reading aloud, catechism study, and prayer. When the bells at St. Thomas Aquinas Church rang at noon, we would stop and say the Angelus and then have lunch and continue on with our day. Grandpa would get in from work about four o’clock and dinner was at four-thirty. The bells would again ring at six o’clock and everything would stop as Grandma and I would say the Angelus and the Rosary (and Grandpa would scoot down to the basement) – after which I would either go home or hang out with Grandpa. (By then, I think Grandma needed a break as much as I did). Grandpa and I would listen to the ballgame on the radio or watch TV and just talk about life.



Back to Grandma – catechism study was from the Baltimore Catechism. Grandma would ask the questions and I would recite the answers. We would do about ten questions each day. If I did well, I knew that there was an ice cream cone (or some other treat) in my near future. She made it like a game, and I really didn't mind. I still remember quite a bit to this day.

As I grew older, I came to realize that three elements are essential in almost any activity if one wishes to be successful: (1) have a firm grasp of the basics, (2) delve into the strategies and nuances, and (3) practice, practice, practice!

To illustrate this concept, consider the game of Chess:

- 1. Have a firm grasp of the basics.** The game takes place on a checker board and the pieces are aligned in a specific order. Each piece has its particular function and can only move in a specific pattern. The object is to trap the opponent's King into checkmate. Without a clear understanding and the memorization of these basics, one's chances of winning a game of Chess are zilch.
- 2. Delve into the strategies and nuances.** When I was in high school, I had the opportunity to teach the game of Chess to some of my teammates. I would often stress the notion of understanding strategies. One of my favorite stunts was to engage a novice in a game and put them in checkmate in three moves. It's an old trick that can easily be countered by a more seasoned player – but to a newbie it can be stunning and somewhat embarrassing. The point of my lesson was to teach the importance of learning the game much more in depth. There are openings and other maneuvers of which a seasoned player will take advantage. The bottom line is that the more they know, the better they'll play.
- 3. Practice, practice, practice!** Knowing the basics, the strategies, and the nuances make for a great foundation. However, it takes a good amount of practice to become proficient and consistently successful. Through practice comes the development of instinct and a greater depth of understanding.

As I said, these principles all hold true for almost anything we undertake – including our faith life. Consider this:

- 1. Have a firm grasp of the basics.** We have the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule that are the basics for living a good life. I find it interesting that many people with whom I interact can't recite either of them. In addition, we have the Sacraments and the Holy



Mass. Again, it's surprising that many can't define what a Sacrament is. (My apologies for the dangling participle.) My question is, how can one play the game well when they don't know the basic rules?

- 2. Delve into the strategies and nuances.** Exploring the Catechism of the Catholic Church and reading Sacred Scripture helps to deepen our understanding of the basics. These, among other tools, give a more in-depth appreciation of our faith, as well as ways to be more successful in one's spiritual endeavor.
- 3. Practice, practice, practice!** Knowing the basics, the strategies, and the nuances make for a great foundation. Our faith life doesn't become fruitful until we put it into practice. Regularly attending weekend Mass is a good start, but there's so much more. At the end of Mass, the Priest or Deacon charges us to (in these or other words) "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." This is where the practice really starts. This is where we truly develop instinct and a greater depth of understanding of our faith. This is what it truly means to be Christian.

So....what do you know?

A final thought from Mary:

First, PENMANSHIP? What happened to what she taught him?

Second, after writing this blog, we had a conversation about Bob's last line – specifically, the inflection. Using the same question, we could ask two different thoughts:

What DO you know?

What do YOU know?

We decided to leave that for the reader to interpret. But beyond basics and strategies and nuances, you now know with certainty that we are WORD NERDS. ☺