



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.

The Circle of (Church) Life

Mary's Perspective:

For those involved in parish ministry, this time of year often calls to mind those who have gone before us. At the same time, I'm finding more and more that age brings perspective. I've been at one parish long enough to observe generations of ministries – no, not necessarily the Lectors are having babies and now their children are Lectors – but a crop of folks with a common interest who invite/cajole/encourage another crop of folks to join them (and eventually take over when the original folks become unable to continue at their original level of participation.) As Bob and I have worked at the same parish in different decades, he is observing that the original members of ministries (first generation) brought on a second generation, and now those ministries are tended by the third or even fourth generation.

We have been musing about a mutual friend, who recently went home to the Lord. In Bob's words, our friend was a second-generation member of his funeral choir when he was music director at the parish where I now serve. She went on to invite, welcome, commandeer (politely), and encourage many more members to join, who then extended the same invitation to the next generation of funeral choir singers, who now participate actively in my choir – as the fourth generation.

Our friend lived to be 101. As her daughter said, she did not do any grand things – in the sense of world travel or inventing something – but she took care of all that needed to be taken care of, in the home, in her church, and among her friends. Knowing you could always count on her? I, personally, think that is more grand than any fancy trip or invention. Anyway, in her no-nonsense ways, she had some basic philosophies.

First, make people feel comfortable. Whether in your home or sitting next to you at the card table, when someone is comfortable, they are peaceful. Hospitality is not only an open door, but it is at the heart of parish ministry. Once folks are comfortable, they are much more willing to help out in whatever endeavor needs attention.

Similar to making folks comfortable, think about the fun things in life. Maybe all is not fabulous, but typically every situation has a silver lining that brings a smile to mind. We can either worry or pray – which is better?



Our friend was a pillar of the parish. As a Church minister, I am painfully aware that many of our pillars are crumbling, whether through illness or advanced age, sometimes other interests, or death. Not only did that generation of volunteers provide the time and talent, but they also significantly contributed their treasure – which is a priority less evident in the subsequent generations. As the old guard wanes away or dies off, there are fewer workers to replace them and less funds to support the ministry. How many churches or organizations do you know that are struggling to make ends meet, and have the same handful of people doing all the work?

As if to further concretize these observations in my own head, Bob and I recently attended a session at the seminary where we were blessed to hear from the same speaker that would be addressing all the clergy at the next day's priest convocation. The gist of his message was to point out that trends in giving are changing. Today's parishioners, in general, have a lower belief in institutions and are supporting other things. Now, I understand that scarcity and concern for numbers is a fear-driven response, and we are a Jesus-driven people. Ministry is about bringing people to Christ. Always. Our identity is not the church building. However, the speaker offered some daunting statistics. Based on studies, if your Catholic parish closed tomorrow, 40% would go NOWHERE else – not another Catholic church, not another any kind of church. So, what do we do with that?

As a parish leader, the message is that we need to cultivate legacy givers – those who believe so strongly in the mission that they choose to leave part of their estate to support the Church after their death. We also need to passionately and tirelessly work as disciples of Christ, so that folks recognize the mission and grow rooted to it. Small moments matter, from the smile and greeting at the door, to attention to detail like spelling names correctly in the bulletin. Providing ongoing training, formation, and affirmation of our ministers and volunteers helps them to grow, and also encourages them to stay connected in sustainable ways. Being open to new ideas, new faces, or new opportunities opens the door to growth and builds the pool of the next generation.

But I also recognize that the vast majority of readers of this blog are not professional ministers, and as a volunteer, "cultivating legacy givers" is not typically a viable task, unless it's your own estate we are considering. However, you do influence the people you touch, and if you are involved in an organization, your reach can be lengthy. Do you walk the talk? Do your financial priorities reflect your values? Cultivating a culture, rather than a committee, is something we can all work towards. Rather than simply tending to the task at hand, the bigger call is to recognize our interconnectedness and the values we share. Perhaps feeding the hungry means participating in a sandwich-making ministry twice a month – but it can also mean inviting a fellow sandwich-maker to coffee and perhaps allow faith sharing to become part of the conversation. How are you helping to form the next generation in the circle of parish life?



We all support various causes about which we are passionate. Speak up! Share your passion! Invite others to see what has drawn you in. Help them experience the same welcome and affirmation that you feel when you do whatever it is you do. Take a page out of our 101-year-old friend's book: make people feel comfortable. Pray, rather than worry. Recognize the fun things in life. And invite them to not only join you, but to bring a friend! Sometimes, it just takes an invitation.

If not you, then who?

Bob's Perspective:

As I approach the two-year mark of my retirement from full-time ministry, the Circle of Church Life has never been more apparent to me. Although I frequently help out with music at other parishes as a substitute musician, I find myself spending more and more time at my home parish. As Mary mentioned earlier, I served as Music Director here in earlier days (1987-1999), which seems like a lifetime ago. Now, I find myself in the role of a volunteer, helping in the music office, singing in the choir, and serving on occasion as a cantor at weekend Masses and funerals. Although I'm a newer member in these roles, I certainly cannot count myself among the next generation. Most of the choir members and cantors are my contemporaries. But it sure feels different now – in many ways refreshing and life-giving, but in some ways, it makes me a little more conscious of my mortality. I've gone full circle: I went from a volunteer musician to a substitute, to an apprentice, to a music director, to a substitute and back to a volunteer.

Over the years, there has certainly been a shift in the role of a parish. When I was little, there were within a radius of ten blocks, five Catholic Churches: an Irish parish, a German parish, a Polish parish, a Lithuanian parish, and a Slovenian parish. They were all surrounded by very tight-knit neighborhoods consisting mostly of the given ethnicity of the parish. Each neighborhood was almost totally self-sufficient. Many of them had their own stores (delicatessen, shoe repair, clothing, hardware), neighborhood professionals (doctor, lawyer, accountant, priest), and places of employment (small factories, stores, and other business concerns). The parish was the center of neighborhood life. Not only was it the place of worship, but it was at the heart of most social activity – it seemed like something was going on all the time.

As time went on, the world seemed to become smaller. I was the first person in my family to attend college. Most people didn't attend college back then, but now I hardly know anyone who has less than a bachelor's degree. In former times, it was mostly the doctor, the lawyer,



and the priest who had a higher education, so they naturally served in the role of neighborhood leaders. As education became more accessible, there was less need for their advice on the more mundane issues of life. Many of the regular Joes and Josephines became at least as well (if not more) educated than the aforementioned professionals. Hence, their roles were diminished greatly as neighborhood leaders.

Insofar as the Church is concerned, the secularism of higher education slowly made its way into the average household, leading to the misguided perception that religion (and in some cases, a less educated clergy) was no longer a necessity for wellbeing. Congregations slowly began to shrink.

Fast forward to 2019 when the world shut down because of the pandemic. Churches were closed, and that being the case, many people drifted away. Although (thanks be to God) many parishes have seen a resurgence in attendance (my home parish is up 9% from last year at this time), in most cases it's far below previous attendance levels. The circle is definitely getting smaller – but only in some cases. Although in the overall scheme the aforementioned is true, there are a number of parishes that have actually grown, mostly in developing suburbs. ALL IS NOT LOST!

Mary mentioned our 101-year-old friend to whom we just said farewell. Her words of wisdom hit the nail right on the head. We can easily sit on the sidelines and say, "Oh poor us," or we can take action and do something. I propose something called "evangelization," which can take many forms. I have always been respectful of our Jehovah's Witness brothers and sisters, who go knocking on doors on a regular basis. While I'm not suggesting that we all do the same (although it's not a bad idea), I am suggesting that we consider actively inviting people to come back home (or join) AND ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE in the life of the parish community. But there is one caveat. In order to be credible, one needs to be an active participant themselves. That means doing just a little more than going to weekend Mass – but it doesn't have to be much. There are many activities that don't take a great deal of extra time. Liturgical ministries such as Usher and Greeter require only a nominal amount of training and being there to help at a particular liturgy (which we should already be attending anyway). On the next level, being an Altar Server takes a bit of training – but is not very complicated (as it was for the Tridentine Mass), and again, for the most part the participant is scheduled to their convenience. The role of Reader needs a little additional preparation, but is doable for most people (since again, they're going to attend Mass



anyway). Then there's Music Ministry, which in many cases requires a weekly rehearsal and attendance at the scheduled Mass. This ministry, in particular, instantly lands you in a smaller community, which can be there for friendship and prayerful support in times of need. Beyond liturgical ministries, there's the occasional need for volunteers: maybe to help stuff envelopes for special mailings, or helping with the parish festival (or other parish events), and so on, or maybe helping with a call chain (like apprising funeral choir members of an upcoming funeral), or crocheting for the prayer shawl ministry. With very few exceptions, there's something that can fit into any schedule.

Are you going to complete the Circle or break the Circle? So, for the life of your parish, what are you waiting for?