



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.

Control

Bob's Perspective:

Times have been crazy as of late. So many times I've heard someone say, "This world is all out of control," and from a certain point of view, this statement is true. However, when one thinks about it, what do any of us have control over?

- We can vote in elections, but we can't control the outcome.
- We can guide our children, but we can't control how they'll actually turn out.
- We can instruct our employees, but we can't control or guarantee they'll get it right.
- We can invest wisely, but we can't control its performance.

But we can control ourselves – and in doing so, we can at least hedge our bets when it comes to dealing with the world.

One day, when conversing with a friend (I'll call him Fred), I asked how his parents were doing. He responded, "OK, I guess," and then proceeded to tell me that he hadn't talked to them in quite some time. It seems that every time they conversed, his Dad would "rip on him" about not going to church – which soon turned into a heated battle. He finally concluded that he was tired of fighting, so he just quit talking to them. It just so happened that, not long after that conversation, I bumped into his parents at the store. After making some small talk, I asked them, "How's Fred doing?" His Mom answered, "We don't hear from him much anymore." Dad chimed in, "I think he's mad at us or something. *<Anger growing in his voice>* I know that I'm mad at him because he doesn't go to church. I can't get through to him that missing Mass on Sunday is a mortal sin. He's going to wind up in hell if he ain't careful!" I thought to myself, "If you presented an argument to me in that tone, I might react the same way as Fred." Maybe if he was a little less angry and a little more inviting, the outcome might have been different.

Controlling our tone of voice and the way we present ourselves generally helps to control the other person's response. Keeping a pleasant demeanor, a calm voice, and maybe even a warm gesture (i.e. placing a hand on their shoulder) shows that you value and respect (love) them. Rather than being dictatorial or dogmatic, try being kind and inviting, perhaps by saying



something like, “If you pick Mom and me up at church after Mass, we can go out and have breakfast.” Fred would witness his parents’ (and others’) devotion to worship, and then share in a pleasant experience of dining together. Even if it didn’t work right away, it would at least keep the door open to future conversations – and those future conversations may just bear fruit.

Controlling our actions also plays an important role. My Pappy always used to say, “Don’t stand there and tell me that you’re sorry, just show me.” When we’ve wronged someone, apologizing doesn’t hurt the situation, but a gesture of kindness can go much further.

There was a guy selling produce, who would drive his truck up and down the street every couple of days. He’d make several stops along the way and people would come out to purchase some of his wares. He almost always stopped in front of our house. One time, when I was about six years old, I tiptoed over to the truck and I took an apple. As I started to sneak away, the man saw me, took me by the arm and walked me up to our front porch. Pappy was standing there as the man said, “Your son took one of my apples.” This didn’t make him happy, to say the least. I began to cry and, handing the apple over, said, “I’m sorry.” Pappy said, “That’s all well and good, but how are you going to show this man that you’re sorry? You just go to your room and think about that.” After talking to the man for a few minutes, Pappy came in later and gave me a firm but gentle “talkin’ to.” I ate dinner in my room that night.

A couple days later, the man came down our street again. It was a hot day, so I took him a cold cup of water. I was still embarrassed and said, “I took your apple and that was wrong.” I handed him the cup. He drank the water, patted me on the head with a big smile and sent me on my way. All was well. I learned that acts of kindness can heal relationships. Doing acts of kindness can also heal ourselves. I offered reparation with an act of kindness, he showed affection with a pat on the head... and I never stole anything again.

Control.

I’m not suggesting that one should be a milquetoast – there are times when one needs to take a strong stand – and kindness may not be appropriate. However, I would suggest that most times there are ways in which we can stand up for what we believe that aren’t overbearing – and in the course of time can be persuasive.

Last week, I attended a cookout at a friend’s home. There were others gathered there, some of whom were recently new acquaintances. Now every time before I eat, I bow my head, make the Sign of the Cross and softly pray a blessing. I’ve never made a big deal of it, and have never



demanded silence or the participation of those present. All of my friends (many of them aren't Catholic – and some aren't Christian) know this, and are very respectful of my ritual. Most times, if they see me making the Sign of the Cross, they'll quiet themselves for a moment out of respect. Back to the cookout, when the food was served and we all sat around the table, the host of the party politely shushed everybody and said to me, "Bob, are you going to say the blessing?" I have to admit that I was momentarily stunned. I said "Sure," made the Sign of the Cross and prayed. Even our Hindu friend bowed his head! As a side note, our Hindu friend grew up in Calcutta and knew Mother Theresa when he was a kid. She visited their street and his home on a regular basis. Talk about a woman who knew control...read her story sometime.

Anyway, I'm not sure whether I agree with the statement, "Sometimes it's better to be kind than to be right," but with rare exceptions, it's almost always better to be kind. Just as anger breeds anger – kindness breeds kindness, and in that we have control.

When we control our emotions, our actions and our words – we have the upper hand. Taking the high road is never a bad thing. I recently read an article about eagles. It seems that eagles can fly higher than almost any other bird. When an eagle is chased by another bird, he doesn't usually mount a counter attack. He doesn't meet aggression with aggression. Rather, he just flies higher.

Control.

Just sayin'

Mary's Perspective:

If I had started this blog first, it might have been titled, "Confessions of a Control Freak." I like feeling in control, as do many folks, so Bob's observations in the bullet points at the beginning of his perspective are generally distressing to me. They also have fine-tuned my attitude and actions over the years, causing me to focus more on what I *can* do, than what I can't control.

On a recent walk, I had what we fondly refer to as a "Godincidence." I'll spare the details, but basically I tripped into a new podcast that really spoke to me. The topic was about helplessness and learned helplessness. It got me to thinking... the opposite of control might be helplessness.

The podcaster reflected that it is common to feel helpless right now, particularly in the wake of the Covid pandemic – and that can be discouraging and frustrating. We get to the point that we have so many experiences over which we have no control that we give in to helplessness, without considering



the parts where we do have control. I read a story that said 25 years ago, the amount of negative input one would experience in a lifetime is the same amount we now experience in 24 hours. Think about the pervasiveness of “news” we get from various sources, including talking heads on television, the radio on our commute to work, newspaper (do people still read those?) and various social media channels. That means we are faced with challenges constantly – and not just those within our inner circle, but literally from around the world. And with the revolving headlines and sound bites of 24-hour news and social media, we are processing negative inputs over and over.

To stop it from becoming overwhelming, how do we combat this? Well, there are some logical strategies. Reduce the amount of news you consume, the time of day you consume it, and the sources. If we expose ourselves to negative news last thing at night, we take that to our sleep. Our brain ruminates even when we sleep, and we awake not feeling refreshed. If we consume news first thing in the morning, it saps our energy for the day. In addition, if you are watching news – either on the television or scrolling through posts – you don’t get gaps or pauses to reflect and think. When you read, you can at least take a break to ponder.

I don’t want to imply that news is inherently bad, or that we should bury our heads in the sand. Being fully informed may be helpful, but only if you do it in an effective way that encourages positive mental health. I think it is imperative to seek out positive news stories. You might have heard the adage, “if it bleeds, it leads.” Our minds are trained to amplify the negative, so we need to consciously look for the positive.

Consider social media posts. Perhaps you get dressed in a new outfit and post pictures online or as part of your Tik-Tok story. You may get several positive comments or likes. Then one person suggests you look tired, and your focus hones in on that negative comment. You give it so much presence and attention, even obsess about it, that it becomes the story you hear over and over in your head. Do you give the same attention to the multiple positive comments? That’s part of the concept of *Two for Tuesdays* – combatting a vortex of negative with positive inspirations. We don’t always recognize what we do well because we don’t take the time to focus on what we are doing well. It takes intention to focus on positives, both externally and internally, but it’s worth the effort. It gives you control over feeling calm, peaceful, and powerful. We would all do well to build on what we are doing well.

Aside from the inward focus, we also need to consider scale. You may have heard the story about the starfish that get washed up on the beach before the tide changes. Walking along, one can try to toss them back into the ocean so they survive. It can feel hopeless to look at the number of fish on the beach, knowing we can only save a few. To us, it’s only one fish, but to that fish, it’s its whole life. I may



only be able to help one person or five people. To me, that's not much. If I can't support lots of people, it doesn't feel significant. But to that person, it's life-changing.

Sometimes control can be a matter of perspective. I may not feel like I alone can make a big difference. But everyone can make a difference, even if I perceive that impact as small. We can be purposeful and impactful alone, but even more so within community. We all know that you feel more power, influence, and in control when you are with others on the same mission. Loneliness contributes to helplessness. Alone, I can't do much, but with a whole group, we can have an impact. So it makes sense to seek out being in community with other like-minded people. (I could write a lot here about discipleship and mega churches, but I'm trying to focus!)

Aligning forces with a community enforces a sense of belonging and mission. Proper self-care also helps us to recognize where we have control. Sleep, exercise, eating all impact how we process the challenges and blessings of life. I handle stress better when I'm well fed, rested, and healthy. If you know you're not alone, you know that you can find more strategies to assert control by leaning on others for support. Positive self-talk makes a difference. Meditation or prayer increases optimism and adaptability, and can improve health challenges. I've always been a believer that, rather than seeking miracles, we should pray for strength, courage, and skills. (Who am I to tell God what the answer should be?) When you feel your resilience, grit, and adaptability are growing, you feel more control.

It's kind of like the difference between praying for the skills to drive better in the rain versus praying that the rain stops. We have the ability to nurture confidence in things we can control, and to work toward developing skills we need to do better in situations that feel out of control. With this shift in perspective, instead of being helpless, I am working on developing the tools to overcome what I can't control.

So what does this all mean? I guess, sometimes, life stinks. Or at least parts of it. We can feel overwhelmed and beaten, and that's valid. But if we allow ourselves to stay stuck in that darkness, we don't get to experience light, joy and happiness. Rather than allowing outside situations or comments to render us helpless, perhaps it's time we work on skills to hone the control where we have it – how we react, the ways we treat others, and growing our community to work together on a mission.