

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.

Why?

Mary's perspective:

It's a simple question. As a mom, I've heard it many times out of the mouths of babes. Why is the sky blue? Why do potato bugs look so cute when they're curled in a ball? Why does ice cream melt? Why do I have to eat the hot dog too and not just the ketchup?

As adults, we tend to take these "why" questions to a more negative place. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why did my loved one have to suffer? Why do people die?

I propose that we would do well to reframe the "why"... Rather than dwell on why the bad stuff perpetuates, what if we focused on why the good happens? I once heard a commentary suggest that the best books we adults can read are biographies, because a biography offers mentorship at the tip of one's fingers. When you read the biography of anyone inspiring, it is easy to point out their successes. *That's* the time to ask "why?"... As in, why are they successful? Why did they make that discovery, or transform lives, or accomplish whatever it is at which they have excelled? What were the stepping stones that led to their success?

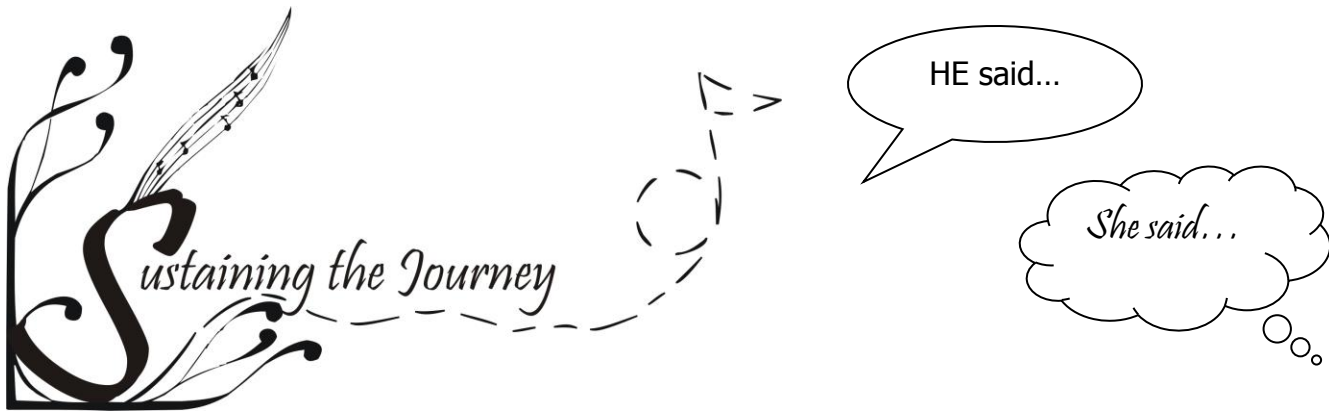
I was chatting with a priest friend recently, and we lamented at the emptiness of the pews at weekend liturgy. At the same time, we were marveling at the success of several area events. For example, my parish hosts an annual vacation bible school. Little ones, up to fifth grade, come every morning for a week, singing songs, learning stories, making crafts and snacks, and playing games, all intended to plant seeds of faith that will hopefully take root and germinate. Once a student reaches sixth grade, they can volunteer as leaders or helpers. This year, as in most years, we have about an equal number of participants and helpers. Nearly 150 young people are drawn to this week-long adventure.

In Cleveland, we have an annual day-long Catholic festival on the grounds of the seminary. The FEST offers everything from bounce houses to the sacrament of reconciliation, to tours of the seminary and an outdoor Mass. Each year this one day draws nearly 40,000 people.

Bob's parish has embarked on a new summer series called Party in the Pavilion. The basic concept is the church offers food at very reasonable prices, a great local band for live entertainment, and a bunch of picnic tables. And the people come – lots of people.

So why do these events draw crowds, when attendance at weekend Mass dwindles?

Bob and I muse about this a lot, particularly on our ridiculously early Sunday morning phone conversations. I believe, before we can fill our churches, we need to understand why such events are filled. What are people seeking, that gets nourished at a festival or an evening with Matt Maher? What draws folks to a wedding or a funeral? Is it community? A sense of belonging? Ritual? A desire to connect with a higher power?



If people aren't hungry – or if they don't realize they're hungry – they won't come. Think about a day when you skipped lunch, and the dinner hour rolls around. If you've been distracted (by work or play), you may not even realize you're hungry, until you take those first few bites of supper. Then you start to grasp a true emptiness, and filling it becomes a priority. I believe the same is true with living our faith. The unexamined life seems, on the surface, just fine. But if you start to contemplate your inner longings, you may discover a desire for belonging, or community, or the comfort of ritual, or the power of the Almighty. In Churchworld, how do you feed them a little and make them recognize their hunger? Perhaps vacation bible school and festivals of praise are a start.

So back to the original question... why? Why do those who live life intentionally seem more peaceful? Why does the music at a Matt Maher concert touch the heart? Why will 150 youth get up early every day for a week during the lazy days of summer? Look at places that inspire you... Masses at churches where you know you'll have a good experience... whether it's the music or the preaching, why? What is the appeal? Why do you want to go back there?

A few weeks ago, we attended the national convention of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. One of the plenum addresses was given by a woman whose first husband committed a horrible act of violence. She told her story (and subsequently wrote a book about it) from the perspective of healing and mercy. Listening to her speak, I could not help but wonder why... why did she come through such horrific events with an even stronger faith? Why is her story one of love, not hate? I purchased her book and found myself drawn into it, wondering even more about the "why". Why did she walk through the fire and emerge redeemed?

Consider the people in your life that you admire. Why? What qualities do they have? How can you emulate them? Why are they successful? What laid the foundation for their success? Perhaps it's someone with a job you covet, or a friend who has really strong relationships, or a musician with a unique skill that has been developed over the years. Why? Why did they get to where they are?

How can you take what you observe, and use that to help you grow?

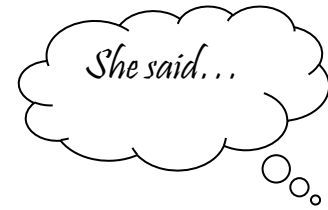
Bob's perspective:

The subject of the declining population in our parishes (at least at Sunday Mass) has been an ongoing conversation in many of our communities. Over recent years we have been faced with parish mergers and closings, and in other cases, changing Mass schedules to better reflect our declining numbers. This isn't just happening in inner cities and first ring suburbs. This decline is also occurring in many fairly upscale suburbs.

Why?

I'm going spinoff on a point that Mary brought up: "If people aren't hungry – or if they don't realize they're hungry – they won't come." So how do we get them to hunger, or realize that they're hungry?

Consider the difference between an 'order-taker' and a salesperson. As an order-taker, a prospective customer comes to you and tells you what they want to purchase. You in turn sell it to them. As a salesperson, you create a need in your prospective customer's mind. You then sell them the solution to their need, namely your product. This can be taken as a



Machiavellian ploy – and depending on one’s motives that could be true. However, from another perspective, isn’t that (at least in some cases) what we’re facing?

“I don’t need a church to be a good person.”

“I don’t need to go to Reconciliation. God already knows I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need to attend Mass on Sunday. I can pray at home (or in the woods, etc.).”

“I don’t need someone to tell me how to live my life.”

Why?

Why have these attitudes become so prevalent in today’s society? Have we become too driven? Too task oriented? Too (fill in the blank)? Remember back to the days when the majority of people rarely worked on Sunday. Now, many have no choice in the matter if they wish to remain employed. Do they really feel that they don’t need a connection to church, or is it that they don’t need one more thing to add to their over-taxed agenda – in which case, church is easily expendable?

Maybe the time is close at hand where we (the church) need to find ways to go out to the people, rather than waiting for the people to come to us; ways to help them realize their need and offer them the solution. Much of this can be looked at in view of the mission of Jesus. He travelled – a lot! He went from Nazareth to the Jordan. He travelled to Cana, Capernaum, and Jerusalem. He spent an amount of time in the countryside of Judah. After a while, he went back up north through Samaria and on to Galilee eventually reaching his home in Nazareth. From there he went back to Capernaum – et cetera. I’ll spare you the rest of the travelogue – but suffice it to say that it doesn’t seem as if Jesus waited around for people to come to him. In essence, the church went to the people. He understood that they were in need and took a proactive posture to minister to their needs.

A line from one of the songs in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “Jesus Christ, Superstar” comes to mind:

“Why’d you choose such a backward time and such a strange land?

If you’d come today you would have reached a whole nation;

Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.”

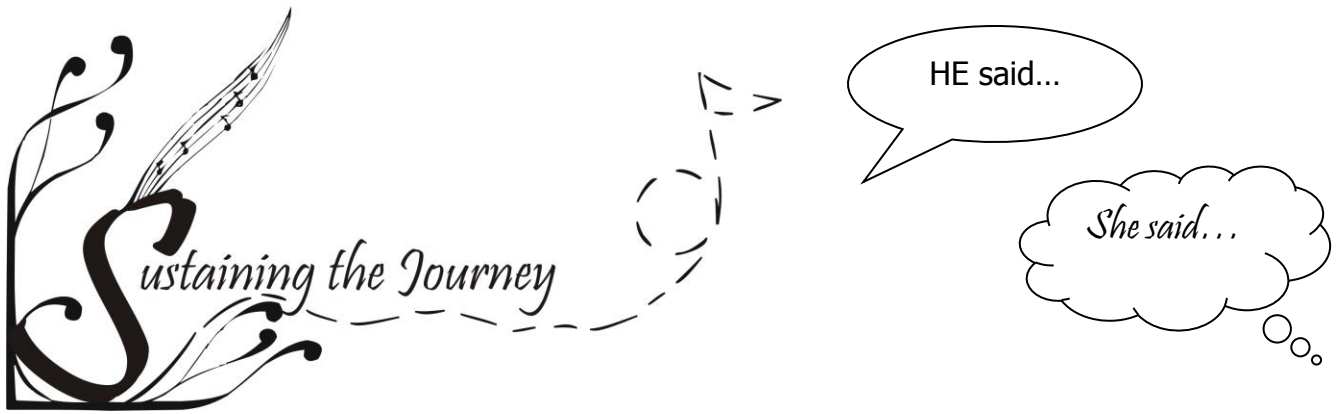
Jesus used a basic, simple, pragmatic approach:

1. He went to where needs existed.
2. He helped people to realize their needs.
3. He offered them a way to be better.

There used to be an old sales adage, “you can’t sell someone a pair of shoes if they don’t walk into your store.” With the advent of mass media and online shopping, this statement holds much less accuracy as time goes onward. Selling shoes (or anything for that matter) is about getting your word out there and providing reasonable ways to make your product accessible. It doesn’t seem that Jesus waited around for people to walk into his “store.” Do we (the church) need to look at new ways of moving outside the “store” in order to remain relevant and be more accessible in a rapidly changing society?

A final thought from Mary – because Bob can’t always have the last word!

The whole concept of waiting has been very present to me lately. I work with a number of people in industry who seem to be most comfortable with a “wait and see” approach. Rather than aggressively seek out business, they wait to see what customers call, and perhaps try to sell a little more to those customers. Rather than plan for the future, be it budgets or



forecasting or marketing strategies or sales canvassing, many companies wait to see what comes and then react. Waiting and reacting are rarely as effective as proactively addressing any situation of concern.

If our churches aren't full, should we wait and see if they come back?

Or should we ask "why"?