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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.

### Spoon Feeding

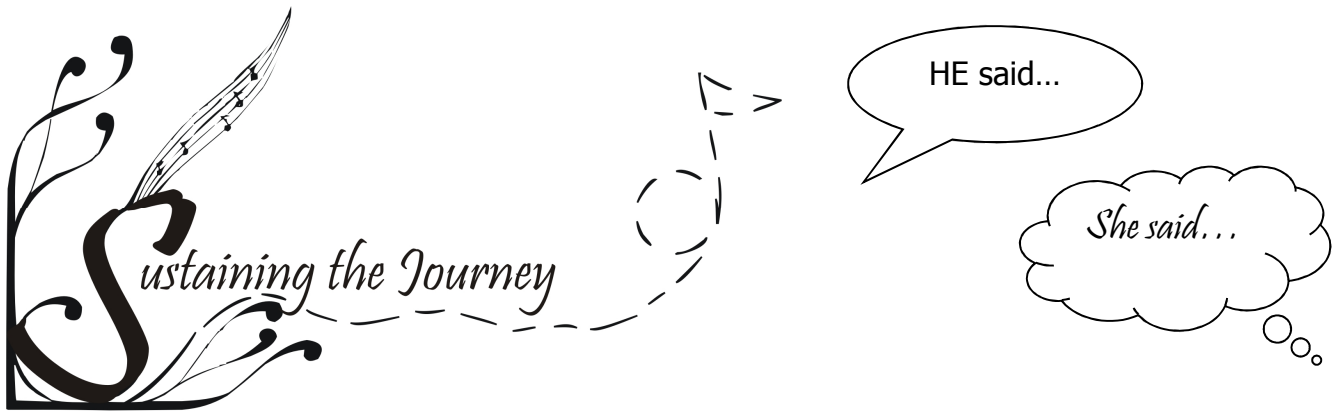
*Mary's Perspective:*

I believe too much spoon-feeding makes us soft.

You could certainly take that comment a number of ways (and yes, we become soft if that spoon is full of ice cream!), so let me elaborate by sharing some examples. One of my roles in life is Director of Liturgy and Music in a Catholic Church. Part of my responsibility is to prepare our liturgical ministers to execute their ministry effectively, to be well-formed spiritually, and to grow in their ministry. I spend hours planning, preparing, providing handouts, reviewing, practicing, meeting, educating, and doing what it takes to help our liturgical ministers be their best. I usually provide a packet of music for our musicians' practice purposes. I make it a point to teach a little bit each time we gather, not just music but also liturgy and theology, to hopefully provide a more well-rounded background in why we do what we do. Occasionally, I provide recordings of music for those who learn better by listening than by reading music.

The result of these efforts, typically, is a pool of ministers who are wonderful. They are skilled, committed, and effective. For example, our cantors have really spent time immersed in the psalms, and it is evident in their proclamation of the responsorial psalm at Mass. However, there are times when I question *how much is too much?* If I provide all kinds of resources – print materials, recordings, extra practices, time – does it encourage them to take initiative and responsibility? Or does my spoon-feeding make them less responsible?

I recently had a practice where I emailed the musicians ahead of time and told them to bring their handouts from our last practice. Literally half of them did not bring their music. They assumed I would just provide more copies, or they could “get by” looking over another's shoulder. There are definitely pieces of liturgical music where I have decided it would be most effective if I took the lead – such as a call/response piece or one that requires finding an acapella note – and there are cantors who rely on that, rather than being prepared to lead. There are some who use the recording (be it YouTube or one I provide) to learn the melody, who no longer try to read the music or pay attention to the notes on the page. They rationalize that they “don't know how to read music” or they “don't need to read music” because this auditory method of preparation is sufficient. In some ways, I think this “crutch” has caused their skills to erode and their confidence to waver. Dependence becomes a learned habit that replaces responsibility. (And for the record, I fully believe that, no matter where your skill levels are, part of the responsibility of ministry is to give God your best – your best efforts, your time and attention, and your commitment to continuous improvement.) Now I'm not beating up any particular musician, simply sharing an observation.



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Here's another observation... I have a number of children, and my children have friends – so I have had experiences with lots of different parenting styles. There are parents who are very involved in their kids' lives (we fondly refer to them as the helicopter parents) and others who are more removed. I believe, as a parent, my role is to give my children roots and wings. I want to encourage them to pursue whatever dreams their imagination leads, and I want them to know that they always have a place to call home. If they falter, we will catch and help them steady themselves – but sometimes you need to get some scraped knees before you master riding the bike (or passing that calculus test, or acing the job interview). I have known young people who struggled in college because in high school, their mom woke them every day and reminded them to study for the test. The freedom of the college lifestyle proved quite challenging because they had been spoon-fed by the helicopter parent throughout their school career to that point, and they didn't have well formed self-discipline skills.

One more observation... because the parish in which I minister celebrates approximately 100 funerals per year, I have lots of friends who have been touched by the death of a loved one. It is heartbreaking to share the journey with a couple who have been married for 60+ years, and then one spouse dies. It is even more gut-wrenching when the surviving spouse has no clue about the finances or some of the day-to-day household chores because the deceased spouse had always handled that. I know several widows who have had to seek the guidance of a financial advisor, or rely on their children to figure out how to pay the bills, or even if they can afford to pay the bills. My grandmother used to prepare breakfast every day for my grandfather, and I believe he died not ever knowing how to make a pot of coffee.

We are spoon-fed in many aspects of life. Weight Watchers tells us how many points we can consume in a day. Talking heads on the radio or television tell us what to believe or who to support. CVS refills your prescription even before you ask them to. Fitness gurus encourage, command, cajole, and drill to get us to exercise more. In some traditional households, the husband manages the money and the wife doesn't even know where the checkbook is. The choir director overlooks absences because you wanted to sleep it, or provides an extra copy of the music because you lost yours. And yes, that spoonful of ice cream (or chocolate, or pick your vice) may offer temporary comfort but in the long run just makes us softer.

Does Big Brother really need to be watching? Have our own internal consciences eroded so much that we no longer have self-discipline, but rather require spoon feeding?

We are in the midst of another Lenten season. Perhaps, rather than “give up” this, or “do” that, we might approach this time with mindfulness. Perhaps this would be an opportune time to consider areas in life where we have gotten soft, and evaluate what is spoon-feeding us. Perhaps today, right now, is an ideal time to take some responsibility for an area of life where we have allowed the crutch to be good enough.

*“Behold, now is a very acceptable time.” 2 Corinthians 6:2*



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*Bob's perspective:*

This topic brings to mind one of my favorite quotes from the novelist, E.M. Foster: "Spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but to know the shape of the spoon."

There are times that we all fall into the "spoon feeding syndrome" and for a variety of seemingly good reasons, but the question is: are we doing more harm than good?

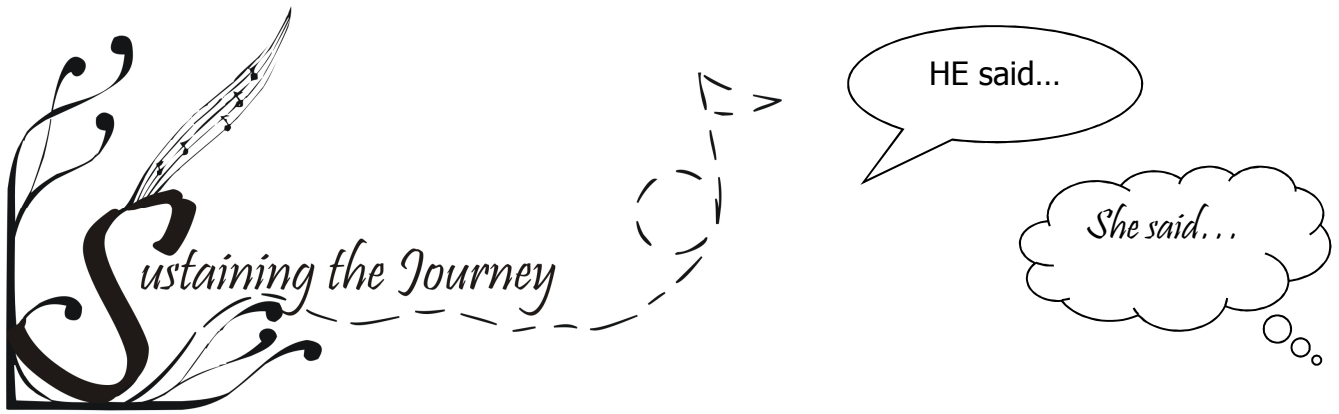
We're all hopefully brought up to believe that we live in service to each other. In itself, that's true. But we also need to be cautious as to how we serve. Are we doing so much for someone else that we're hindering their incentive to grow or become self-sufficient? I usually take the highway to work every morning. Inhabiting the end of the exit ramp on nearly a daily basis is one of several people. They are usually holding up a sign indicating that they are in need of financial help. I certainly believe that we all have a duty to care for the needs of those who are less fortunate. At the same time, in this day of blatant car-jackings, I'm always amazed as to how many motorists roll down their windows for a total stranger and hand cash out to them. On a few occasions, I handed them one of my business cards, asking them to call me for help in getting back on their feet. To date, not one of them has contacted me. Is it easier just to accept a handout than to work on changing your life? Are the good hearted people who are just handing them money doing a better service?

On some occasions, it may seem easier for us to do a particular task ourselves, rather than take the time to teach or explain to someone else how it's done. While this may seem effective in the short run, the long term result in most cases is probably sub-standard at best. No one learns from this, nor do they become self-sufficient. What would happen if we were no longer able to perform said task?

This can be best illustrated by one of the old Machiavellian principles: "Never do your own dirty work while there are plenty around who are more than willing to do it for you." I don't mean to sound so cynical, but the truth is that many of us experience this time and time again without realizing what's happening. A while back, I attended a meeting at which the group leader asked those in attendance to volunteer for some rather simple tasks. When the leader of the meeting asked if someone would be willing to help with the project, the room fell silent. After an awkward moment, the leader said, "I can probably do this myself." No one objected. How sad.

A little while later, I had a conversation with the group leader. He was a bit disgruntled because now more work had fallen on his shoulders. I asked him why he didn't press the group harder for a volunteer. He said that he didn't want them to be upset. I replied, "So it's better that you're overworked and upset than to hold them responsible for the event?" I shrugged my shoulders and walked away.

It may have served the group leader well had he related this classic children's fable: As the story goes, the Little Red Hen found some seeds of wheat. She asked her friends, "Who will plant the seeds?" None of them (the Cat, the Goose or the Rat) were willing to help, so she planted them. When the grain was ripe, she asked "Who will harvest the wheat?" None of them would help, so she harvested it herself. This went on in a similar fashion through her requests for help in milling the wheat, kneading the flour and baking the bread. Finally after the bread had been baked, she asked "Who will help me eat the bread?" The Cat, the Goose and the Rat all got in line, more than willing to take part. At this, the Little Red Hen said, "No you won't," and, giving the bread to her chicks, she let her so-called friends go hungry.



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I wonder what may have happened the next time she found some seeds. Would there be a different outcome? To that end, I'm reminded of a saying in the book of Proverbs (6:6-11) which is attributed to King Solomon:

*Go to the ant, O sluggard,  
study her ways and learn wisdom;  
For though she has no chief,  
no commander or ruler,  
she procures her food in the summer,  
stores up her provisions in the harvest.  
How long, O sluggard, will you lie there?  
When will you rise from your sleep?  
A little sleep, a little slumber,  
a little folding of the arms to rest—  
Then poverty will come upon you like a robber,  
and want like a brigand.*

I guess this problem ain't new.