

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.

The Nones

Mary's Perspective:

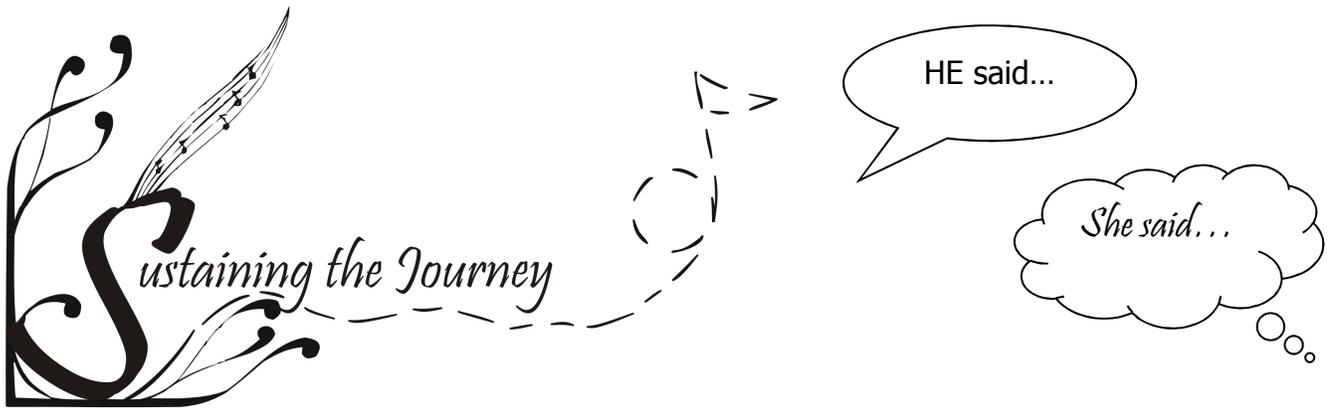
There have been a number of significant studies lately about people who consider themselves "unaffiliated" with a particular faith tradition. On a survey that gives options like Catholic / Baptist / Jewish / None, they choose "none". Just a little bit of research will reveal all kinds of statistics that say more and more people born after 1980 are leaving the Church. Some 22% of Catholics are Millennials. 44% of "unaffiliated" (the Nones) are Millennials. Another study revealed that this disaffiliation happens as early as AGE 13. How many folks do you know that celebrated their Confirmation because their parents made them - and then considered themselves done with all things Church? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize where this path leads.

So WHY are they leaving? There are lots of reasonable answers to that... often the mission and message we teach are vague. "Just be good" is behavioral therapy. Having evangelistic zeal is a challenge, and often our answers to difficult questions are superficial. (Why do bad things happen to good people? It must be God's plan...) In Catholic schools and PSR programs, we have focused on the catechetical to the detriment of the encounter. (That's big words for we are teaching rules, not relationship with God.) Our youth are studying calculus in high school, yet often our religion curriculum stays at about a third grade level.

Faith is about more than just doctrine. It's about a personal encounter with the Savior. We all long to love and be loved. It is "eyelash to eyelash" intimacy that transforms. If we are open to that kind of relationship, the Lord has much more in store for us!

Many of the "nones" that were surveyed respond that they are spiritual - but they don't see need for an institution. Ritual and rules can be exclusive, not very relevant in today's world, and a turn-off. Particularly in a society where we spend a lot of time focused on self and feeling good, exclusive or archaic attitudes are detrimental to credibility.

What we have not effectively passed on is that community is relevant in our lives, and that faith is about more than simply knowing the rules. "Spiritual" = ME. "Religious" = WE. The story of God is a story of love - both of the individual, and of the community. It is about a God who is active in our lives, who we encounter in the breaking of the bread.



One key to remaining active (affiliated) is prayer. Studies show that the most connected Christians are those who pray regularly. However, studies also show that Catholic teens are least likely to pray daily. Again, we're not using rocket science to see where this is going. If prayer is a conversation - thus presuming relationship - it's pretty obvious to me that those who have no need for prayer don't have a valuable relationship with the Divine.

Can we go back to that whole concept of age 13? Yes, the most recent studies focus on millennials, but we're losing youth very early along the path! Obviously I don't have the answers. I do believe in the transformative power of music. I do believe that we need to be comfortable in our own relationship with the Almighty, in order to share that with others in our lives. (That means prayer needs to be a regular part of life.) I certainly have some thoughts about how formation programs could be overhauled. I think we need to start giving youth the credit they deserve for having well developed minds - and challenge them to think deeper. Some say we need to think like missionaries, all the time. Being a missionary is part of discipleship - it's not a burden, but rather a joy.

Where do we go from here? How do we stop the growing number of Nones?

Don't you hate cliffhanger endings?

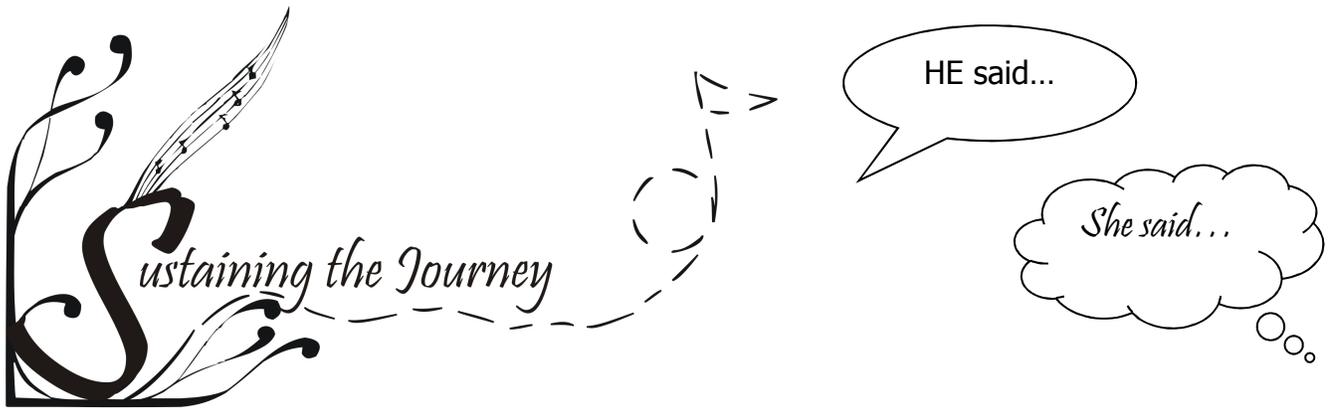
Or is this just a beginning?

Bob's Perspective:

I'm not one to quote statistics very often. As most people realize, stats can be maneuvered to prove just about anything – and we all know that if we see it on the internet, it must be true! (Yeah...right!).

However, I recently visited the website of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) out of Georgetown University. Rather than bore you with a lot of background data, you can check out the site at <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>. One of the categories that I found most interesting (the category commonly referred to as “Nones”) was listed as follows:

“Former Catholic adults: Those raised Catholic (native- and foreign-born) who no longer self-identify as Catholic (survey-based estimate). As the largest religion in the U.S., Catholicism has the largest number of former members (some later return as reverts). Catholicism has a higher retention rate than most other religions in the U.S. (including all Protestant denominations).”



In 1975, the number of “Nones” was about 7.5 million. In 2017, the number was 30 million. There were two sharp increases. The first was between 1990 and 1995 with an increase of about 7 million. The second was between 2005 and 2010, also with an increase of about 7 million.

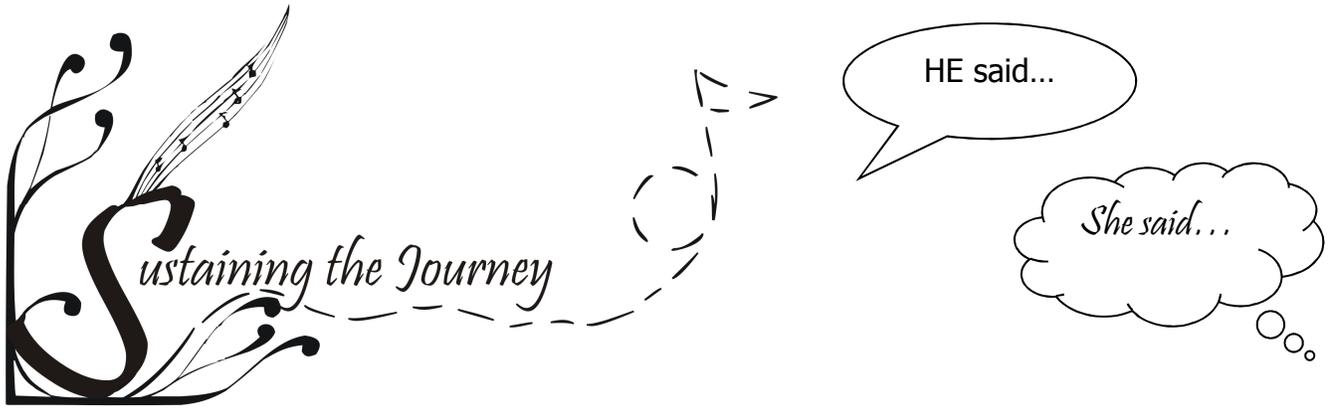
Socially and politically in the period between 1990 and 1995, the world saw the dissolution of the USSR, the commercial introduction of the Internet, Operation Desert Storm (Gulf War), the Balkan Wars, the Air Bag, the election of President Clinton, the invention of DNA fingerprinting, the first World Trade Center bombing, the Oklahoma City bombing, and major strides in genetic engineering.

Between 2005 and 2010 President George W. Bush began his second term. Pope John Paul II died and Pope Benedict XVI began his papacy. Facebook was launched as a social network site. Barack H. Obama was inaugurated as President, the Affordable Care Act was signed into law, the Tea Party was organized, the iPhone was introduced, and the housing and automotive industries began to collapse.

I am by no means saying (or inferring) that any one (or any combination) of these events directly precipitated an exodus from church. The Catholic Church is not the only denomination experiencing this shift. However, the aforementioned events as well as others indicate a shift in societal attitudes and values which may well have contributed to lifestyles that promote personal individualism as well as skepticism (or outright rejection) regarding the traditional institutions of business, government and church. Feeding into this as well is the overall sense of entitlement and instant gratification, which our society so easily and readily espouses and advocates.

I’m not sure that there are any simple answers or quick fixes. The way to begin reversing this de-evolution (at least as far as church is concerned) has to include another shift in attitude. Catholic Schools and PSR teachers need to shift away from teaching religion as a subject as opposed to teaching it with the development of a strong faith as their goal – nurturing the concept of relationship. In this busy, hurry-up world, many view church as part of their check-off list (one of a number of things to get done over the weekend) rather than a time of prayer, worship and refreshment. I’m sure that a fair number of the people who carry that attitude probably seldom (if ever) pray outside of their weekly visit to church. Meaningful communication is an essential part of any healthy relationship.

One way to promote this attitude of relationship with God is to live by example. Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas both espoused that if one wishes to become a ‘great souled person’ they should hang around someone who is ‘great souled’ and imitate them. Through this imitation, they pick up habits, attitudes and ideals that will eventually make them ‘great souled’ as well. It then stands to reason that if we want family members or friends to shift their attitudes about their relationship with God, we need to honestly and outwardly live our lives as good examples rather than merely preaching ‘oughts and shoulds.’



This approach really works. I conducted an experiment with a group of friends. We periodically meet at a restaurant for lunch. In the beginning, when our meals were served, I didn't interrupt conversations or anything. I merely closed my eyes, made the sign of the cross and said grace silently. Then opening my eyes I joined in with the conversation as well. After doing this a few times, I began to notice that the conversations were starting to drift off when I made the sign of the cross – and waited to continue until I was finished. After a couple more times, some people actually bowed their heads as I prayed in silence. That's where it stands at the moment. No one from our group has ever said anything about it to me, nor have I ever brought it up to them.

Interesting...huh?