

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.

What Can We Bring to Offer?

Bob's Perspective:

For various and sundry reasons, I recently went to Sunday Mass at a parish which I don't normally attend. It was an early morning Mass and fairly well attended. The Assembly participated well, both in response and singing. However, from an artistic standpoint, the music lacked terribly. I struggled through praying and singing, trying very hard to not be distracted or judgmental – and I admittedly had a rough time.

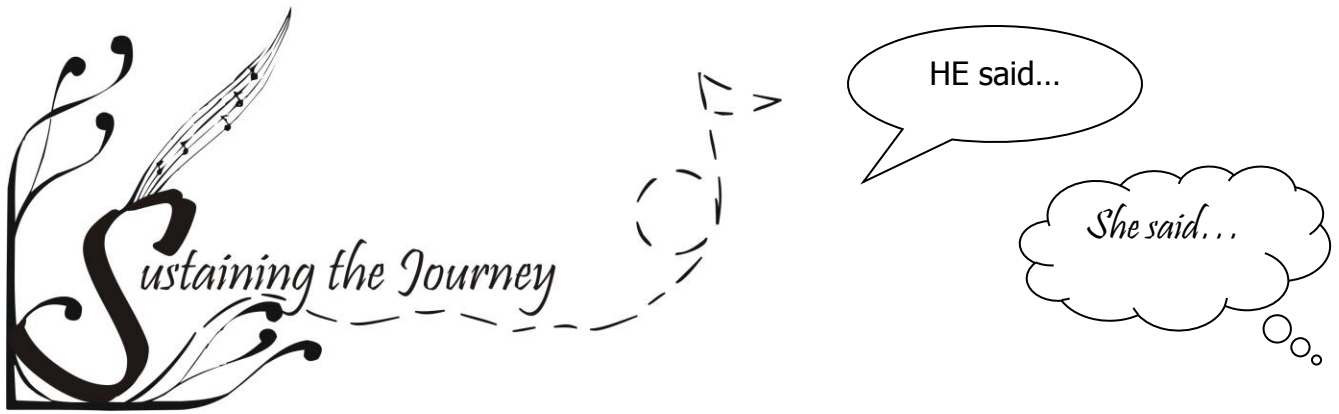
So I prayed, asking our Lord to give me something to help me get through this “ordeal.” In his usual fashion he answered me. You think I would know better by now, because when things like this occur, I usually don't get the answers for which I'm looking. This case was no exception.

My Dad always used to say, “If you want to make God laugh, just tell him your plans.”

Two scripture passages (neither of which had anything to do with this particular Sunday's proclamations) came careening into my mind:

1. *The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.'*
(Luke 18:11-12)
2. *He [Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, “Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.”*
(Mark 12:41-44)

Many times, we don't know the circumstances that surround an event – and being judgmental comes very easy.



The music at this particular Mass was executed by two older people, not elderly, but certainly in their sunset years. I have no idea as to whether they prepared in advance, how much effort they put into rehearsal, or how much supervision they were afforded in their preparation. It could also have been that they weren't scheduled to be there and were "pinch hitting" for someone else. It also stands to reason that too not many musicians would be banging down the doors to play that early on a Sunday morning. Maybe (just maybe) the music they presented was all they had to offer (their livelihood v. their surplus).

My thoughts turned to my own Music Ministry. Over the years we have been very blessed to have developed a number of strong musicians and singers, but that wasn't always the case. Sometimes our Assembly had to endure a few "rough spots and bumps in the road" in order to afford the necessary room for growth of our future leaders.

My thoughts turned to myself (O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest...yeah, right!). As I learned and grew in my younger years, I'm fairly sure that some executions of music at Sunday Mass may have also been executions of some others' ears and sensibilities. Even now, I am usually very well prepared for the Masses on the weekend, but there are those occasions when (for various reasons) rehearsal time comes up short. In those cases, I read and play well enough to make music presentable, but in my own heart I know that I could have (or should have) done better. In other words, I didn't necessarily give God or our Assembly my very best in those moments (my surplus vs. my livelihood).

I think that I can confidently say, "I'm sure I don't stand alone among any of us in this regard." We've all had music moments that we wish could have been edited out of the final cut. We're all human and sometimes life just happens.

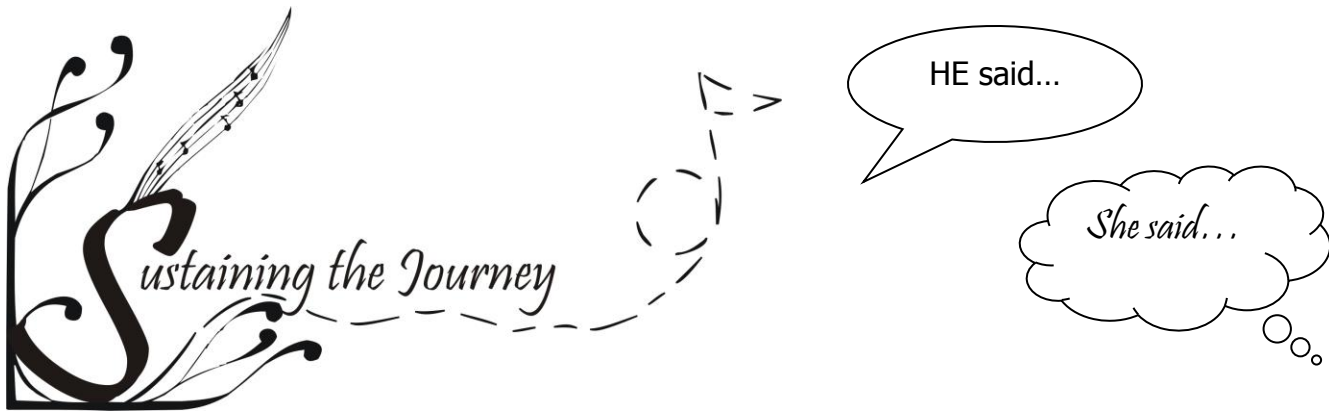
Maybe that was the case at the Mass I attended – maybe stuff just happened.

So, what's the difference between two people who gave it their best (their livelihood) and we who have much and don't always give it (our surplus)?

Hmmmm.

Mary's Perspective:

"Being judgmental comes very easy." I don't always agree with Bob, but on this one I think he blew it out of the park. We perceive others judging us, we get defensive, we judge them back, and there is tension that can be debilitating – often over a nonexistent issue. If others' opinions cause us to pause and reflect,



perhaps even adjust our ways, then that can be a helpful part of living an intentional life. For example, although it took him a while to come around, Bob's impression of the music at that particular Mass gave him reason to evaluate his own efforts. In this instance, the judgment was the catalyst for recommitting to giving his best in ministry.

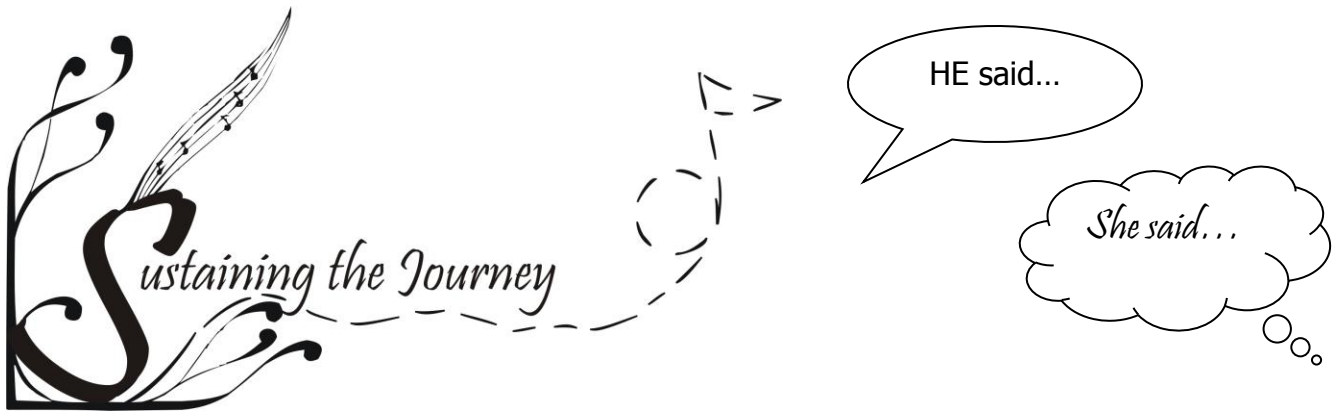
As a professional musician, folks freely offer me their opinions (judgments), both good and bad. Among other ministers, we laugh that you can play a Mass and someone will say it was too loud, another will say it was too reserved, another will say you sing too much Latin, another will say you don't sing enough Latin, etc. – all at the same Mass! Just in the last week, I've received very affirming comments, but also critiques that I don't do any Aretha Franklin (need to invigorate the music), we don't have enough members in our choir, and I should probably be looking for another job. The reality, I suspect, lies somewhere in the middle.

Perhaps my glass is erroneously half-full, but I believe for the most part that Church Music Ministers are doing their best (even the two older folks who accompanied the Mass that Bob attended). Recognizing they come from different backgrounds, different skill levels, and different formation, sometimes one's best falls a little flat (pardon the music pun!). Sometimes our impression of our own abilities could use some deflating. But in general, those that work in the Church are there for the love of God and the service of others.

I recently read a sign that stated "Comparison is the thief of joy." How true! If we keep comparing ourselves to others, we will often fall short of some perceived level of quality. I'll never be as thin as ___, or I'm not as good a musician as ___, or as strong as ___ or as *(fill in the blank)* as *(someone else)*. If we compare others to ourselves, we definitely run the risk of an overinflated ego. For example, those musicians picked that for the Communion song? What were they thinking? I have so much more insight... It seems to me that the end result of any of these comparisons is frustration, pride, arrogance, and generally not much positive. Certainly not joy.

So where is this all leading? I'm one for concrete strategies, so I will offer some suggestions...

First, if this line of thinking causes you to nod your head, good! Take the time to evaluate your commitment, your investment in ministry, and whether you are giving of your livelihood or just your surplus. Not in comparison to others, but an honest assessment of your own self. If adjustments are called for, make the change to do better.



If you believe you're doing a great job (perhaps you are), you might still consider feedback from neutral parties. As a choir member, you might ask the choir director for some guidance on ways to improve your ministry. If you are a paid staff member, solicit input from colleagues on your strengths and areas of challenge. RECORD YOURSELF. There is nothing more dispassionate (and sometimes eye-opening) than hearing a recording from when you were in the midst of ministry. I recently played back a recording of some music that a group of friends did a number of months ago. I look back on that event warmly, feeling like we did a really good job. As I listen now, I can hear many areas where the blend wasn't as pleasing, or notes/diction/timing weren't as tight as perhaps I thought they were. Was I giving my best, or feeling over-confident, showy, and forgetting the ministry part of music?

By now, most church activities are ramping up again, and we have opportunity to regularly participate in a variety of ways. Will you sit back, let others do the work, and judge? Will you give of yourself when it's convenient or only at times when others will appreciate your obvious skills? Or will you put in the effort to give of your "first fruits" – giving your best to God?