

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.

Progressive Desensitization

Mary's Perspective:

On November 1, I got in my car and started my usual Sunday morning drive before dawn. After backing out of the garage, I flipped on the radio. The station – broadcasting contemporary Christian music – was playing CHRISTMAS CAROLS.

Sidebar... at that point I thanked God that I had already backed out of the garage, or I might have made it a drive-thru...

At first, I thought it was a joke – some sick, not funny, strangely humored joke. When “O Holy Night” was complete, the song, “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” came on. At that point, I realized the selection of music was intentional. I believe I literally spoke out loud... REALLY?

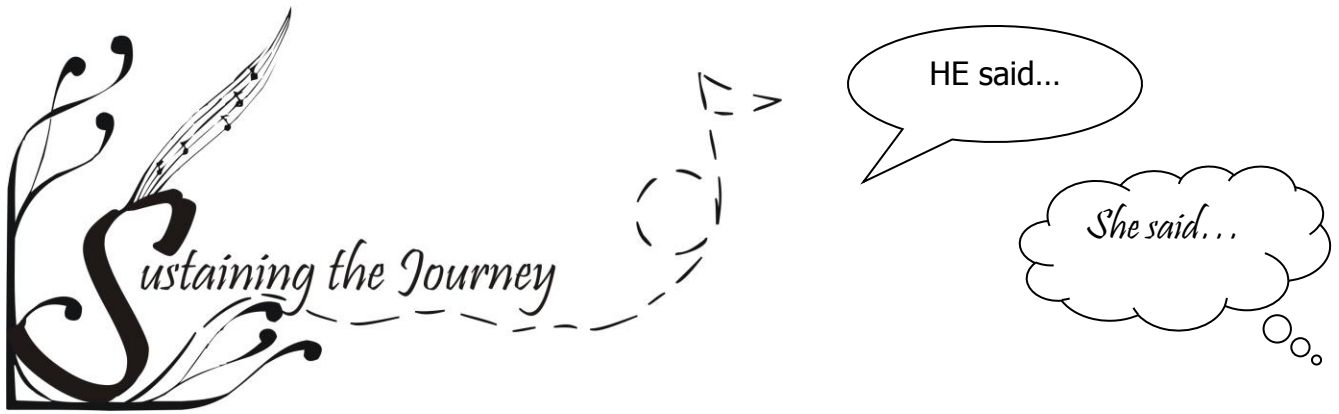
As I was about to turn it off, a commercial came on. In the background sang the refrain, “we need a little Christmas...” and the announcer said that in these extraordinary times, we all need a little hope – the hope that comes with the joy of Christmas. Okay, so I suppose it wasn’t a cruel joke but rather a well-intentioned (though, in my opinion, ill-timed) sentiment.

That got me to thinking... I bet there was some meeting of minds behind closed doors (or in Zoom windows) having a debate about when the Christmas music should start being played. Given it’s a Christian radio station, it even occurred to me that perhaps the meeting participants were vaguely aware that Christmas in churches is going to look very different this year. For the health and safety of all, we really should NOT be singing communally – at all – so that means no rousing congregational rendition of “Silent Night.”

Perhaps those in the meeting thought the idea of Christmas Eve Mass without singing “Silent Night” was too much to bear. Perhaps they wanted to help folks get accustomed to it by playing Christmas tunes so frequently that by December 25, we were sick of them. Progressive desensitization, if you will.

Like I said, well-intentioned.

I think we face progressive desensitization in many aspects of life without even realizing it. For example, I want to lose weight. The idea of eliminating carbs is more than I can bear – I never met a bread I didn’t like! However, about two years ago, I made the decision that, whenever I stop for fast food, I would not order fries.



I didn't stop getting fast food; I just didn't get fries with it. Little by little, I stopped missing the fries. Actually, now I find them to be too salty.

Another sidebar... when Bob and I discussed this, he reminded me that, when we've gone out for fast food together, I haven't ordered fries – but I have eaten his... Touché. It's not a foolproof plan.

That decision to avoid ordering fries desensitized me to the desire for fast food. I still stop at a drive-thru occasionally, but my frequency has declined. If you had told me a couple years ago that I wasn't going to want fast food very often, I would have laughed. Of course, if you had told me a couple of years ago that I would actually be able to make the numbers on the scale go down, I also would have laughed – but today I'm wearing a skirt that hasn't fit in five years!

What's the point? I think progressive desensitization is a technique that we can use in our favor. If anyone told you a couple years ago that a time would come in the near future where you wouldn't consider entering a store or a restaurant without wearing a mask, you might also have laughed. Now, it's commonplace. The transition may have felt painful – it's a hassle to remember and annoying to always have a face covering – but little by little we did it, and now it's the norm.

The holidays are going to feel very different this year. We know of many families who are forgoing their traditional family parties at Thanksgiving in favor of smaller, socially-distanced gatherings. Those of us in liturgical ministry are being challenged to “think outside of the box” when it comes to how we approach music and crowds at Mass. And yes, Christmas without robustly singing “Silent Night” will be just weird. Maybe that radio station wasn't so dumb after all. Maybe if we consider how to adapt our customs, immerse ourselves in those adapted traditions, and find new ways to make happy memories, we will be desensitized to the potential pain of holidays amidst pandemic.

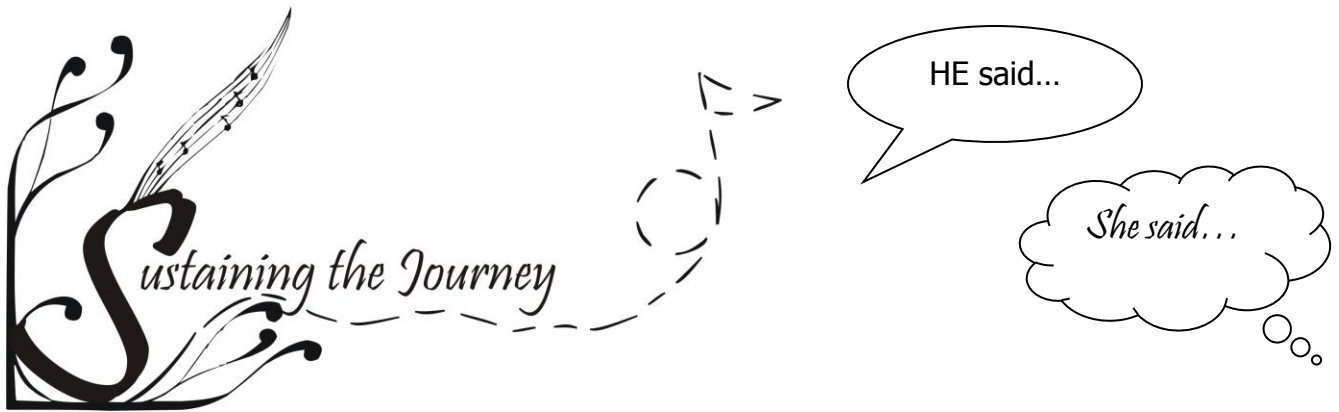
Maybe listening to “O Holy Night” on the radio on November 1 is the first step.

Maybe.

Bob's Perspective:

Progressive desensitization is very insidious by its nature. Most times it goes unnoticed until we look back to the past and then compare it with the here and now. How many times have we sat back, scratched our heads and thought (in a variety of situations), “How did I (we) get here?”

For example, at the end of a busy day, I enjoy kicking back and watching vintage television programs (*Laugh In*, *The Smothers Brothers* and the like). At the times of their origin, both shows in particular battled the network censors on a weekly basis. As a matter of fact, the Smothers Brothers were eventually taken off the air



because of censorship problems. At this juncture, I was in my teenage years. I liked both shows back then because of their edginess. Today, I think that both shows (in reruns) are incredibly mild compared to many that are produced today.

Other shows that I enjoyed back then (and revisit in reruns often) are *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons* and *Sanford and Son*. These and many more were produced by Norman Lear. The shows dealt with a variety of social issues. Through the art of comedy, they brought many controversial issues to our attention – giving us much reason to reflect, and challenging us to grow. Many times, these shows dealt with subjects like racism, sexuality, war and drug/alcohol addiction. They were all effective in getting their points across – both pro and con. The shows made many uncomfortable, but they helped people in humorous and civil ways to converse and slowly move toward at least some kind of resolution. I know many people who stood on opposite sides of the fence but laughed together at the same jokes. They may not have solved the world’s problems, but certainly brought healing and resolve to their microcosms. As Lau Tsu said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

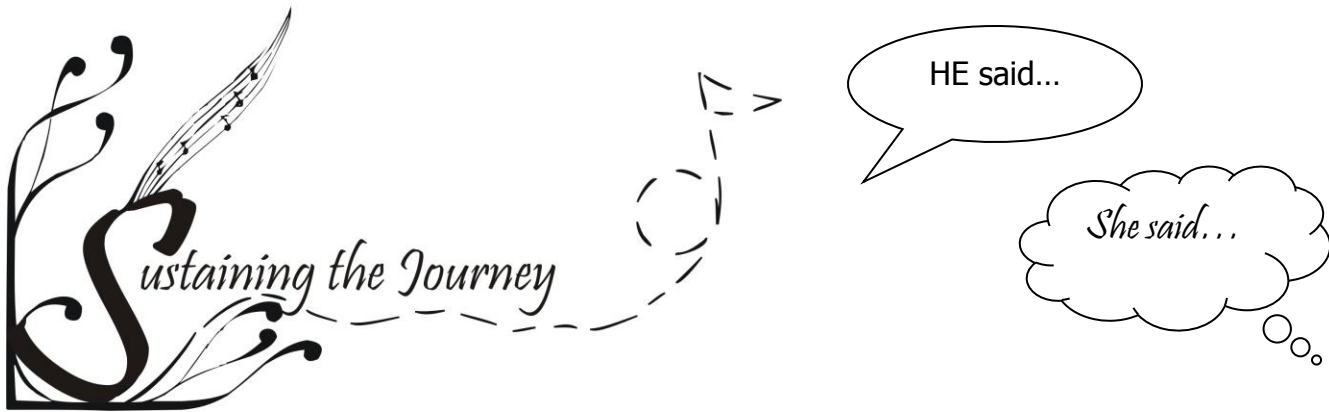
The thing I find most interesting is that they were considered “Liberal shows” back in the day. Through a little research and conversation, many Liberals are now appalled by such programs. By today’s standards, both actors and script writers would be fired and black-listed for their opinions and use of “insensitive” language. As a matter of fact, in today’s world, many of us would be summarily dismissed from our positions at work or in ministry if we even quoted some of the lines – or made fun of certain situations.

The first step in any healing process is conversation and tolerance for opinions (not necessarily agreement).

Progressive desensitization.

Family-wise, I had a number of aunts and uncles. Many of them are no longer with us (I’m in my mid-sixties). My parents also had a number of cousins (my second cousins), all of whom were significantly older than myself. Out of respect, I always addressed them all as “Uncle” or “Aunt.” I would never even dream of calling them by their first names. It was (and still is) a sign of respect for age and authority. To this day, I still address them (or refer to them) as such.

At the parish in which I minister, I still address the priests as “Father,” the nuns as “Sister,” and our elder parishioners as “Sir” or “Ma’am.” The elder parishioners with whom I have closer relationships I refer to as Mr. or Miss(es) with either first or last name (for example, “Mr. Smith” or “Mr. Joe,” “Miss Sally” or “Mrs. Jones,” etc). They’ve paid their dues and deserve that much respect.



The first step in social breakdown is the lack of respect for family and elders.

Progressive desensitization.

If I were to allow it, this article could go on for pages...maybe even a whole book!

So my point is, maybe we as a society should stop worrying so much about symptoms and take more time to look at causes. Maybe we're biting off more than we can chew. Instead of getting into verbal brawls over racism and politics, maybe we should just treat those around us with a little more respect. Back in the day, neighbors watched out for each other. It truly took a village to raise a child. My parents rarely defended me to a teacher or a neighbor. They all stuck together – and for the vast majority of time, rightly so.

Rather than concern myself with what everyone (or anyone) around me thinks or does, maybe I should just center on what I believe – and how I act in accordance.

Instead of worrying about global warming and ecology, maybe I should just be a little more mindful about my daily activities (clean up after myself, turn off the lights when I leave a room, walk when I'm able to do so instead of drive, etc.). At one time in my life, the rules were: if you open it, close it; if you break it, fix it (or replace it); if you take it out, put it away; if you turn it on, turn it off. Rather than mindlessly discarding something, try to find another use for it. Mend what can be mended, fix what can be fixed, reuse what can be reused. Live within your means, make do with what you have. (Back then, we didn't have \$1000 monthly credit card bills either!)

Finally, hate the sin, but don't forget to LOVE the sinner.

Progressive desensitization.