

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.

Financial Survival of the Church

Mary's perspective:

Starting a reflection by reminiscing about "the good old days" makes me feel terribly old. However, permit me to indulge for just a moment. In the baby boomer time of the Catholic church, parochial schools were expanding exponentially. Classrooms were full, there were multiple rooms of each grade, and the schools were primarily staffed by an order of sisters. The nuns provided an essentially free labor force, allowing for very reasonable tuition costs and churches that could financially manage both parish and school. In addition, the pews were full. Families went to church together, every weekend, in their Sunday best. Offertory collections were significantly higher because (as my teenagers would say) tithing was a "thing". There were enough people to warrant building expansions and enough in the coffers to facilitate renovations.

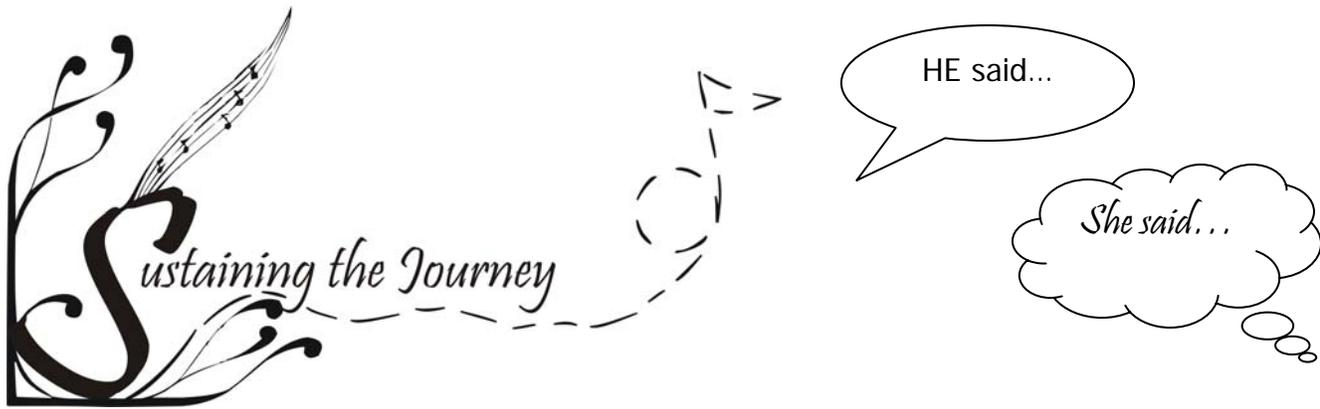
Fast forward to today... The free labor force no longer exists - many parishes have no nuns at all. Very few parochial schools can afford to pay teachers a reasonable (let alone competitive) wage and the cost of educating pupils raises tuition to levels out of reach for the average family. In order to get some relief in the form of state subsidies, parochial schools have opened their doors to students of other faiths. It is no longer the assumption that school students will see each other at Mass on the weekend.

Nearly across the board in our diocese, attendance at weekend liturgy is significantly lower, to the levels that many parishes have rearranged their schedule to eliminate mass times. Priest attrition has contributed to the reality that parishes that once had three or four priests are now managing with a single pastor, or even multiple parishes sharing a pastor. The 50- and 60-year parishioners who helped build the church are now facing health challenges, fixed income, and inability to regularly support the parish. We experience fewer younger families attending, and they generally do not provide the same level of financial support as their predecessors.

So what's a parish to do?

Many (if not all) churches turn to fundraisers to replace the lost collections. Night at the Races, Festivals, Chinese Auctions and the like are common. However, there is significant risk in planning a budget that relies on fundraisers. Is it true that "if you feed them they will come"? Or, more importantly, are they not coming because we're not feeding them?

My first observation is that we need to evaluate dispassionately how well we feed them. I think of the movie *Field of Dreams... if you build it, they will come*. For those who have read the book *Rebuilt*, by Michael White and Tom Corcoran, their whole concept was to learn from thriving mega-churches how to feed people - and so they grew. How well do we feed people?



Next, I believe we need to think outside of the box. Whatever the reason, if we don't have sufficient support of the assembly to maintain the facilities and services we provide, how else do we fund them? Perhaps corporate sponsorship? Grass-roots evangelization? A different mindset and approach? If I had the answers, I wouldn't be facing yet another season of festivals and fundraisers! But it bears more thought... Fundraisers aren't the answer. People support what they believe in, what returns to them perceived value, and what makes them feel connected. How do we feed them?

Bob's Perspective:

The Church already deals with corporate sponsorship of sorts. Most weekend bulletins are loaded with business ads, which contribute to the printing and distribution. Local businesses support the calendar, the festival, and other parish activities. However, when it comes to the Liturgy, I would be leery of taking that to the next step. I can hear it now: "Our Entrance Chant is brought to you by 'Al's Automotive Supplies.' Let us raise our voices, singing 'We Are Many Parts.'" - OR- "Our Offertory Chant is sponsored by the Internal Revenue Service. Let us joyfully sing, 'Take Our Bread.'" I shudder to think where the commercials for the local bakery or winery would go.

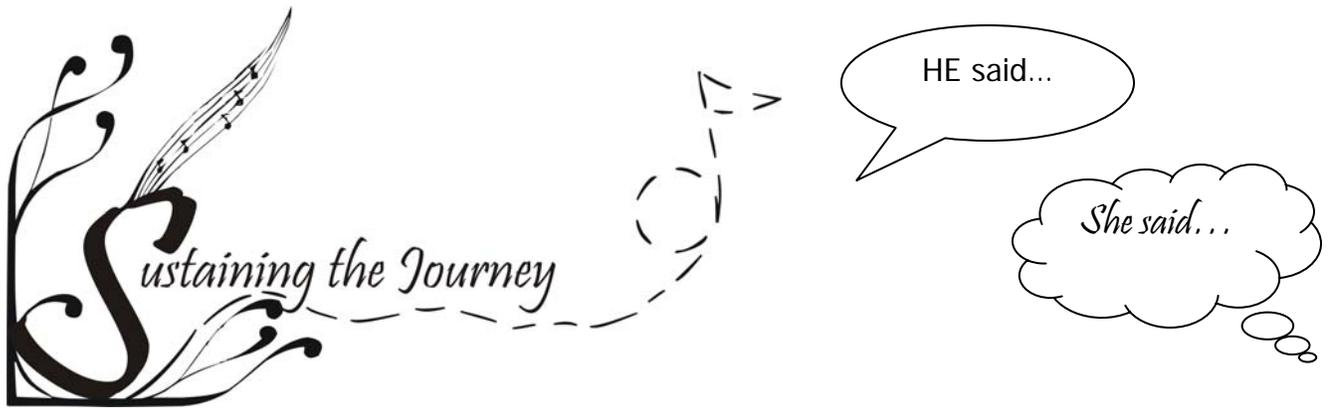
OK, let's switch gears. As the Pastor and I walked across the parking lot toward Church last weekend, we noted that the parking lot was fairly populated (as with most Sundays). However, when we entered the Church, we were somewhat stunned that the attendance didn't seem to match the number of cars. As we thought about it, he concluded that although there are quite a few cars, they bring a lot less people.

That's a fair observation. Growing up, I hardly knew of any family in our neighborhood that had less than 3 or 4 children in their immediate family. Now, I hardly know a family that has more than 2 children. Our numbers aren't necessarily dwindling because of the lack of faith or commitment. Much of the attrition is due to the lack of people. In a parish that boasted 20 to 25 weddings per year (April through October), it's more common for us to now have 5 or 6 in the same time period. Of those, a significant number of them are older couples (late 20's to early 30's) as opposed to much younger as in years back. In addition, many couples are just not getting married – and so not raising their families in the Church. This also accounts for a lack in the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

So, how does the Church financially survive? In the short term, fundraising in various sorts and degrees is obviously necessary, though somewhat distasteful. The truth is, if we tap into the same well over and over, it will eventually dry up. The solution therefore has two possible courses. We either need to consolidate our assets or we need to broaden our base of support. I personally like the latter approach.

Assets can only be consolidated to a certain level before losing efficiency and effectiveness. Broadening the base can supply a virtually unlimited resource pool.

In years gone by, the neighborhood parish was much more than just a place to go to church and/or school. It was the center of most neighborhood activity. It pulled people together in the social realm, not just with a festival or one-time event. Rather, it was where people gathered for all sorts of things – dealing with the parish issues as well as with the concerns of the neighborhood community. People worked together for the betterment of all. It was that sense of



ownership and pride that led them to be fiscally responsible for the support of their parish. Giving to the Church wasn't just an afterthought – it was a line item in the family budget – and an investment in their community.

Evangelizing isn't just about bringing converts into the Church. It's also about bringing in those who have strayed away. Programs like Alpha and Catholics Come Home can be a good place to supplement parish evangelization efforts. But the best way is personal invitation. Just think about this for a moment. If every person in the pew would bring just one person with them to Church, the number in attendance would be doubled. If even 20% of those invited decided to help financially support the parish through weekend contributions...