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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.

## Embraceable Moments

*Mary's Perspective:*

Prior to writing a blog, I often peruse our last few entries to make sure I'm not repeating myself (apparently that happens when one ages), and also to see how our journey has progressed. As I reread [our last blog](#), I was very drawn to the concepts of mission and purpose. First, let me "set the scene"...

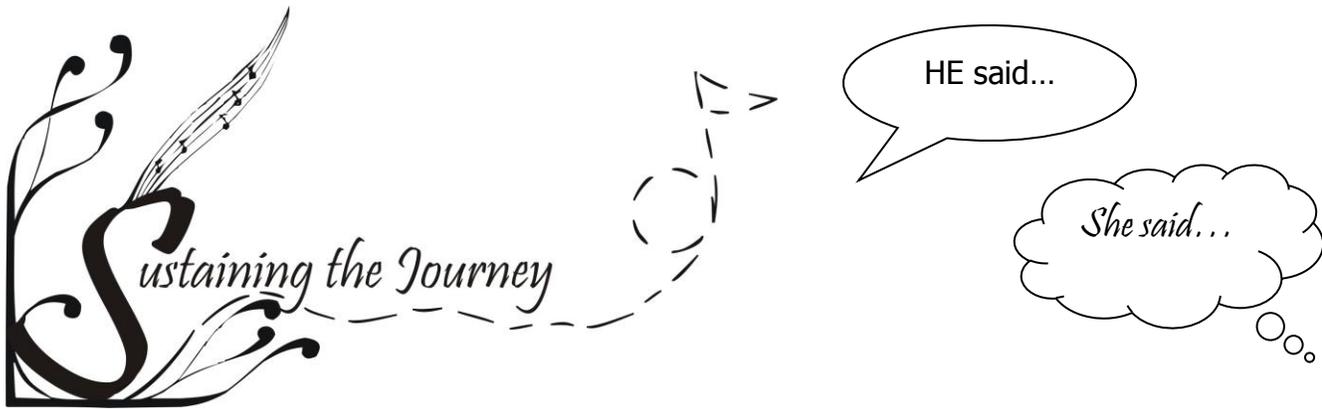
This past week, I attended the national convention of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians (NPM). I've been attending this annual convention for decades now, but this year's was the first "all virtual" event. In some ways, it was phenomenally well done. The team put together some 1,700 hours of online learning, and full registration enables participants to access this continuing education until September. High quality speakers, chat rooms, virtual exhibit hall, concerts, and daily Zoom meetings with NPM staffers made it a well-rounded experience. And, though I definitely will continue "attending" over the next month, I diligently treated the week like a typical convention, viewing sessions from 7am to 10pm most days. (Thank God for friends who know when you need a break and a brownie.) I learned a lot.

However, the missing link was palpable. The energy of the crowd, the networking with others, and those moments of interaction that sometimes change the trajectory of one's ministry were just *gone*. Rather than walking with friends from hotel to convention hall, or re-hashing sessions over lunch at an outdoor café, the sum total of my walking for the week was the trek from couch to bathroom. While my knees might be appreciating the break, my brain, heart, and soul have been sorely lacking.

I think my experience this week was like a microcosm of our collective experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the "new normal" has encouraged some positive habits, I think we are all most missing the embraceable moments. All major celebrations – whether Sunday Mass, or weddings, or funerals, or even a baby shower – are tinged with restraint. We want to comfort the dying but can only do so through the window. Pastors want to reach the flock, but are limited to livestreaming or emails or outdoor prayer with plenty of distance. Choir members miss Thursday night practices and greeting their buddies with a squeeze. Perhaps the most gut-wrenching is nursing homes, where our most vulnerable aren't even allowed to spend what could be their last few months with family. A friend confided this weekend, "Video chatting is nice, but I just want to hug my mom." Embraceable moments.

I was very grateful for the opportunity to participate in the convention, but I absolutely missed the embraceable moments. Once again, I am challenged to re-frame my thinking. (Seems I say that a lot lately.) A blessing of the virtual convention is the opportunity to repeat sessions, or watch a webinar again. There are several of the breakouts that I intend to view again, perhaps with pen and paper to take more diligent notes. And the NPM staff has been generous with access, encouraging members to host a virtual meeting and "screen share" with others who might benefit from some of the sessions. For now, I'll share two take-aways from last week.

First, Grayson Warren Brown talked about baptism. His analogy was to that of a teacher. If one considers a teacher's career, there are some good benefits: two months off in the summer, paid holidays, and thanks to some union



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contracts, decent pay. However, if you survey college students preparing to become teachers and ask them why they want to become teachers, their answers may vary:

*"I had a teacher who believed in me, and showed me I can do anything. I want to pay it forward."*

*"There is that incredible moment when a student has been struggling, and the light bulb goes off and they conquer what once was a challenge. I want to facilitate those light bulb moments."*

*"I believe education is the key to empowering the downtrodden to improve their life situation, and I want to be part of that solution."*

*"Salary is good, I get weekends and holidays off with pay, and two whole months off every summer!"*

Grayson suggested that the most successful teachers would be the ones who are in it to help improve lives. In other terms, the ones who are in it for the purpose, not the benefits. He then asked, why do you want to be baptized? If you're only in it to make sure you get to heaven, or so that you can call on St. Anthony when you lose your keys, then you're simply looking for the benefits. But baptism is a call to be part of the mission – to see Jesus in others' faces, and to help them to know Jesus and see Him in others, too. Once you know Jesus and love him, your behaviors change to reflect that relationship.

The other take-away I'll share came from a presenter from right here in Cleveland. Fr. Tom Dragga did an excellent session on utilizing technology in ministry – focusing on best practices of livestreaming and/or recording liturgy and other worship opportunities. One of the nuggets he shared was a reminder that we are a people of hope. We ourselves need to recognize the hope that comes with our Christianity, which stretches far beyond lockdowns and masks and social distancing. And then we have a responsibility to be bringers of that hope in the world.

So what does that look like for you and me? First of all, if we've fallen into the trap of focusing on the benefits instead of the mission, perhaps we need a clear-headed self-evaluation to discern what's next. That may help pull us out of wallowing on what we've lost in this pandemic. Amidst that discernment, perhaps we must remind ourselves of where we find hope. And then, wrapping those two together... If we are unable to partake in the embraceable moments, how do we become bearers of hope?

*Bob's Perspective:*

If I were offer another title for this blog, I would call it, "Missing the Embraceable Moments."

My mother-in-law lives in assisted living and my father-in-law (her husband) lives across the street from her in a nursing facility. Other than a daily half-hour Zoom meeting (only 5 days a week, no weekends), they haven't been together since the beginning of March. Health-wise, Mom is doing well. Dad, on the other hand, has dementia – confused, sad and lonesome for his family. On their behalf, the staff at the nursing facility does very well to accommodate him with comfort and care – but understandably it's not the same as his family.

My siblings-in-law and I join (at least once a week) in Zoom meetings with Mom and Dad. Sometimes I'm not sure if that's helpful or not. While Dad's happy (in various degrees depending on how he's doing that day) to see everyone, I



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sometimes think that our presence on camera reinforces his need for physical presence, making him feel even more sad and lonely. I'm at a loss as to whether there are any viable solutions to this dilemma.

Some months ago, one of my sisters-in-law lost her husband to a multitude of complications induced by Covid-19. He was in the hospital for approximately one month. Soon after being admitted he lapsed into a coma, never to come around. Because of pandemic precautions, she wasn't able to personally be with him in the hospital, other than seeing him on a webcam. This makes me think back to five years ago, when my wife (her sister) was in her last days of battling cancer. I was able to stay in the hospice room with her – night and day. I held her in my arms as she breathed her last – I heard her last breath and felt her last heartbeat. I thank God every day for that moment in time, and I can't even begin to imagine how painful the separation of my sister-in-law or my parents-in-law must truly be. As a Lay Ecclesial Minister, I've seen this played out by our parishioners a number of times during the "Year of the Mask." It's heartbreaking.

This past week as more people are now allowed to gather together, my sister-in-law arranged to have a Funeral Mass said for her husband, followed by a military burial at our local National Cemetery. Because of pandemic conditions, our Diocese "strongly discourages" the use of congregational singing at this time. I think this to be a very wise choice. The Funeral Mass (from an artistic and prayerful stand point) was beautifully done by the Presider and Organist/Song Leader. I'm sure that it brought moments of comfort to those in attendance. For me, while being comforted in some ways, I also felt somewhat isolated when listening to the Responsorial Psalm and acclamations being sung, while I (as part of the Assembly) had to remain silent. It's not that anyone around needed to hear my voice. Rather, it was about not being able (or allowed) to lift my voice to sing our songs of worship. It reminded me of the Babylonian Captivity:

*By the rivers of Babylon there we sat weeping when we remembered Zion.  
On the poplars in its midst we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for the words of a song;  
Our tormentors, for joy: "Sing for us a song of Zion!"  
But how could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)*

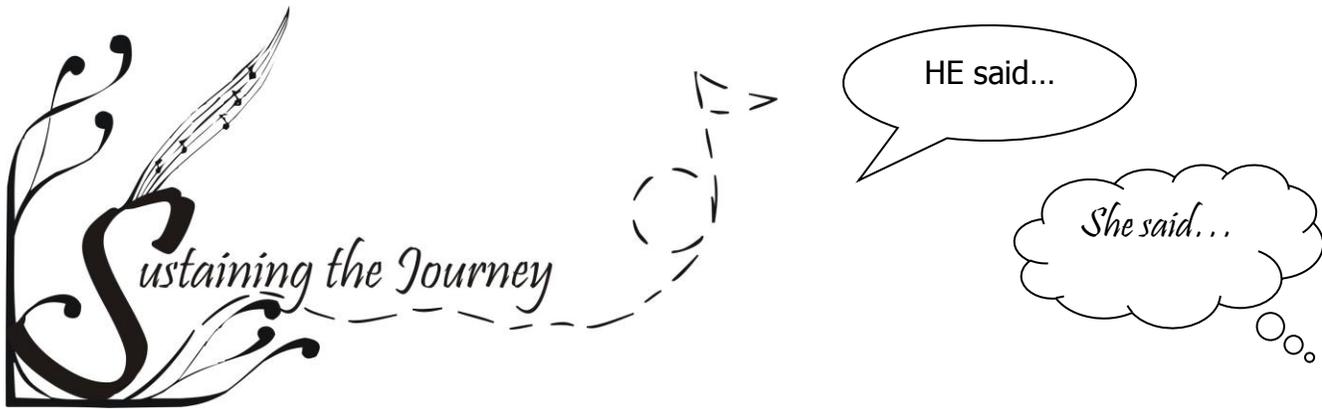
As I sat in the pew, I began to think of my father-in-law. Just as I'm not sure if Zoom meetings are more comforting or more painful to him – I'm not sure if hearing sung music (and not being able to join in) at the funeral was more comforting or more painful to me.

Congregational singing is a hallmark of Catholic worship. As I said, I understand and totally agree with our Diocesan perspective. The safety of our parishioners should be paramount in our concern. To that end, as Music/Liturgy Director of our parish (and with our Pastor's blessing) we have taken on the perspective, "if all of us can't sing, none of us will sing." In this way, we are truly all in this together – we'll lament together, and one day we'll again lift our voices and rejoice together in glorious song.

Missing the Embraceable Moments.

*A final thought from Mary:*

I have reflected quite a bit on Bob's response, and I think one of his most insightful points is that there may not be viable solutions to these dilemmas. And please know that my intent here is not to slam my colleagues, but to offer a broader perspective and some food for thought.



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I keep thinking back to Triduum, when we were not allowed to celebrate in person. Watching live-stream celebrations evoked conflicting emotions: on the one hand, many commented that seeing the familiar environment and hearing the familiar priest's voice was comforting. On the other hand, seeing the priests and deacons participate but the rest of us being relegated to simply watching gave me a strong sense of the elite and privileged "special ones" separated from the "ordinary folks" – and also a sad, isolated, palpable longing, similar to Bob's father-in-law when he can only see his loved ones via Zoom.

In much the same way, when a musician chooses to sing all the parts of the liturgy – including all of the Assembly's parts – one could say the musician is helping fill the words in for them. On the other hand, I believe it also communicates the message that "I'm special and I can do this, but you can't. You're not invited." For so many years, we have embraced and preached full, active, conscious participation, yet this approach suggests the assembly is not needed. The musician and the presider will take care of it all, people parts included. Liturgy is no longer the work of the people, but more like a spectator sport, watching the elite.

The difference between Triduum during lockdown and liturgies now is that many of us now have the option to receive Eucharist, and to participate in person. So while the choice during Triduum was to stream or not to stream, the musician who is now choosing to take the place of the assembly could be perceived as disrespectful to those gathered. It also shows blatant disregard for the directives provided by the hierarchy:

- To paraphrase the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, *the people are to avoid the appearance of singularity or division, keeping in mind that they have only one Father in heaven and that hence all are brothers or sisters to the other.*
- Additionally, the role of the cantor is to *animate the assembly's participation.*
- And, from our diocesan directives, *the goal of full, conscious, and active participation is defeated if the cantor/vocal soloist replaces the congregation.*

These instructions have been made out of respect for the nature of the liturgy and concern for each other – not to be punitive. (The decision to restrict communal singing is based on science, and is mindful of the health of our <mostly aged> population.) I believe simply disregarding these directives out of boredom or a desire to perform is rude. Again, perhaps folks appreciate hearing the singing, and I am in the minority here. But for now, I don't see the viable solutions that spiritually nourish all.

Rather than feel discouraged or petulant, we are definitely challenged to see hope and to be bearers of that hope. The bigger question is how.