

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.

Funerals...What the Heck Are We Doing?

Mary's Perspective:

If the title of this blog suggests exasperation, it should. We write and talk a lot about funerals. Both Bob and I serve aging parishes, and it is common for us to recall 100 members who have died in the past year – funerals are part of our lives. But some days, that begs the question... what are we doing? Allow me to elaborate by sharing a couple of funeral experiences.

Today, we buried "Ray". Ray lived to a ripe old age, having been married 65 years to his high school sweetheart. He was proud of his Polish heritage, a hard worker who grew through the ranks to become a Union president, and raised a lovely family. We have a wonderful bereavement ministry in our parish, and a minister met with Ray's family. They selected music and readings and dutifully answered questions aimed at helping Father prepare a homily that relevantly reflected on both Ray's life and the Sacred Scriptures. The day of the funeral, the mourners – all 20 of them – wore black. They did not respond to any of the prayers. They sat politely while a Polish hymn (chosen by the family in homage to Ray's heritage) was sung. At the end of mass, Ray's friend the Union vice-president gave a eulogy. He shared stories of how he and Ray visited friends and associates and how those folks always knew they had Ray's support, and how important Ray's friendship was to him.

Side bar on eulogies... they do NOT belong in a funeral Mass. Period. IF there are to be "words of reflection", they should relate how the deceased lived the Gospel, and how the Scriptures explain our faith in resurrection. Unfortunately, 99% of the eulogies I have heard (and believe me, I get to hear a lot) revolve around the person speaking...as in "Grandma was so good to ME. She made ME breakfast in bed and I remember when we used to play princesses together. She always said I would be good at helping people and now I'm a nurse..." What about everyone else gathered? What about heaven? What about Jesus?

Let me share another example. I was called and asked to play a funeral at a neighboring church because the regular musician had a doctor's appointment. In this case, the person had died a month back, had been cremated, and the family decided to have "a service" because "Mom would have liked that". When I got there, it turned out to be the funeral of a distant relative. When the cousin saw it was me, she was happy. "Oh, I HOPED you'd play Mom's funeral!" It had never occurred to her to ask the church if I would play - or even to tell the rest of the family of the arrangements. As a matter of fact, they also brought Dad's cremated remains (which had been on the mantel for seven years), with the intent of bringing both to the cemetery after the mass. When the pastor discovered there had never been a funeral for



Dad, we celebrated a double funeral. In this case, the family had not selected any readings or music. One of the four mourners wore a veil because she didn't want to be disrespectful.

What are we doing?

If we really believe what our faith proclaims - that life is changed, not ended - how is it that so many families still think a funeral needs to consist of wearing black, sitting politely, and giving a eulogy at the "service"? Have we done such a poor job communicating this faith?

Bob and I recently spent a week at the national convention of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. For a week, we were amidst some 1,500 people who all believe in the value of sung prayer. We debated how to intentionally engage youth, sampled new music from multiple publishers, and participated in lively discussions on the best ways to implement new music/formation/ministerial outreach. We had opportunity to be inspired and learn from the best in our field, to contemplate high level theological principles and to celebrate prayer in many different forms. There were multiple presentations on implementing technology in worship, as well as high-caliber performance events.

But I keep going back to... what are we doing?

All of that inspiration and formation and education and lively discussions are wonderful - but I'm afraid not rooted in the reality of Sunday-to-Sunday church life. If the people we worship with are still of the mindset that funerals mean wearing black and sitting respectfully and eulogies, then what are we doing?

I actually had a conversation with a fellow minister about the best ways to introduce new funeral music. The argument goes like this... Those who participate in funerals are looking to the music for comfort, and the familiar is comfortable. So, even though there are absolutely beautiful contemporary pieces that express our faith in the life to come, families turn to *Be Not Afraid* and *On Eagles' Wings* over and over because there is comfort in the familiarity. Perhaps that entire conversation was more of a mental exercise. Perhaps we should be focused on how we best communicate our faith so that when mourners gather, they do so not just in grief, but in hope.

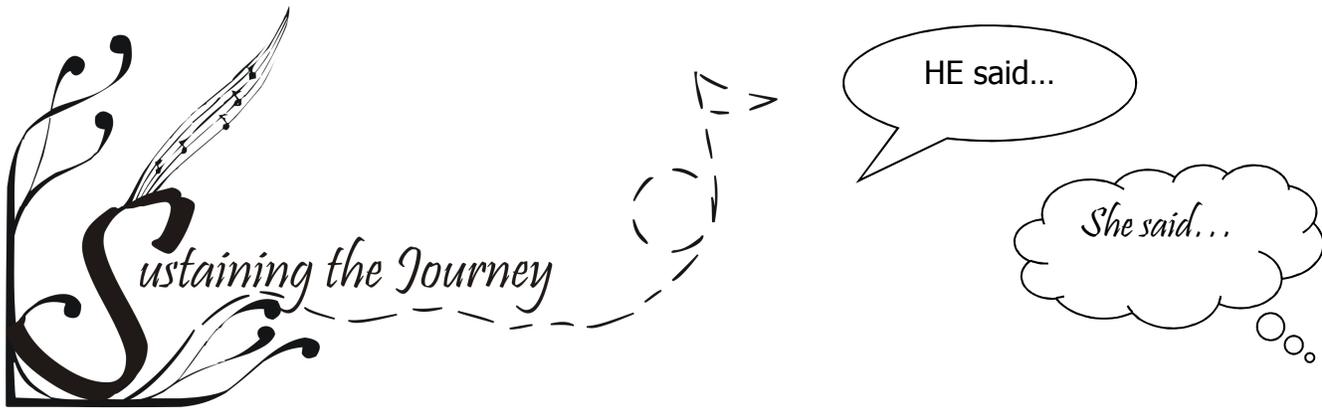
But then that begs a bigger question... so many times, the folks that come to church for the funeral are not the ones who gather on Sunday. How do we reach them? How do we share with them that funerals are about a confidence in new life yet to come? How do we move past dressing in black, wearing veils, watching respectfully and spouting eulogies, to the true substance of faith? How do we connect ritual with comfort? How do we change expectations when we don't even reach folks to understand their expectations?

What the heck are we doing?

Bob's Perspective:

I think that Mary is right on the money with this one. The dilemma here is separating (or maybe integrating) religion, faith and emotion. It seems in many cases that the attitude is:

“Yes, I know what the Church teaches, but *this* is what I’m feeling.”



“I know that a eulogy doesn’t belong in the Mass, but Uncle Ted really knows how to tell a story and he makes us laugh.”

“I like the songs we sing on Sunday, but ‘Wind Beneath My Wings’ is so pretty.”

“I know that Dad’s life was centered in his faith. We don’t get to Church very often, so is it ok if can we just...?”

It seems to me that there is a huge disconnect between religion, faith and emotion. The tough part of planning a funeral is that’s how many people live their lives (maybe through no fault of their own) – so we are caught between Catholic doctrine, liturgical rubrics and the emotions of the moment. The ‘subject’ of religion is taught well in our schools and maybe in our families as well. However, religion is more than a subject or an academic endeavor. Religion helps to guide and form our faith. Faith is much more than just knowing the answers to the questions. It’s about digging deep down inside ourselves. It’s about conversion. It’s about an emotional relationship with our Creator.

Again, the Church (that’s ALL of us) needs to find better ways of crossing that bridge, and helping others to do the same. We tend to let our focus drift to satisfying the “expectations” of society, rather than to grow out of that shell into a more wholesome state of being.

Unlike weddings where there is usually plenty of time to catechize people along the way, funerals are much more difficult because of the immediacy of connecting an emotionally traumatic incident with the ritual actions that need to occur within a short period of time. This compounds itself when the death of a loved one comes quickly or unexpectedly.

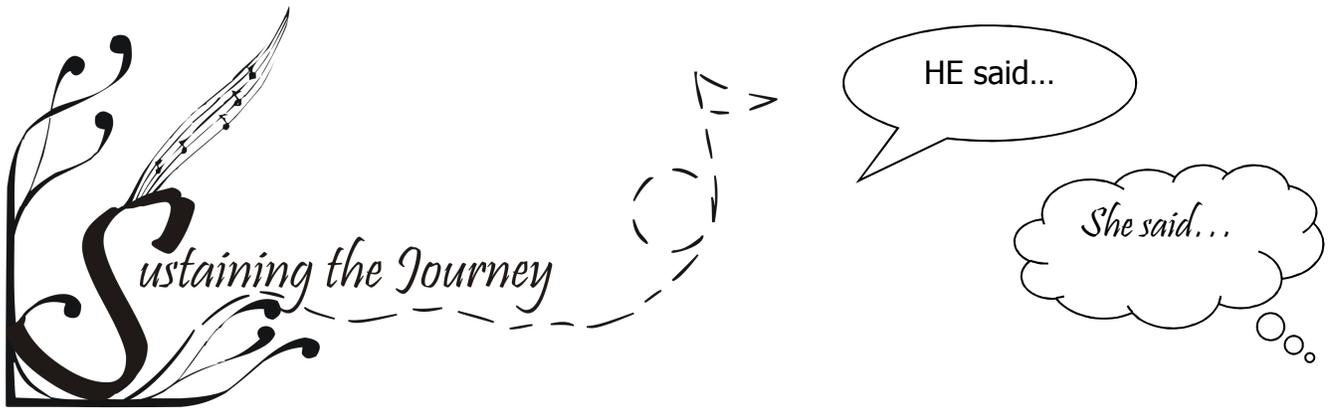
While I think that there are no simple solutions, I would suggest that preplanning funeral liturgies would at least help to alleviate this tension. Offering funeral planning sessions (or classes if you will), especially in a group setting would provide time to catechize (when emotions are less charged), let people ask questions, and offer musical suggestions and insights that might otherwise not be as well received. This process would also allow people to take their time in choosing scripture readings and music, rather than getting something down on paper now because it’s good enough and the funeral is tomorrow.

To echo Mary’s sentiment: “What the heck are we doing?”

Mary’s perspective

So this is more of a “She Said – He Said – She Said”, but sometimes the woman needs to have the last word! I wholeheartedly agree with Bob’s analysis that the death of a loved one presents a time of integration of religion, faith, and emotion. Actually, I suspect future blogs will reflect more on this. But back to his suggestion of preplanning funeral liturgies... I offer two thoughts:

- 1) I have participated in several funerals that were pre-planned, and they have been positive experiences. The family felt confident that the ritual expressed the faith of their loved one, and the actual planning process opened doors to conversations that might not have otherwise occurred. The time of planning provided comfort for all involved, by delving into Scripture, considering what music expresses, and knowing that arranging some of the details would not pose a burden at the time of death.



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- 2) If you are in a position of leadership and would like to host a workshop to address funeral planning, call us. (If you'd like to have your church host us, have them call us!) Bob and I have offered a session called "But I'm Not Dead Yet!" multiple times, and it has been very well received. It is fruitful to initiate a conversation that helps integrate religion, faith, and emotion.