

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.

Expectations and Priorities

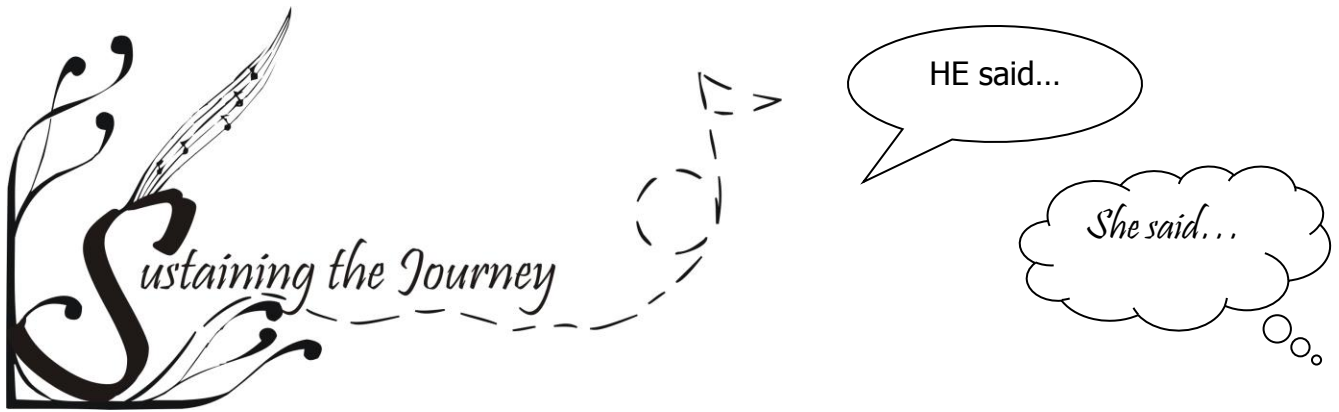
Mary's perspective:

So here's the thing... we've written a lot about being counter-cultural, and how being rooted in Church values, driven by our faith, we don't necessarily mesh with societal expectations. That's true. We also are *called* – not just Bob and Mary, but WE, the collective Body of Christ – are called to MORE. To reach higher. To strive to be better. To learn more, pray more fervently, evangelize and support the other evangelizers. In scriptural terms, to lay down ourselves and pick up the cross, and to be servant.

That is a blessing and a responsibility and, quite frankly, often a challenge. As I attempt to coordinate the liturgical ministry of 200+ volunteers every week, I am painfully aware that each of us respond to this call in varying degrees. There are times when I wish I could change the priorities and values of folks – as I'm sure many feel the same about me! So forgive me if this seems to be a rant, but following are some observations of times when expectations and priorities of the church and its members don't always align...

We have some very faithful members of our music ministry, who serve in the role of Cantor. They've been doing it for years. They understand the parts of the mass and they can typically come in at the right time, on pitch, when cued by the piano or organ. Unfortunately, sometimes with experience comes complacency. "I mean, really, do I need to practice singing Here I Am, Lord again? I got this!" And perhaps you do... or perhaps we've allowed ourselves to become a little sloppy. When the cantor also serves as Psalmist, there is an added responsibility to not only musically prepare, but also to prayerfully prepare. As the accompanist, I can tell immediately the cantor who just spent a couple hours this morning (or yesterday afternoon) plunking out the notes and getting the words in place, as compared to the cantor who prayed this psalm every day this week.

Not picking on cantors, but I'll take this one step further. Not only can I tell when prayer is a regular part of a minister's life, but sometimes the most confident folks are also the ones who could use the most tweaking. Music ministers (myself included) need to be very careful that we don't get too confident about our ministry. I don't know about you, but when I've been singing a piece of music for a while (whether church music, or a



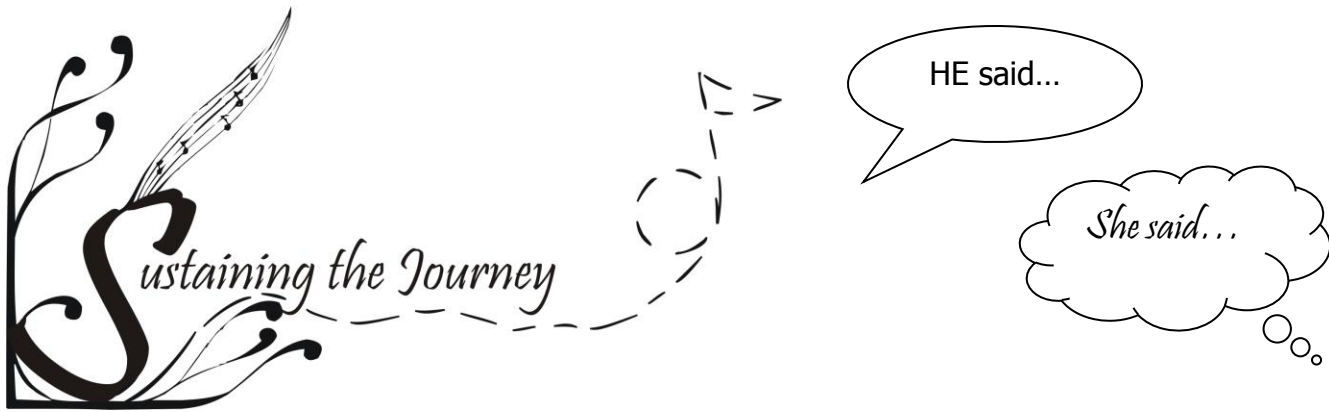
song on the radio), I tend to start adding my own embellishments: a note here, a slur there, hold it out longer here. Maybe a word or two change. It's one thing to do that when singing in the shower or along with the radio in the car – but that's definitely not desired when it comes to sacred music. Most cantors I know would do well to record themselves singing acapella and compare that to a more professional presentation – whether it's recording the music director at cantor practice or searching online. (A word of warning here... if you are one of those folks who prepares for liturgical singing by finding You Tube renditions of the music, you could be setting yourself up for confusion. Artists who put their music online tend to take liberties or add their own touch – which may not be how the music will be used liturgically. If you are going to go the online route, at least listen to the recording provided by the publisher. Much of our liturgical music can be found at www.ocp.org, www.giamusic.com, or www.wlpmusic.com.)

When it comes to prayerful preparation, I would observe that an assembly who prays regularly celebrates better than folks that slide into church during the Gloria, think about their grocery list during the homily, and leave right after communion. The entire liturgy is a big dialog – between God, presider, cantor, and the people. We each have our part, and that means that participation by the assembly is critical! When the music minister sings both the call and the response, it's like telling the people they don't need to be there – similar to telling oneself a knock-knock joke, punch line and all.

Expectations are another big part of church life. Here's a fact: it takes money to have ministry. Yes, we are in the "business" of saving souls, but the reality is things like electricity, heat, a non-leaky roof and a paved parking lot all require financial support. The paid personnel of churches (ordained and lay) comprise probably the largest portion of any church budget. So yes, it is appropriate at least once a year to address finances from the pulpit. Just as your household expenses rise each year, so too the church's liabilities. When was the last time you changed the amount you put in the weekly collection basket?

I overheard a conversation recently between two friends. One was expressing utter frustration because she was engaged to be married and "even though I've been a member here my whole life, Father won't let us get married Saturday at 3:30!" It turns out her limo driver charges by the hour, and so she and her fiancé are trying to cut expenses by making the wedding mass and the reception pretty closely timed. The friend very supportively agreed that Father was being unreasonable, and suggested she find another church.

While I understand that frustration, I suspect the bride did not recognize that most churches offer Confession prior to the vigil Mass. In most cases, that means Father is in the confessional an hour before the 4 or 4:30 Mass – meaning he is not available to be marrying the couple at the same time, nor would the couple have time for photos in the church after their wedding. However, the couple's expectation was that the church should provide services for them within their constraints, because they had been faithful members and were entitled to such respect.



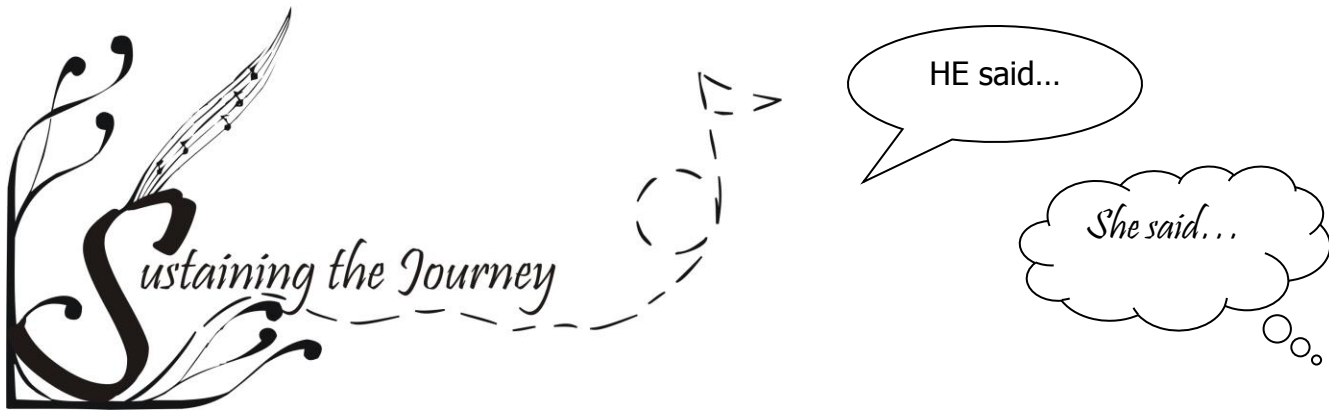
Indulge me in one more example. Back to the volunteers who minister at liturgy. There are typically rules/duties/expectations for each ministerial role. These include the logistics specific to the ministry (i.e., the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion stand here to distribute Eucharist) and also general expectations (dress respectfully and show up 15 minutes prior to the start of Mass). There are a few ministers who believe that, because they are volunteers, the “rules” are more of a guideline, and we (the rest of the members) should be grateful for their service, even if they can’t adhere to the guideline. So, to them, a curtsy or a head bob are close enough to a profound bow when passing the altar. To them, it’s annoying when a coordinator has secured a replacement five minutes prior to the start of mass because that volunteer had a little trouble arriving before Mass started.

I am very grateful for the ministry of all of our volunteers. And I am employed (literally) because of the generous financial support of many of our parishioners. But that doesn’t change the expectations. I believe we are all called to more than just “showing up”. Call it time, talent, and treasure – or tithing – but part of being a follower means sharing in the cost, spreading the Good News, and rolling up your sleeves to help others. It means working at our craft to continuously improve. It means praying – not just in the confines of that parish building, but all day, every day. It means following the directions and caring enough to be better than simply adequate. It means growing, learning, seeking – adjusting priorities to perhaps be counter-cultural, and taking up whatever cross is expected to make you a better disciple. We are called to ditch the societal expectations and heed the baptismal call of servant. How will you respond?

Bob’s perspective:

In terms of our society, our families and the Church, we are often pulled in a number of directions at the same time. I find myself constantly juggling between one task and another or one event and another. Which task has the greater urgency, or which event is more in need of my presence? When is it necessary (or appropriate) for me to take the time to serve my own needs? When is it most necessary to take myself out of the equation and put the needs of others before my own?

In order to fashion a reasonable response to these questions, it seems to me that one would need to have some rules of priority in their lives. In what order of importance do we generally place God, our families, our friends, our jobs and ourselves? Notice that I use the word, “generally.” After the general list is firmed up, the next question to ask is, “are there any absolutes on this list?” In other words, is there any part of this list that is unchangeable? This examination might become quite disconcerting. It’s easy to say that God is at the top of one’s list, but is he really? I’m on vacation, so I can’t (or don’t need to) go to Mass this weekend. I want to sleep in, so somebody else can distribute Holy Communion on Sunday. I don’t have time to practice the Psalm



or a reading, so I'll just 'wing it,' if I show up at all. I was at a party on Saturday night, I just don't feel like getting up this morning.

Of course, there are a multitude of valid reasons for not being able to be at Mass, or to perform a particular ministry from time to time. These however should be the exceptions of our lives and not the norm.

This is an anecdote that I've shared with some before, but I think it bears a second telling. Some years ago, I attended a national convention of the American Guild of Organists. The opening ceremony was held at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland and the address was given by Rev. Peter Gomes of Boston, who was the national chaplain of this organization. His address started off with reading of the story from Genesis about Cain and Abel. I couldn't help but wonder what this had to do with music ministry.

After he finished the reading, he asked those assembled to identify Cain's sin. The consensus: Cain's sin was that he murdered his brother Abel. Rev. Gomes then offered another perspective, a perspective which changed my entire way of thinking about parish ministry. He suggested that Cain's sin was that he gave garbage to God. In the story, Abel's sacrifice was from the best he had to offer, and God found it pleasing and acceptable. On the other hand, Cain's offering was from his leftovers and God rejected it. Cain became jealous and in a fit of rage killed Abel. But it was Cain giving less than his best that caused the whole unfortunate scenario.

Rev. Gomes then made a very pointed statement. He said, "As Ministers, we have no right to our positions, if we only intend to give of our leftovers and not of our best."

Maybe this is a good time to ask ourselves a few questions. Leftovers can be looked at in a number of ways.

1. Do I give God the best of my time, or do I only serve when it's convenient or when I have nothing else to do?
2. Do I pray on a regular basis, or do I only communicate with God when I need something?
3. Do I strive to give God glory, honor and thanksgiving at Mass, or do I show up just to get the job done?
4. Do I receive Communion with focus and intent, or do I just "eat and run?"
5. Do I give God the best of my talent? Do I practice and prepare, or do I just wing it?
6. Do I perceive my role in liturgical ministry as a ministry, or is it just one more thing to do?
7. Do I strive to live a life outside the walls of the Church that is congruent with my ministerial role in the Church – or am I Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?

Am I giving my best, or am I giving garbage? Just sayin'.