

## Stewardship: The Gift of a Lifetime

A frequently repeated conviction of Saint Paul is his understanding of the fact that by God's goodness and grace every person has a fundamental calling in the church, plus multiple gifts and talents ... all of which are for the larger community, not merely for the individual alone. Ultimately each gift is for the Church in the world ... and therefore for the world into which the Church is sent / missioned!

To the Corinthians he wrote that there are many gifts, many varieties of service and many types of work ... each of them a manifestation of the Spirit at work, and "all for the common good" (I Cor 12:7). Some folks, he pointed out, have the capacity to speak wisely, or with great knowledge; others heal or have the capacity to sort things out with clarity. Some are prophets, teachers, philanthropists or simply cheerful goodhearted people (Rom 12:6-8)! Every such ability comes from God and is given to us by God for others. What ever one's profession or occupation, the bundle of talents we have are "for the work of ministry and for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12).

Absolutely everything we have ...basic personality, personal health, family, friendships, faith, interests as well as hobbies and skills ... are on loan from God to be used wisely and generously. Nothing belongs to us alone. Even our mistakes and the things we have learned through bitter experience somehow belong to others too.

Paul's convictions were the conclusion to centuries of Israel's pondering of God's many mighty deeds for the Chosen People. He called them for a purpose.

Adam and Eve were created as a team and commanded to care for the entire earth, together with all the creatures that live upon it (Gen 2:15.20).

Abraham and Sarah were called to be a source and instrument of blessings for all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3).

In the Gospel of John we hear Jesus reminding his disciples at the Last Supper, "As the Father loves me, so I have loved you (John 15:9)." Thinking about that simple but profound statement, we can't help but explore the teaching for its riches. The Father loved Jesus and showed his love by giving him a body with all its natural abilities, the gift of the Holy Spirit's love and truth, a specific moment in time, a particular task within that historical period, colleagues and partners, an obstacle culminating in the cross and final victory. That's how the Father loved Jesus and that is precisely how the Lord loves us as well. Those are all gifts from God to be used wisely and well for others. They ultimately return full circle to join a chorus of praise for God's goodness in conquering sin and death forever. All these fundamental gifts of God's love become the grist for our sense of stewardship. They are to be developed wisely and shared generously. They are to be perfected by our relationship to Christ and in Christ.

A few months ago the Archbishop pointed out the three fundamental characteristics of a good steward: the ability to take stock and to know precisely what is

present (in the human heart, the grace of one's vocation, the pantry, closet, garage or saving account), and the discerning capacity to determine what is still needed to get the job done whatever that may be, and finally the sense of how to use all those opportunities and resources wisely.

A steward is someone who manages life or a household or a business or any communal endeavor. They run families, parishes, villages, businesses and schools. Good stewards know what they have and what they need and how to get the job done.

At baptisms and confirmations we rehearse the fundamentals of our faith in the loving and redeeming Triune God as we pass on that friendship with God to yet another generation. "This is our faith," we say. "This is the faith of the Church and we are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus our Lord." The fundamental concept of stewardship is part of what we pass on to that next generation, and what the Holy Spirit "confirms" in our young adulthood (in the Western Church as contrasted with the East which celebrates all three sacraments of initiation in infancy).

Catechists and youth ministers, therefore, also have a key role in passing on stewardship as part of the faith.

That faith deepens and develops as we mature. The more our lives are permeated by our faith in Christ, our Lord and Savior, the more our lives are interwoven into the mission of the Church, the better stewards we become. Part of normal human growth moves from dependence to independence to interdependence ... and then to dependence again. It presumes a mature move from "mine" to "ours." That's what becoming adult means! The fully mature Christian is one who lives completely "in Christ," making our own his decision to lay down his very life for others!

Parish councils are stewards of the faith in any given local community. Lay leaders selected for the maturity of their faith (not simply as individual voices for a particular constituency ... such as day school parents, cultural minorities or age groups, etc.) working with their pastor and the corporate trustees of the parish community are instruments of sound stewardship. That's what the minutes of every meeting are really all about ... an accounting of stewardship!

Parish annual appeals, the annual Archdiocesan Stewardship Appeal and the special Faith in Our Future Capital Campaign are about much more than fiscal generosity. Every letter should state that clearly. Each event, be it annual or extraordinary, becomes a moment to assess our personal portfolio of blessings for ways to share those gifts more wisely. Perhaps writing a check is the easiest part of the process! We constantly and inevitably need the larger community ... which we call "Church" ... to help us make that inventory.

We can and should remember that these events are truly about more than money! Stewardship encompasses our entire life and everything which contributes to its fullness.

In some mysterious way, everything belongs to everyone, and each of us has the God-given opportunity to take responsibility for making that happen! This is a stewardship which is the gift of a lifetime, and truly catholic!

*- Bishop Richard J. Sklba*