



STEWARDS OF GOD'S GRACE
A PASTORAL REFLECTION



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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

"As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Pt 4:10).

Earlier this year, I published *Returning to Grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist*. In this letter addressed to all the clergy, consecrated women and men, and lay faithful of our Archdiocese, I offered some thoughts on the meaning of the Eucharist and its central place in our lives. I also tried to address in positive, hope-filled ways the challenges we face as we emerge from the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic and the many spiritual, social, physical and financial hardships it imposed on our people, our society and our Church.

All of us—clergy, religious and lay faithful—have a responsibility to invite and encourage our fellow Catholics to return to the grace of the Eucharist. I see this as a stewardship responsibility, an opportunity “to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace” (1 Pt 4:10).

How can we do a better job of inviting Catholics to be more actively engaged in the life of their Church? How can we most effectively teach stewardship as a way of life? How can we who are called to be servant leaders model “best practices” of Christian stewardship in our parishes, schools and archdiocesan ministries?

These and many other questions confront us with a new urgency today. As we seek to “return to grace” by encouraging full participation in our prayer and worship, our celebration of the sacraments, and in the ministries of our Church, we need the gifts of the Holy Spirit to give us the courage and the wisdom to be faithful witnesses to the importance of stewardship in our lives.

In *Returning to Grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist*, I asked:



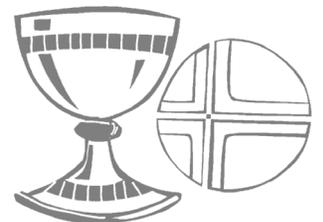
What can each of us do to help our brothers and sisters here in northern New Jersey return to the Grace and Beauty of the Eucharist? How will we encourage those who hesitate to join us in personally celebrating the Mass with our fellow parishioners each Sunday, when it is safe to do so in greater numbers? Is it possible that the Great Eucharistic Fast of 2020 will prove to be a blessing in disguise—a great awakening—for those of us who have consciously or unconsciously “walked away” from Jesus and His Church.

To be successful in our efforts to promote full, conscious and active participation in our worship and in the life of the Church, we must help each other grow in our understanding and practice of basic principles of Christian stewardship.

In *Returning to Grace*, I observed that:

We are called to recognize Jesus as truly present in the consecrated bread and wine, His Body and Blood. We are also called to recognize ourselves as true members of the same Body and Blood of Christ who are intimately united with Him and with each other through the miracle that occurs each time we receive the Eucharist. For this reason, the priest or minister never says, “receive Jesus,” but rather, “The Body of Christ.”

The “Amen” that we respond can never be perfunctory. It should be a genuine, heartfelt expression of our faith in Christ who comes to us as Lord and brother, who becomes one with us in the most intimate communion that is possible for us and creates communion among all the members of His Body. Each time we receive the Holy Eucharist, we accept the Lord’s great commission to proclaim His Gospel and to minister to His people in every nation to the ends of the earth.



The spirituality of stewardship makes it possible for us to cherish and use responsibly the gift of grace that we receive in the Holy Eucharist. By sharing generously the time, talent and treasure we have all received from God’s abundant goodness, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel and minister to God’s people in every nation to the ends of the earth.

The American bishops’ pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*, which was first published nearly 30 years ago, challenges us to understand and accept “stewardship” in its most profound terms. Unfortunately, too many people still reduce stewardship to the weekly

collection or fundraising. This does not do justice to the concept of stewardship that we find in sacred Scripture or in 2000 years of faithful Christian practice.

As the bishops wrote in 1992:

What identifies a steward? Safeguarding material and human resources and using them responsibly are one answer; so is the generous giving of time, talent, and treasure. But being a Christian steward means more. As Christian stewards, we receive God's gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly in justice with others, and return them with increase to the Lord.

Christian stewards recognize God as the origin of life, giver of freedom, and source of all things. We are grateful for the gifts we have received and are eager to use them to show our love for God and for one another. We look to the life and teaching of Jesus for guidance in living as Christian stewards.

Being a Christian steward means more. Stewardship is what we do with what we have (all our spiritual and material gifts) after we say we believe in God. Stewardship is a form of spirituality, a way of living the Gospel that recognizes God as the ultimate owner of all that we *have* and all that we *are* as God's children.

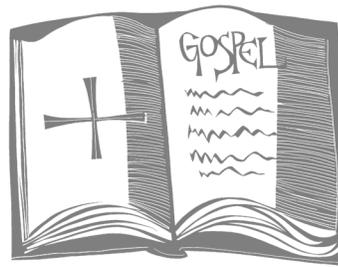
As all of us—individuals, families, parishes, schools and other Church ministries—are emerging from more than a year of health crises, social unrest and financial difficulties, we need the spirituality of stewardship more than ever. We need to reflect a mature understanding of what it means to be grateful for all God's gifts, and to share with others generously and responsibly all that has been entrusted to our care by our merciful and loving God.



Stewardship: A Disciple's Response identifies stewardship as a mature form of discipleship. (Today, following the lead of Pope Francis, we might say that stewardship is an expression of discipleship “in a missionary key.”) According to the stewardship pastoral:

As members of the Church, Jesus calls us to be disciples. This has astonishing implications:

- Mature disciples make a conscious decision to follow Jesus, no matter what the cost.
- Christian disciples experience conversion—life-shaping changes of mind and heart—and commit their very selves to the Lord.
- Christian stewards respond in a particular way to the call to be a disciple. Stewardship has the power to shape and mold our understanding of our lives and the way in which we live.



Mature missionary disciples nurture, cultivate and share generously *all* God's gifts—not just their financial resources or their time and talent (as important as these are as signs of our responsibility as baptized Christians and stewards of the Church). *Being a Christian steward means more.* It means giving *ourselves*, mind body and spirit, as members of the Body of Christ committed to the mission we receive anew every time we receive the Eucharist: *to proclaim the joy of the Gospel and to minister to our brothers and sisters in every nation to the ends of the earth.*

Examples of generous stewardship are all around us—especially during the many months of hardship caused by the pandemic. Take, for example, the stewardship of time and talent demonstrated by first-responders, recognizing their unselfishness in accepting possible perilous circumstances. The pandemic added to the civic pantheon front-line health care professionals (doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals) and "essential workers" (bus drivers, supermarket employees, food workers). Surely, these are the contemporary examples of generous stewardship, illustrating a "life for others"!

I know from my own experience, and from conversations with pastors in many different kinds of parishes, that Catholics give most generously when they are actively engaged in their parish, school or other Church ministries. In fact, we are all much more likely to share our financial resources if we have first given *ourselves*—our hearts and minds, our time and talents—to organizations and ministries that we believe are making a difference.

Our challenge as pastoral leaders is to inform, inspire and invite our people to become more closely involved with their Church through their prayer, their reception of the sacraments (especially Penance and the Eucharist), and through their participation in the liturgy and in ministries that serve the needs of others.

Thirty years ago, in *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, the bishops described what they called "obstacles to stewardship" as follows:

People who want to live as Christian disciples and Christian stewards face serious obstacles. In the United States and other nations, a dominant secular culture often contradicts religious convictions about the meaning of life. This culture frequently encourages us to focus on ourselves and our pleasures.

At times, we can find it far too easy to ignore spiritual realities and to deny religion a role in shaping human and social values. As Catholics who have entered into the mainstream of American society and experienced its advantages, many of us also have been adversely influenced by this secular culture. We know what it is to struggle against selfishness and greed, and we realize that it is harder for many today to accept the

challenge of being a Christian steward. It is essential, therefore, that we make a special effort to understand the true meaning of stewardship and live accordingly.

The chief obstacle to stewardship as a way of life is self-centeredness. Once we understand the “true meaning of stewardship” and are able to “live accordingly,” we can see that the cultural influences that militate against full participation in the life of our Church are overcome by the four characteristics that the stewardship pastoral says describe a Christian steward: *Gratitude, Accountability, Generosity, and Giving back to the Lord with increase.*



These fundamental principles are simple, practical applications of the Gospel values that frame our whole lives as missionary disciples of Jesus Christ. They are not things we “add on” in order to raise money or invite greater participation in the life of our Church. Saying thank you, being accountable, giving generously and developing all God’s gifts so that we can return them with increase are integral to Christian life and ministry.

As I visit parishes in each of the four counties of northern New Jersey that make up our Archdiocese, I see many examples of good stewardship. I also see pastoral leaders and parishioners who love the Eucharist and who recognize this great gift of Divine Love as the source and summit of parish life. I thank God every day for these “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (cf. 1 Cor 4:1) who have embraced their vocations as disciples and missionaries united with Christ through the grace of the holy Eucharist.



Many pastors and lay leaders are asking: How can we invite Catholics to become more fully engaged in their parishes, schools and other archdiocesan ministries?

My response is: *The best way to invite, and encourage our sisters and brothers to “return to grace” is by reflecting the four stewardship principles—Gratitude, Accountability, Generosity and Giving back to the Lord with increase—in everything we say and do as co-responsible leaders.* I know from my own experience that when we pastors practice what we preach, people are much more likely to return to their Church to be welcomed and fed by the Word of God and the grace of the Eucharist.

Once we recognize the importance of stewardship in our pastoral ministry, there are many places we can turn to for help in implementing stewardship principles in our parishes, schools and other archdiocesan ministries. The International Catholic Stewardship Council (www.catholicstewardship.org) offers excellent resources for helping individuals, families and

communities grow as stewards. This includes an Annual Conference (in Orlando this year, September 12–15), regional gatherings, online and printed materials all designed to promote the spirituality of stewardship and help Catholics become more fully engaged in the life of their Church.

In addition to these international resources, Our Archdiocese's Office of Development and Stewardship exists to cultivate and promote stewardship as a way of life throughout the four counties of northern New Jersey that make up the Archdiocese of Newark. The mission of our Development and Stewardship Office is "to help Catholics use their gifts of time, talent and treasure to actively build the Kingdom of God and advance the mission of the universal Church - to boldly proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, to pass on the Faith to the next generation, particularly through the celebration of the Sacraments, and to care for the poor, the vulnerable, and those on the margins." (www.rcan.org/development-and-stewardship-0)

Finally, our Archdiocese is blessed with ready access to a wide variety of professional firms and voluntary organizations that exist to help parishes, schools and other Catholic organizations teach stewardship principles and develop urgently needed human, physical and financial resources to carry out their mission. We should not hesitate to take advantage of the programs and services offered to us by ICSC, by our Office of Stewardship and Development and by the other organizations who assist Church leaders in this increasingly important aspect of our pastoral ministry.

Being a Christian steward means more. It is much more than programs, strategies or techniques for encouraging participation or increasing financial support. At the same time, especially now, we need all the help we can get in our efforts to overcome the obstacles to stewardship as we invite Catholics to "return to grace" and to share all God's gifts with grateful and generous hearts.

Nearly 30 years ago, the bishops reminded us that:

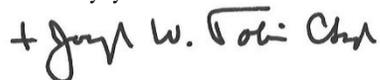
After Jesus, we look to Mary as an ideal steward. As the Mother of Christ, she lived her ministry in a spirit of fidelity and service; she responded generously to the call. We must ask ourselves: Do we also wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ and Christian stewards of our world and our Church? Central to our human and Christian vocations, as well as to the unique vocation each one of us receives from God, is that we be good stewards of the gifts we possess. God gives us this divine-human workshop, this world and Church of ours.



Mary's response to God's gift-of-self to her— "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38)—is what we should affirm every time we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist and say, "Amen."

I hope that these reflections on the spirituality of stewardship, and its fundamental role in our Church's pastoral ministry, can serve as a helpful companion to our efforts to encourage Catholics in northern New Jersey and beyond to return to full participation in the Sunday Eucharist and the ministry of their parish communities. This is a challenging time for our Church, but it is also a moment of grace. May we embrace this opportunity with open and generous hearts, confident that, as the bishops say in the conclusion to *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, "The Spirit shows us the way."

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,



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