



Each year we are asked in the parish to make a renewal of our understanding and practice of Christian Stewardship. We make this renewal, not primarily because the Bishop asks us to, but because this is part of the message of the Gospel. So, I would like to take two weeks to do this renewal. This week I will focus on stewardship of treasure and next week stewardship of time and talent.

First of all, what is stewardship? If you had to put it into one word, it would be that Stewardship is our response. It is our response to God. We know that God blesses us with many gifts, above all the gift of life and the gift of our faith. We can think of too: family, talents, money, house and the list goes on and on. Ultimately, it must be recognized that everything we have is a gift from God.

We cannot claim that anything we have is our own work alone. We have our part in it for sure, God has made it that way, but ultimately everything is God's gift to us. So Stewardship is about what we are doing with all the gifts with which God has blessed us.

Are we wasting our gifts, or are we using them well for God's kingdom? Are we being selfish with what we have been blessed with or are we sharing our blessings as God would have us do? These are the Stewardship questions and today, as I said, I would like specifically to focus on Stewardship of Treasure. I would like to start with my own personal witness of this.

When I was first ordained, I was assigned to St. Vincent's as Associate Pastor. St. Vincent's is the largest parish in the diocese and in the state. They have 10,000 parishioners and 750 students in the school. Their weekly collection is about \$45,000. Now we priests get a salary – some do not know that – but we do, meager though it may be. When I was at St. Vincent's, I did give to charity, kind of here and there, and I'll be honest, I didn't give to St. Vincent's because, first, my pay check came from St. Vincent's and it seemed silly just to give some of it back and, second, they had so much money coming in, I figured that my little offering won't be missed. I pretty much operated this way for the first nine years of my priesthood.

Then I was transferred to Our Lady of Good Hope as Pastor. The first week I was there, I received, as you all do, the monthly packet of giving envelopes from Our Sunday Visitor. I opened it up and it said: "Rev. Pastor". I have to say, to use a Protestant term, I felt convicted. It was as if God was saying, "If you are going to preach Stewardship to the people, you'd better put your wallet where your mouth is." So, from that time on, I have been very intentional about giving. I sit down and figure out how much I make a year and give a portion to the parish and a portion to charity.

We know that the traditional Biblical tithing of stewardship is 10%, that is, a call in the Old Testament to give 10% of our income off the top to God. You'll be surprised to know that the Church has no specific requirements of what should be given. The law of the Church says only that the faithful are obliged to support the work of the Church. So the stewardship message is a spiritual one, a spiritual goal to strive for.

But here's the thing. Living stewardship well brings, first, freedom of heart, which comes from generosity. I think that there are only a few things that make us more miserable than stinginess. But when we are able to let go of the stranglehold that we can have on our money and the fear that we are never going to have enough, then we begin to live in freedom, joy and peace.

Second, God cannot be outdone in generosity. Stewardship is a matter of trusting God. When we give, we should be saying, "God, I'm going to give you from my first fruits and I trust that You will take care of me." You cannot outdo God in generosity.

So make it a spiritual goal to give 5% of your income to the parish and another 5% to other charities, for Catholic school tuition, or the Bishop's Appeal. Again, the Church does not absolutely require this specific percent. There is no sin if you can't get to this level, but this is a spiritual goal for all of us in the sight of God and it should be a serious goal, that is, we all need to take time to ask God what He is asking of us in this area.

They say that in tough economic times giving to the Church actually goes up because people have been able to re-prioritize, to really see what's important, to be more frugal with their money, and that frugality helps them to be able to give more back to God. Maybe this is the case with you during these difficult times and so now is a perfect time to renew, re-evaluate, even to be more generous in your gift back to God. And we need it. We are doing much better financially at St. Anthony's, but we need your gift. We all need to give.

But maybe for some, you are really in a pinch. There's been a job loss, a mortgage foreclosure; and full stewardship is just not possible. Don't worry. There's no guilt here. Do what you can. The Lord understands, and I understand. But don't stop giving, even if it's only a buck a week that you can give. It's the beauty of the intention of your heart that God sees and your little gift, if that is all you can make, is very pleasing to God.

I ask you to be very intentional – don't let your giving be willy-nilly. Sit down and figure what you make in a year and pray about what percentage of that you can give back to God. Work towards 5% to the parish and 5% to other charities or school tuition, and then make that commitment to give right off the top in gratitude.

This stewardship should become for all of us a way of life because this is part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus – to give, to share and to thank God for our blessings. Thank you for your generosity to the parish. Thank you for your trust in me – I am Steward of the Parish. May God bless our parish with a spiritually bountiful 2010.

**Fr. Mark Gurtner at St. Anthony de Padua Church, South Bend
3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time 2010**