

For This You Were Called: Be Thankful

A Pastoral Letter on Stewardship

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I. Learning How to Receive

Disciples who practice stewardship recognize God as the origin of life, the giver of freedom, the source of all they have and are and will be.

—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,
Stewardship: A Disciple's Response: A Pastoral Letter On Stewardship
(Washington, D.C., 2002), p. 5

In considering the gift of God's life and love in Jesus Christ, Saint Paul writes: "I will not treat God's gracious gift as pointless" (Gal 2: 21). The whole of the Christian life is a response to a gift received. Our response to this gift, first and foremost, is to be evermore receptive and appreciative of the gift of God dwelling in our hearts through the Spirit, and attentive to the gift of God's constant giving in human life, creation, the world, and the Church. There is no more fitting response than to echo in all we say and do the words of Saint Paul: "Be thankful" (Col 3: 15). Our call is to live from a grateful heart. Giving of our time, talent, or treasure motivated purely, or even primarily, from a sense of duty or obligation may be rooted in a failure to recognize the grandeur, the magnitude, of God's lavish gift given. The Medieval Dominican Meister Eckhart reminds us: "If the only prayer you say in your life is 'thank you,' that would suffice." But that word of thanks is to spring from the deepest part of ourselves in which the Word of God has touched and changed us, the place in us where the Spirit's gift remains: the heart, soaked and saturated in gratitude for the gift of God who gives without beginning or end.

Gratitude is the foundation for authentic Christian living. When we acknowledge God as the source of all life—of all that we have and all that we are, the most natural and appropriate response is to give thanks. This fundamental orientation or disposition of thankfulness colors everything in our lives. It opens us up to the goodness of all God's creation, and to the gift of other persons in our midst. It helps us appreciate in new ways the gift of life itself and all the blessings that we have received.

When we are grateful, we don't lose sight of the pain and suffering in human life. We don't deny, or attempt to conceal, the sorrows and frustrations of daily living, and the enormous suffering in the wider world. We do not turn our backs on the hurts and injustices that must be faced as we live in a broken and sinful world. But being grateful does allow us to see the challenges of life from the perspective of God's gift constantly being offered, even and especially amidst pain and suffering, grief and anxiety.

II. Knowing How to Give Thanks

Christian stewards know themselves to be recipients and caretakers of God's many gifts. They are grateful for what they have received and eager to cultivate their gifts out of love for God and one another.
—*Stewardship*, p. 5

Jesus says, "I came so that you might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). The Gospels tell of individuals, like Peter, who said "yes" to Jesus' invitation and then later denied him, and of others, like the rich young man, who refused Jesus' invitation. Being a disciple is not easy. "If you wish to come after me, you must deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow me. For if you wish to save your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake you will save it" (Lk 9:23-24).

The call that each of us receives is at once a great blessing and an enormous challenge. We need the grace to respond in a generous way.

Each of us is a unique mix of talents and shortcomings, weaknesses and strengths. Each has been called, in a singular way, to know, love and serve God by sharing in the mission of Christ, the mission of the Church. Everyone, without exception, is to be held accountable for the development and use of the particular gifts and talents we have received in service of Christ's mission to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed.

This call offers a chance to break free of the bonds of selfishness and sin that encumber us and prevent us from being truly happy. It is an opportunity to move beyond the loneliness and fear that prevent us from uniting with our fellow human beings and sharing with them our most intimate hopes and dreams. It is a call to serve others and, in doing so, to experience what it means to be truly free. Why do we hesitate? How can we refuse such an opportunity?

III. Do Not Squander the Gift

A steward is one who cares for what properly belongs to another. Good stewards take care of the goods entrusted to them. They show themselves to be responsible and productive guardians who are worthy of the trust that has been placed in them by another. Christian stewardship, most basically, involves being grateful to God for the gift of our call, living freely and responsibly with, in, and from that gift.

In *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, my brother Bishops and I described the relationship between discipleship—the call—and stewardship—our response—in this way:

Who is a Christian disciple? One who responds to Christ's call, follows Jesus and shapes his or her life in imitation of Christ's. Who is a Christian steward? One who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them in justice and love with others, and returns them with increase to the Lord.

— *Stewardship*, p. 9

Each of us must discern, accept and live with joy and generosity our commitments and responsibilities if we are to be good stewards of the material and spiritual gifts we have been given (*Stewardship*, p. 13).

In the Gospel Jesus speaks of the "faithful and prudent steward" as one whom a householder sets over other members of the household in order to "distribute the food allowance at the proper time" (Lk 12:42). Good stewards understand that they are to share with others what they have received, that this must be done in a timely way, and that God will hold them accountable for how well or badly they do it. For if a steward wastes the owner's goods and mistreats the other household members, "that servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful" (Lk 12:46).

The strong words that Jesus uses to illustrate the responsibilities of a prudent and faithful steward reflect the serious and important role that stewardship plays in carrying out the Church's mission. Christian stewards must be conscientious and vigilant. After all, the first requirement of a steward is to be "found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:2). And the responsibilities of Christian discipleship—to carry forward the work of Christ and the Spirit—constitute a uniquely solemn trust.

Christian stewardship helps us realize that the answer to the all-pervasive alienation, anxiety and unhappiness in our time is to be grateful for what we have been given as opposed to feeling sorry for ourselves and coveting our neighbor's goods. Awareness of God's abundant gifts changes our whole attitude toward life. Giving thanks brings healing and hope.

At the Eucharist we are gathered in the Gift, by the Gift, and for the Gift. The Eucharistic Liturgy is a great act of Thanksgiving for the gift of the Son through the gift of the Spirit (Cf. *Gathered and Sent: Documents of the Synod of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles 2003* [Chicago, IL: Liturgical Training Publications, 2003]. Pastoral Initiative V: Eucharist and Sacramental Living).

The Eucharist is the sacrament of giving thanks, our deep expression of gratitude, the grace-filled response to the Lord's gift of his life in the Paschal Mystery. It is a prayer of thanksgiving made through, with and in Christ and with all who make up Christ's Body, the Church.

Our participation in the Eucharist expresses our gratitude to God and our commitment to allow the Lord to enter our lives, to nourish us with the Word, to sustain us with the sacrament of his Body and Blood, building us—member for member—into the Body of Christ. In the Eucharist we become what we receive; we receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist and respond by becoming ever more fully the Body of Christ for the transformation of the world. When we express our gratitude to God through the celebration of the Eucharist—fully, consciously, actively—it is our gift and task, then, to respond moment by moment from a grateful heart, to live what we believe and celebrate.

In the Eucharist and in sacramental living, we say thanks to God for all that we have and all that we are. And, being a truly Eucharistic Church means that we cultivate the gifts we have received, ready to pass them on so that others might live.

IV. Rendering an Account

All temporal and spiritual goods are created by and come from God. . . One day God will require an accounting of the use each person has made of the particular portion of these goods entrusted to him or her.
— *Stewardship*, p. 20

In Matthew's Gospel (25:14-30) we learn that good stewards cultivate the gifts entrusted to their care while the irresponsible steward buries his master's goods and doesn't even collect interest on them. On the last day, the Lord will ask each of us, "What did you do with all the gifts and talents I gave you? Did you develop them and share them with others? Or did you neglect them and keep them hidden? This is the question of accountability (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative II, Structures for Participation and Accountability).

In our Archdiocesan Synod the delegates affirmed the importance of participation in the mission of the Church, and the importance of accountability on the part of all in the Church. Participation in the mission of the Church is rooted in Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, and nurtured by regular celebration of the Eucharist. All receive gifts from the Spirit that call them to build the Church and advance the Reign of God (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative II).

We are all responsible for advancing the mission of the Church because we are all members of the one Body of Christ, gathered and sent to carry on Christ's work. Here in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, we are especially gifted with diversity. We are blessed with people who represent many different cultural, racial, ethnic heritages, and very diverse language and socio-economic groups. This blessing is also a challenge. It demands that we develop and use *all the gifts and talents entrusted to our care*. It means developing new structures for participation, collaboration and accountability in mission and ministry. It means reaching out in new ways to people who are marginalized, suffering or in any kind of need (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative II).

We must rely on the help of God's grace and the mutual support and collaboration of our co-workers in God's vineyard. Given the difficulties we face, in our personal lives and in carrying out the mission of this Local Church, we would be wise to seek the special intercession of Our Lady of the Angels, and all the saints, as we strive to be accountable for the gifts we have received and respond to the many we face as we seek to advance the Kingdom of God in our own time and place.

V. The Consequence of Faith

Stewardship means helping the Church's mission with money, time and personal resources of all kinds. This sharing is not an option for Catholics who understand what membership in the Church involves. It is a serious duty. It is a consequence of the faith which Catholics profess and celebrate.
— *Stewardship*, p. 7

Love is of God

In his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), Pope Benedict XVI writes that "love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a re-

sponsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community the Church must practice love” (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Part II, no. 20).

In our Pastoral Letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*, the Bishops of the United States identify the obstacles that block our efforts to respond to God’s call to discipleship and to live as Christian stewards. The most basic, and pervasive, obstacle is sheer selfishness, lack of love (*Stewardship*, p. 34).

In addition to the individual and personal tendencies of our sinful human nature that cause us to turn inward and cut ourselves off from others, there are also many socially ingrained obstacles that militate against unity, communion and solidarity among people and nations.

As individuals and families, our graced task is to grow in the practice of charity, the generous sharing of our time, talent and material possessions. This we do through the corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, tend the sick, visit those in prison and bury the dead. These basic acts of love are urgently needed by people in our Archdiocese and around the globe, so that all our sisters and brothers may know the goodness and generosity of the God who is Love.

Communion and Justice for the Life of the World

— *Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative VI,
Social Justice: Living at the Service of God’s Reign

Building a world of communion and justice is a foreshadowing of, and participation in, the Reign of God. “Communion” describes our relationship with God, others, ourselves and all creation: a relationship rooted in the equality, mutuality, and interdependence that is at the heart of the divine life. Authentic communion calls for a willingness to share the resources of this Archdiocese across parish, deanery, and regional boundaries (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative VI).

“Justice” is the activity of creating a world in which we all have what we need to live and grow—with particular attention given to the poor, the weak and the wounded. The Gospel reminds us that we come to a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ through our encounter with the poor and all who are in need (Mt 25:31-46) (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative VI).

The *Growing Stewards* initiative that is taking place in parishes throughout our Archdiocese is designed to invite and challenge parishioners to become actively involved in the mission of the Church. Through their prayer and participation in the ministries of their parish, the Archdiocese and the wider Church, good stewards grow in gratitude and in generosity. Generosity springs as a response to God’s gift and giving, and grows through our engagement in the Church’s mission. The gift of our time, skills, abilities, and our financial resources is what we give freely and responsibly, not reluctantly or begrudgingly, in response to the gift we have received. Our response may not be perfect; nor is it once and for all. Christian stewardship requires practice. Discipleship demands that we be willing to grow as stewards, as disciples who imitate the Lord’s compassion and love for the poor and for those who are considered to be the littlest and least in Church and in society (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative VI).

VI. Passing It On

— *Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative III,
Ongoing Education and Formation:
Adults; Young Adults; Youth

Mature disciples make a conscious, firm decision carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves..This commitment is expressed not in a single action, nor even in a number of actions over a period of time, but in an entire way of life.
—*Stewardship*, p. 5

An overarching concern of our Archdiocesan Synod was the importance of passing on the Christian faith to the next generation. And the next. But faith without action is pointless. Faith takes the form of discipleship. And the

faithful disciple is a good steward of the gifts given by God. To be good stewards of the gift we have received calls for a commitment to lifelong formation of adults, young adults, youth and children. Disciples who have heard the call of Jesus, and have responded in faith—without counting the cost—long to better understand their faith and their experience of life in Christ. In the United States Bishops' Pastoral Letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, we describe the importance of parents teaching their children the truths of the faith and praying with them; passing on Christian values to them in the face of pressures to conform to contemporary society; and initiating their children into the practice of stewardship itself in all its dimensions, especially amidst the pressures of today's culture of materialist consumerism (*Stewardship*, p. 32).

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*, Pope John Paul II describes the style of life that Jesus lived, and that we are to follow. Speaking to all of us, the Church in America, the Holy Father wrote:

Conversion demands especially of us Bishops a genuine identification with the personal style of Jesus Christ, who leads us to simplicity, poverty, responsibility for others, and the renunciation of our own advantage, so that like him and not trusting in human means, we may draw from the strength of the Holy Spirit and of the Word all the power of the Gospel, remaining open above all to those who are furthest away and excluded.

—John Paul II

Ecclesia in America

no. 28

Stewardship is a way of witnessing to the gift given to us through a way of life that may be identified as “the personal style of Jesus Christ.” By personal witness, and by sharing with others, our distinctive way of life might persuade others to recognize the gift being offered to them in Christ Jesus. We pass on the Good News of living freely and responsibly from the gift we have received, handing it on to others in our midst, and to the next generation. And the next. But only those who are first evangelized themselves, those who experience the presence and the power of the Spirit of Christ who comes to us as a gift, can truly grasp the Gospel as Good News and hand it on to others (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative III, Ongoing Education and Formation: Adults; Young Adults; Youth).

VII. Stewardship as Evangelization

Every member of the Church is called to evangelize, and the practice of authentic Christian stewardship leads inevitably to evangelization. As stewards of the mysteries of God, people desire to tell others about them and about the light they shed on human life, to share the gifts and graces they have received from God, especially the knowledge of Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30).

—*Stewardship*, p. 33

The first Pastoral Initiative emerging from our Archdiocesan Synod, that which is to give direction to all our initiatives in this Archdiocese, is “Evangelization and ‘the New Evangelization.’” Stewardship is not only central to our discipleship, it is also central to evangelization which is the principal mission of the Church. The Church exists so that the Gospel may be preached to all nations. Its message will be all the more persuasive if the bearers of the Good News do not squander the gifts they have received, but are good stewards of what God has given.

Each baptized person is called to participate in the mission of Christ and the Spirit, the mission of the Church, proclaiming in word and deed the message at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry: the Reign of God among us here and now, at this time and in this place. The whole life of the Church in all its dimensions is to serve this mission: announcing in what we say and do the Good News, the year of God's favor, the transformation of the world, and the coming Reign of God, the Reign of truth, holiness, justice, love and peace—beginning in our own households and neighborhoods, extending to the ends of the earth (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative IV, Ministry and Leadership: Lay; Consecrated Life; Ordained).

To succeed in this evangelizing mission requires personal conversion, a change of mind, heart and actions that conforms us to the person of Jesus Christ and his “personal style.” Being true to this baptismal calling also requires that we reach out to others to proclaim in word and deed the Reign of God which is here in our midst but

also yet to come. Finally, our work as bearers of the Gospel requires that the values we proclaim—truth, holiness, justice, love and peace—permeate each and every culture, transforming every sphere of life (*Gathered and Sent*, Pastoral Initiative IV).

As the United States Bishops note in *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, the practice of stewardship leads us to share in the work of evangelization, in transmitting and strengthening our faith, and in works of justice and mercy on behalf of persons in need (*Stewardship*, p. 32). Christian stewardship is much more than giving money or contributing our time and talent to support a worthy cause, though it is certainly that. The call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ evokes an awareness of the Gospel's claim on every dimension of our lives, not just this one or that. Being a Christian steward means responding to the Lord with increase in gratitude for *all* the gifts we have received.

Conclusion

As stewards, Christian disciples must embrace the fact that we are no less than God's co-workers (1 Cor 3:9). We have each been given a particular and unique share in God's work of creation, redemption and sanctification. It is our gift and our task to be grateful, responsible, generous and willing to pass on to others what we have received with increase, for the sake of the Reign of God.

All too often when summoned to give generously, we are inclined to think of paying God back, or settling the score. But the one who has received the gift of God's love, given without measure or calculation, knows that we can never repay the Lord for all the good that comes our way. But that same love that gives and keeps on giving—Life for the life of the world—stirs up in us a desire to live freely and responsibly with what we have been given to us—and then pass on to others from a grateful heart the gifts we have received.

Questions for Reflection

I. Learning How to Receive

In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul tells us to “Be thankful.” What is it that Christians have to be thankful for?

Each of us is called to live our lives from a grateful heart. What does this mean specifically in your life?

If “gratitude is the foundation, or basis, for authentic Christian living,” how do we cultivate a grateful attitude for the gifts we have been given?

II. Knowing How to Give Thanks

Peter initially said “yes” to Jesus’ invitation to follow him and later turned his back on Jesus. The rich young man did not even accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship. As one who is also called to follow Jesus, what do you find to be the most difficult challenges in authentic discipleship?

In accepting the invitation to follow Jesus, we are called to serve others. How is serving others a means of being truly free?

III. Do Not Squander the Gift

What are the distinguishing four marks, or signs, of a Christian steward? What are some ways in which we can those signs come alive in our own lives?

In the Gospel Jesus uses strong words about the wasteful steward. What attributes makes a good steward? How does a trustworthy steward live her or his life?

Being aware of God’s gifts to us is said to be the real answer to the alienation, anxiety and unhappiness we find in our society and in our own lives. How could we increase our awareness of God’s abundant gifts?

In the late fourth century, St. Augustine taught that when we receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, we become the Body of Christ, the Church, that is, we become what we receive. How can becoming more fully the Body of Christ transform the world?

IV. Rendering an Account

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the king who will judge the “sheep and the goats” on the Last Day according to how they cared for the least of the brethren. We are all called to be accountable for how we used the gifts given to us by God. What are some ways of being accountable today?

The great diversity in our Archdiocese is a great blessing; it can also be a great challenge. In what ways is it a blessing? A challenge?

V. The Consequences of Faith

The United States Bishops maintain that stewardship is a consequence of our faith. In what ways is this so?

The Bishops also point out that the most basic obstacle to living as a true Christian steward is selfishness, or a lack of love. What do you think love has to do with Christian stewardship?

How can we share our time, talents and treasure most effectively with others?

If “communion” describes our relationship not only with God but with others, ourselves and all creation, what are ways that our Archdiocese can enter into authentic communion?

Christian stewardship is not automatic and does not come easily. It is challenging and requires practice. What are some ways to begin the practice of living a stewardship life or to increase stewardship in our lives?

VI. Passing It On

In our Archdiocese, we believe that lifelong faith formation is essential to our ability to pass on the faith to future generations. How do you see this commitment as a form of stewardship?

Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*, spoke of the “personal style of Jesus Christ.” How did the pope characterize Jesus’ personal style? How can identification with that style lead to conversion?

VII. Stewardship as Evangelization

The principal mission of the Church is to evangelize, to tell others the Good News of Jesus Christ. How is stewardship related to evangelization?

Successful evangelization requires the personal conversion of the evangelizer. In what ways do you think that living the life of a Christian steward leads to conversion and then to effective evangelization?