

The Christian Vocation of Stewardship

OUR SUNDAY VISITOR

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The celebration of the Christmas holidays has once again focused the attention of Christians on the entrance of Jesus into the world in which we live. Though the Incarnation is a core element of our faith tradition, there are definite implications of this event which may come as a surprise to many. For a great number of people, religion is relegated to a level which excludes the concrete realities of the world in which we live. Yet, the Incarnation celebrates the entrance of Jesus into the human condition in all things save sin. The ministry of Jesus would take place within a world of flesh and blood, a world that has concrete needs. The Church continues the ministry of Jesus in that same world. As disciples of Jesus, Christians must always ask how they contribute to the mission of the Church.

As the Christian reflects on that question, an answer will be found in different expressions of service and ministry on behalf of the Church. The answer becomes very practical as the Christian shares time and talent. The response becomes very concrete in the resources the Christian shares to build up the Church in the world today. At the heart of this sharing of time, talent and treasure is a unique challenge to Christians ~~-----~~ the challenge of Christian stewardship.

For Roman Catholics, stewardship is an unfamiliar word. Yet, stewardship is the life-style to which Christians are called in response to the ministry of the Church today. It is not a choice of a few who share their gifts in an extraordinary way; rather it is a vocation of all Christians.

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As an ideal and a reality, stewardship is part of human consciousness in the modern world. From so many points of view, the human race is becoming far more aware of its obligation to be a steward of creation. Recent space explorations have helped us recognize our interdependence as a planet and a universe. Our consumer approach to natural resources was drastically reversed as we faced a shortage of oil and energy supplies. The ever-increasing threat of nuclear war is a constant reminder of the fragile hold the world has on its resources. More and more people are involved in the ecology movement which reflects a Christian reverence towards creation where we are asked to respect and manage the gifts of nature. In the face of technological and scientific demands, there is a clarion call to preserve creation.

A stewardship consciousness is a response to the commandment God shared with the human race when it was asked to assume the responsibility of and care for creation. After the marvelous and magnificent sequence of events which led to the creation of the human person, God told the first human beings to increase and multiply. But following that invitation came a command: "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle and over all wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." (Genesis 1:26)

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The heart of stewardship is offered in this first command given to the human race. The human race was asked to administer and manage the gifts of creation. It was expected to be the "caretaker" of creation in the best sense of the word. As the first human beings were challenged to assume this responsibility, so are we. As we look at our gifts of time, talent and treasure, the greatest challenge to stewardship is perhaps the sharing of our possessions.

Though legal documents might well give juridic ownership of land and possessions to human beings, it is part of the Judaeo/Christian tradition to recognize the fact that all creation is under the sovereignty of God and must redound to the glory of God. What any human being "owns" is really possessions of God held in trust. We are literally trustees of what belongs to God. This view of human ownership puts all our possessions in a different light and offers a unique religious perspective and challenge.

What we possess and hold in trust is shared with us to fulfill our own needs, but also for the service of others. What we possess for our own necessity and even for what we might call "the good life," is but a symbol and proof of the far greater gifts which God shares with the human race in the spiritual life. In a world today filled with poverty, hunger and unemployment, Jesus' words that one's soul is definitely more precious than food or clothing (Mt. 6:25) is indeed a challenging statement.

Stewardship calls people to recognize possessions as gifts of God's love. Created in the image of God, human beings must use these gifts for their own good and the good of others whereby we offer to God the prayerful acknowledgement of His sovereignty. The powerful scene

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of the Last Judgment in Matthew's Gospel reminds us that the Lord will judge us according to the measure of how we used our possessions as means of love and charity.

In determining the sharing of our possessions with the Church today in order to continue the ministry of Jesus, we are asked to put on the lens of faith to recognize the presence of Christ in the needs of others. Such sharing is not humanism, but comes from a deeper awareness of our relationship to God and to others through baptism.

The mission of the Church is to continue the ministry of Jesus. The Church does this in various ways through education, care for the sick and aged, help for the widow and orphan. These ministries have been part of the Church's mission from the beginning of the Christian community. They are not just a human response to human needs, but rather the fulfillment of the command to love one's neighbor. These ministries are but a normal response to and an integral part of the mission of religion. They become an essential apostolate of the Church. They involve not only buildings, institutions and services, but also the powerful visible commitment of people who give their lives in service to others through works of charity in the name of Jesus.

However, the Church exists in a world where there are material needs and financial demands. For centuries, the followers of Jesus have fulfilled the corporal works of mercy by their generous response to the service of others in the establishment and maintenance of hospitals, schools, orphanages, homes for the aged, and countless programs and services which continue the ministry of Jesus.

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The Christian response to Church appeals for funds cannot be an automatic one. Stewardship must characterize Christian generosity. Such stewardship is the responsibility of each person, and not just a few.

The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World from Vatican II urges all people to recognize possessions as "common property in the sense that they should accrue to the benefit of not only themselves but of others." (Paragraph 69) In helping the poor, this same document teaches that people "are obliged to come to the relief of the poor, and to do so not merely out of their superfluous good." (Paragraph 69)

The Gospel demand for Christian charity implies a stewardship stance. But stewardship is also a response to Christian justice whereby we fulfill our obligations to help others and promote the mission of the Church today.

Stewardship is an obligation of individuals within the church; but it is also the obligation of the Church itself. We cannot make diocesan and parish finance committees an option if parishes and dioceses challenge individuals to assume a stewardship response.

In practical terms, stewardship of resources is then a response to the radical demands of the Gospel. It calls for a way of life whereby we place our possessions and the obligation to share them with others within the perspective of an obligation and not a choice. Stewardship goes beyond the automatic contribution made each week to our parish, or the pledge given to a diocesan appeal. Stewardship even goes beyond the tithing of our resources.

Stewardship is a living out of a consciousness and appropriation of the Gospel message. It presumes a perspective of life

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whereby we recognize and acknowledge a dependence on God and share what He has given us with others.

It would have been simpler and far less challenging if Jesus did not become incarnate. But once Jesus entered the human condition, he shared a ministry with others which the Church continues today. To accomplish its mission, the Church needs the generous response of its people. This response is asked of each baptized person as each determines one's gift of time, talent and treasure. Hopefully, our response will be one of stewardship as the basis for Christian generosity. To do otherwise would not enable us to fulfill our vocation as Christians and disciples of Jesus. The Christian has the vocation of stewardship of time, treasure and talent. In living out that vocation we fulfill the final command of Jesus to proclaim the good news to the ends of the earth. Stewardship gives us ownership in fulfilling that command.