

Theology of Stewardship

by Bishop Robert Morneau,
Auxiliary Bishop of Green Bay, WI

Overview of Stewardship

Stewardship is a way of life. For Christians who follow in the way of the Lord Jesus, stewardship is an expression of discipleship. When we recognize that God is the origin of all life, the giver of everything that we have and are, the source of our freedom and giftedness, the healthy person responds by thanking God through prayer, by serving God and God's people through ministry, by sharing our financial resources with those in need. Stewardship is a way of life based upon conversion of heart.

Why conversion? Because too often our hearts lack the vision and compassion that makes us true followers of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament the prophet Ezekiel, speaking for God, makes this statement: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a

heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26). Our God is a promise-maker; our God is a promise-keeper. When the Holy Spirit breaks into our lives, our hearts become prayerful, our ministry joyful, and our generosity extravagant.

Stewards, according to the pastoral letter Stewardship: A Disciple's Response, do four things:

- receive God's gifts gratefully
- nurture God's gifts responsibly
- share God's gifts justly and charitably
- return those gifts to God abundantly

Gratitude is the cornerstone of stewardship. All is gift for those who see life with the eyes of faith. God gives us our existence and talents, our time and our treasure, our family and friends. Stewards express their gratitude by a life of generosity.

Stewards are serious about naming and developing the gifts and talents given to them for the sake of the community. As one poet asks: "What have you done with the garden entrusted to you?" (Antonio Machado). Responsibility and accountability are part of our call as disciples.

Stewards share. What has been given to us is not simply for our own use. Recipients are to become benefactors. So we return to the Lord and our needy sisters and brothers a just and sacrificial portion of all that comes our way.

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A theology of stewardship looks to the future. Our lives here on earth are relatively short. One day we will return to the Lord from whom we came. If we have lived in Christ and in the Spirit, then we will bear fruit, abundant fruit. Stewards yield a rich harvest.

Stewardship as a way of life based upon conversion of heart is broad in its range and demanding in its claim. Stewardship embraces all of life and challenges us to be faithful to our calling. The following passage from the pastoral letter Stewardship: A Disciple's Response articulates the range of this way of life:

"Stewardship plays an important role in the lives of people who seek to follow Christ. In particular, Christians must be stewards of their personal vocations, for it is these that show how, according to the circumstances of their individual lives, God wants them to cherish and serve a broad range of interests

and concerns: life and health, along with their intellectual and spiritual well being and that of others; material goods and resources; the natural environment; the cultural heritage of humankind."

Using the image of a garden we might ask ourselves the question - how well have we or are we tending the following gardens of our life?

- the garden of our body (physical garden)
- the garden of family - friends (social garden)
- the garden of the globe (ecological garden)
- the garden of choices (moral garden)
- the garden of our emotions (psychological garden)
- the garden of the city/nation (political garden)
- the garden of the "chip" (technological garden)

- the garden of history (historical garden)
- the garden of mind (intellectual garden)
- the garden of the arts (cultural garden)
- the garden of money (economic garden)
- the garden of our soul (spiritual garden)

Obviously, these gardens overlap and intersect. But each of them calls for a certain amount of tending and care. Each person must decide on how we allocate our limited time and resources in attempting to be good stewards of these many gardens.

(To be continued...)

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Stewardship of Prayer

Prayer is about our relationship with God. The most recent doctor of the Church, St. Therese of Lisieux, speaks of prayer in this way:

"For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands the soul and unites me to Jesus."

Stewards nurture their relationship with God by having a prayer life. Whether that is two minutes or two hours a day, listening and responding to God is at the core of the disciple's life. At times the prayer will be that of thanksgiving. At other times the prayer will be that of praise or petition or forgiveness.

Whether private or communal prayer, the purpose is to stay connected to God so as to do the divine will.

This dimension of stewardship can be measured to some degree. Of the 168 hours per week, of the 144 daily ten-minute slots, how much time do we use in prayer? And, of course, the most important prayer of all is the Eucharist in which we hear God's word and receive Jesus in the Eucharist. Stewards are eucharistic people.

Stewardship of Service

Ministry is about gifts and needs. We name and nurture the gifts God has given us; we place these gifts at the service of those in need. Ministries are many in number and find expression in the areas of worship, education, community, social justice, leadership, and evangelization. The Epistle of St.

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

A theology of ministry and service emphasizes that it is not so much that we do things for others but rather Jesus is doing something for others through us. Being aware of the difference between "for" and "through" changes our whole manner of service. That is why prayer is so important: it keeps reminding us that all stewardship is ultimately the work of the Lord taking place through the actions of faithful disciples.

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Jesus came not to be served but to serve. Through baptism and confirmation we are called to a life of commitment to the wounded of the world. The Eucharist strengthens us in that mission and the Christian community hopefully supports us in our responsibilities.

Stewardship of Sharing

"The budget is a moral document" (Jim Wallis). How we earn and spend our money is both a highly personal issue as well as a social concern. Having access to someone's checkbook is also having access to that person's value system. "For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be" (Matthew 6:21).

Stewards are generous people. Again, they have a grateful heart realizing that all gifts come from the Lord. They feel an obligation to return a portion (be it 3%, 6%, 10%, 20%) to the Church and other charities. They refuse to be co-opted by a culture of greed and live a life of hoarding. A tough question has to be asked: can a person claim to be a

disciple of the Lord if they are not sharing generously of their financial resources?

A strange phenomenon happens in the stewardship world. The greater the generosity and the greater the sacrifice, the greater the joy. Joy, according to some authors, is impossible without generosity. And as one author states, joy is the infallible sign of God's presence.

Resource

Stewardship: A Disciple's Response, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1993).

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Bishop Morneau is a member of the USCCB *ad hoc* Committee on Stewardship.

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