

Stewardship: A Disciple's Response

U.S. Bishops Pastoral letter on Stewardship Summary

Introduction

Three convictions in particular underlie what we say in this pastoral letter.

1. Mature disciples make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves.
2. Beginning in conversion, change of mind and heart, 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. It means committing one's very self to the Lord.
3. Stewardship is an expression of discipleship, with the power to change how we understand and live our lives. 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. They are deeply aware of the truth that "The Lord's are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it" (Ps 24:1). They 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.

The Challenge

In some ways it may be harder to be a Christian steward today than at times in the past. Although religious faith is a strong force in the lives of many Americans, our country's dominant secular culture often contradicts the values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is a culture in which destructive "isms" — materialism, relativism, hedonism, individualism, consumerism — exercise seductive, powerful influences.

There is a strong tendency to privatize faith, to push it to the margins of society, confining it to people's hearts or, at best, their homes, while excluding it from the marketplace of ideas where social policy is formed and men and women acquire their view of life and its meaning.

The Choice

Christians are part of this culture, influenced by it in many ways. In recent decades many Catholics in particular have entered into the mainstream of American society. That has been a remarkable achievement. Often, though, this process also has widened the "split" between faith and life which Vatican II saw as one of "the more serious errors of our age" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 43). Thus American Catholicism itself has taken on some of the less attractive values of the secular culture.

For example, although religious people often speak about community, individualism infects the religious experience of many persons. Parishes, dioceses, and church institutions appear impersonal and alienating in the eyes of many. Evangelization is not the priority it should be. How to use people's gifts and charisms, how to empower the laity, how to recognize the role of women, how to affirm racial, cultural, and ethnic minorities, how to overcome poverty and oppression — these and countless other issues remain vexing questions, as well as opportunities.

Also, while many Catholics are generous in giving of themselves and their resources to the Church, others do not respond to the needs in proportion to what they possess. The result now is a lack of resources which seriously hampers the Church's ability to carry out its mission and obstructs people's growth as disciples.

This pastoral letter recognizes the importance of church support, including the sharing of time, talent, and treasure. But it situates church support in its broader context — what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

This also is the context of stewardship. Generous sharing of resources, including money, is central to its practice, and church support is a necessary part of this. Essentially, it means helping the Church's mission with money, time, 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.

This pastoral letter initiates a long-term, continuing process encouraging people to examine and interiorize stewardship's implications. At the start of this process it is important to lay out a comprehensive view of stewardship — a vision of a sharing, generous, accountable way of life rooted in Christian discipleship — which people can take to heart and apply to the circumstances of their lives. Concentrating on one specific obligation of stewardship, even one as important as church support, could make it harder — even impossible — for people to grasp the vision. It could imply that when the bishops get serious about stewardship, what they really mean is simply giving money.

The Vision

Jesus' invitation to follow him is addressed to people of every time and condition. Here and now it is addressed to us — Catholic citizens of a wealthy, powerful nation facing many questions about its identity and role in the waning years of a troubled century, members of a community of faith blessed with many human and material resources yet often uncertain about how to sustain and use them.

As bishops, we wish to present a vision that suits the needs and problems of the Church in our country today and speaks to those who practice Christian stewardship in their particular circumstances.

What we say here is directed to ourselves as much as to you who read these words. As bishops, we recognize our obligation to be models of stewardship in all aspects of our lives. We must be stewards in our prayer and worship, in how we fulfill our pastoral duties, in our custody of the

Church's doctrine, spiritual resources, personnel, and funds, in our life-style and use of time, and even in such matters as the attention we give to personal health and recreation.

As we ask you to respond to the challenge of stewardship, we pray that we also will be open to the grace to respond. We pray that the Holy Spirit, whose gracious action conforms us to Jesus Christ and to the Church, will enlighten us all and help us to renew our commitment as the Lord's disciples and as stewards of his bountiful gifts.