

Pastor's Pen:**Stewardship is Every Parishioner's Responsibility**

Stewardship is the task of taking care of something. We can be stewards of many things: our homes, families, monies, planet, etc. Within the context of the Church, we are called to take care of the heritage given us within our parishes and dioceses. For its part, both the parish and diocese bear the responsibility of providing worthy worship, superior education and faith formation, help to needy, and the general building up of the Body of Christ. How strong or effective a parish or diocese can be in such tasks rests in the ability of all her members to assume their share of the load of providing for these things to happen.

To bring this to a parish level, what is necessary for us to provide the benefits of our faith both to parishioners and others? In a concrete way, it takes buildings, personnel, and materials. Those buildings require constant upkeep, utilities, and insurance. The personnel require salary and benefits such as health insurance. Materials from bread and wine to educational materials to cleaning supplies to food and so on are also needed. On top of this a parish needs volunteers, people interceding before God, and time and energy to make their parish flourish. In other words, a parish is very much like a family. The more each member of family contributes of their time, energy, and resources, the stronger the family becomes.

It's About Being a Family

This image of family should stick in our minds. Too often, parishes can come across as a business that offers goods and services. Some see the collection as a sort of cash register where money is given for whatever is 'bought' by the individual. Some see the goods and services as free entitlements they should be afforded with no effort on their part and cost on their part. Imagine what happens in families when such a mentality takes place! It leads to a dysfunctional family more prone to division than union. It lowers the standards and capabilities for all and wears down the committed.

In a well-functioning family, every member knows that with the benefits of being in the family come the responsibilities to the family. I come from a family where there are multiple special needs situations. We understand that expectations of capability are different. We understand that each has different gifts and talents. We understand each has different sources of income. As in any functional family, where one is weak another adds their strength. Why? Because everyone has a weakness for which others will need to lend their strength. There are places in my life where I need others in my family (diocese and parish included) to lend their help to supplement my weaknesses. There are places where I can lend my strength to supplement other people's weaknesses.

The Thanksgiving Offering

In the Scriptures, there is the prescription of taking this willingness to support the larger family in what is called the Thanksgiving Offering. Also known as the tithe, it was an offering of the first fruits of one's labor to God as an act of thanksgiving; an acknowledgment that what one had was a blessing and not an entitlement. The Thanksgiving Offering was used to two ends: A) To the material support of those charged with 24/7 service of the Lord (they were not allowed to own businesses and such) and what was needed for worship, and B) to help those in need.

Any parish doing their duty correctly is using the Thanksgiving Offering to these ends. As a priest is not allowed to own a business, the only source of income for most priest (some have investments) is what comes in via the offering. With that same offering the rest of the personnel of a parish are also paid. Those whose jobs are to serve the Lord in the capacities needed within a parish are paid and given benefits from the tithe.

The needy? We cover that as well. First we try to take care of the needs of our own parishioners. We do this through education, faith formation, pastoral care (youth and shut-ins, for example), and outreach to the larger community and its poor. We do this through the collections we take up for various needs outside of the parish and with our helping missionary groups that come into to ask our help.

When those who can contribute choose not make their thanksgiving offering it has a ripple effect. It cripples the ability of a parish to do its ministry and help those in need. It tells God that I owe Him nothing and He owes me everything. It leads to parishes cutting back on their ministry to the detriment of all parties involved. In the prophet Malachi, God refers to the withholding of the tithe as "theft from God" (Malachi 3:8). In other words, we do stand accountable before God for what we did with what He gave us.

As pastor I stand doubly before God as answerable. First, I myself am also to give a Thanksgiving Offering. I am not exempt. A wise priest once told me to not ask of others what I will not do myself. Second, I am responsible for what happens with what you offer. Canon Law says I am supposed to live simply. I do. I try to keep my own footprint on the budget to a minimum. My job as a pastor is to make sure the mission of the parish is done and able to expand. It is my job to fight back the sense of entitlement that hampers our mission. In coming weeks, you will see policies put into place that will reflect that if one wants the benefits of belonging to the parish, then they must share in the responsibility of providing for those benefits. Stewardship is everyone's duty before God.