

Put God First - And Feel the Joy!

by Bishop Victor Galeone

Next month many of our congregations will be promoting Parish Stewardship Sunday. To prepare for that weekend I'd like to offer some reflections on the importance of stewardship in the life of a Christian.

First, stewardship is not a program about raising money. We Catholics are quite generous in responding to an emergency. "The church roof is leaking. Please be generous!" That attitude, however, is a caricature of what true stewardship is.

Stewardship is a Way of Life:

- It is the realization that all that we have comes from God. (1 Cor. 4:7)
- It prompts us to give God gratefully a portion of what we have received.
- It makes us grow spiritually and it deepens our faith.
- Stewardship, in a real sense, is fulfilling the two commandments that according to Jesus summarize the entire Old Testament: Put God in first place in your life, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. (Mt. 22:37-40)

For example, the Lord reprimanded his chosen people through the prophet Haggai: "You are living in paneled houses, while my house lies in ruins." He then points out that their crops are failing, and they are malnourished and miserable - all because they are neglecting the Lord. The people responded to Haggai's rebuke. They began rebuilding the Lord's Temple in earnest, and as a result they were greatly blessed in their own lives.

Furthermore, God's word points out repeatedly that those who give willingly are the happiest: "Happy is the one who is gracious to the poor." (Prov. 14:21) "Whoever is generous will be blessed." (Prov. 22:9) "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) This, incidentally, is the theme of this year's Stewardship Sunday: "Put God first - and feel the joy!"

Stewardship encompasses every facet of our lives: our time, our abilities, and our possessions. But many of us are hesitant to respond generously because of fear:

- Fear that if we give our time, we won't have enough left for our own wants.
- Fear that if we offer our talents, they might fall short of others' expectations.
- Fear that if we give away our money, we won't have enough to pay for the escalating cost of gasoline, education, insurance, utilities, etc.

In contrast, God's word challenges us to give back ten percent of what we have received. Those who have responded accordingly, have experienced the truth of God's promise, "Whoever is generous will be blessed." For those who barely give anything, I invite you to consider the following:

Time:

- Whether busy or relaxing, we all have the same number of hours in a day. Saying "yes" to one thing forces us to say "no" to something else. Are our priorities in order?
- To the one who is too busy to worship God one hour a week at Mass, I ask, "Too busy to give God one hour of the 168 that he gives you every week? Where do you plan to spend eternity? With God? - when you begrudged him that one hour a week!
- How much time each day do you spend before the TV? On the Internet? In prayer?
- How often do you work overtime? How much time is spent with your spouse? With your children?

Talent:

- Asking "Do I have to volunteer?" is the wrong question. Rather, you should ask, "How can I best use my gifts to help others?"
- As followers of Jesus, we are called to use our gifts to serve others. In this world, we are his hands and feet, his eyes and ears, his mind and heart.

Treasure:

- Are you registered in your parish?
- Do you receive envelopes? It's a great way to give your sacrifice - "gift-wrapped."
- If you're not tithing, give at least one hour of your income to the Lord each week.
- "But I can't afford that much!" - Last week, how much did you spend on entertainment? On recreation? On lotto tickets? On cable TV fees? In the fitness center? In the beauty salon? Is what you spent on any one item more than what you earn at work in one hour?

I recall something that an uncle of mine told me years ago when I was studying in Italy as a seminarian. My Uncle Peppino and I were riding along in an open, horse-drawn carriage one summer afternoon in 1958. As we sat there drinking in the beauty of the Tuscan countryside, he broke the silence. With a broad smile on his face, he said, "You know, Victor - provided that I have the Lord's grace in my heart, health in my body, and at least two pennies in my pocket at all times, I'm the happiest man in the world!"

My Uncle Peppino had never read a tract on stewardship, I'm sure. But his life was a living testimony of what true stewardship is all about: the Lord's grace in his heart (putting God first); health in his body (to serve others); with at least two pennies to spare (after paying all his bills and giving generously to the Lord) - he was the happiest man in the world (feeling all the joy)!

I would like to close with the Lord's words from the Sermon on the Mount. They are quite apropos to our theme: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'...For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first his kingdom and his goodness, and all these other things will be given to you as well." (Mt. 6:31-33)