

Stewardship: A Discipleship of Love

by Bishop Victor Galeone

What is Stewardship?

1. At a conference of pastors a few years ago, the point was raised about the plight of the poor. How could parishes become more involved in sharing their resources with needy parishes at home and abroad? An inner-city pastor spoke up in frustration: "Stop treating the poor as if you're their salvation. The poor love God! Get your people to love God and all the rest will follow." That pastor was right. And his final remark is the foundation of all true stewardship.

2. "Get your people to love God and all the rest will follow." Jesus would agree. Recall the response he gave when he was asked which commandment was the greatest: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt 22:35-39) Jesus was not stating anything new. He was merely quoting two verses from the Old Testament, the first of which all devout Jews still recite the first thing on rising every morning. But in that day, Jesus' response was revolutionary. You see, the rabbis of his day had put so much stress on the exact observation of the details of the Law of Moses that they had gutted it of its very heart. As God complained through the prophet Isaiah: "This people gives me lip service, but their heart is nowhere near me." (Is 29:13)

3. I've heard people voice a similar complaint about the Catholic Church. "The Church is too legalistic. It's all about rules. Break one, and you're in big trouble. But that's not how I look at religion. Religion isn't about commandments; it's about showing love. Two observations are in order. First, Jesus did not do away with either laws or the commandments. When the rich young man asked him what he should do to be saved, Jesus responded by quoting the commandments. (Mk 10:17-19) But one must be careful, because rules without a relationship can lead to rebellion. Witness the teenage years! And that's why the second observation is so important: the primacy of love. I'm delighted that my anonymous objector says that religion is about showing love. I agree. But bear in mind that love is much more demanding than the law ever could be. Laws deal with maximums and minimums: "Don't exceed 65 mph on the interstate." "Pay at least this much tax by April 15th." Love, on the other hand, is boundless - "it sets no limits. Is there any country that has a statute requiring a young man to give the girl of his dreams an engagement ring? Then why does he do it? A foolish question! Love does much more than the law ever requires. As St. Augustine observed, "Where there is love, there is no law. Or if there is a law, it's the law of love."

4. The basis of all authentic stewardship is love. And in this matter, God took the initiative. "God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son..." (Jn 3:16) That verse is so familiar that it may have lost its impact on us. So imagine that some terrorists have kidnapped a father and his young son. The next day, one of the captors puts a gun to the boy's head, threatening to pull the trigger. The father pleads, "Spare my son. Take my life instead." Yes, it would have been much easier for God to have died instead of his Son. So when he allowed his Son to die on the cross in our place, he proved the depth of his love for us: "God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son."

5. The question is asked in Psalm 116:12: "How can I repay the Lord for all that he has done for me?" St. John gives us the answer in his first letter: "We are to love, because he loved us first." (1 Jn 4:19) Love can be repaid only by love. In that same passage, John goes on to explain that we prove our love for God by showing love for one another. He asks how is it possible to love God, whom we don't see, if we hate our brother, whom we do see. There's an inseparable link between the two commandments that Jesus stressed. They are two sides of the same coin: love of God is proven through love of neighbor. It's the standard that Jesus set for all who want to be his disciples: "This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (Jn 13:35)

6. Now let's consider how we are to repay God for all that he has done for us. We do so through the gift of our time, talents and treasure. Some people mistakenly identify stewardship with money only,

that is, with our “treasure.” Such a narrow view destroys the concept of authentic stewardship. Stewardship is like a tripod, supported by the legs of time, talent and treasure. If just one leg is missing, then true stewardship collapses. Each component is essential. So let’s examine each one in turn.

Giving of our Time

7. I recall a radio preacher once saying: “Our problem in America today is that we’ve forgotten how to spell love. How do you spell it? T-I-M-E, that’s how. We want to spend time with the persons we love. The greater the love, the more time we want to spend with them. And we avoid those people who mean nothing to us. So if we don’t spend any time with God; that means that he doesn’t rate in our lives.” The preacher was right, of course.

8. Applying that preacher’s criterion to ourselves, let’s answer a few questions: Yesterday, how much time did we spend reading the newspaper? And how much time doing some Scripture or spiritual reading? How many hours did we spend in front of the TV? And how long did we spend in prayer? Some may object that prayer is boring: “It’s just a waste of time.” I once heard prayer defined as “that glorious waste of time.” But isn’t that what lovers never tire of doing - wasting time in each other’s presence? Some of us can quote from memory the batting average of our favorite ballplayers, but haven’t a clue where the love chapter is found in St. Paul’s letters. May I suggest that we each acquire a good translation of the Bible. Start with St. John’s gospel. Let’s read it for just three minutes a day. Begin with a short prayer, something as simple as: “Lord, send me your Holy Spirit to help me understand what I’m about to read.” Mark the place where you stop reading with a card, so that you can continue the next day.

9. Have you ever heard another Catholic - “perhaps even a relative - “complain, “Why do I have to go to church on Sunday?” How would a young lady react if she overheard her boyfriend tell his buddies, “Why do I have to take Donna on a date this Saturday?” If our attitude towards Sunday Mass is one of a tedious obligation, then we’ve failed to comprehend the basics of our faith. We fail to realize that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our life with God here on earth. At the altar, time and space disappear as we are joined with Jesus “the Lamb, now slain yet standing before the throne of God.” (Rv 5:6) He comes as our divine Bridegroom, to join himself to us in the love embrace of Holy Communion, thus uniting us with all the members of his Mystical Body. So unless we’re excused through illness or some emergency, if we purposely fail to join in this awesome heavenly banquet, what are we telling God? That we’re too busy? Too busy to give him back just one hour each week of the 168 that he has given us?

10. Before concluding our reflection on time, let’s add a word about the importance of spending time with others, especially with our family. A father who repeatedly promises his son that he’s too busy to watch his little league game this Saturday, but that he’ll surely be there the next, yet never goes, doesn’t love that child. We always find the time to be with the ones we love. A recent poll indicated that husband and wife spend an average of only 25 minutes a week in meaningful conversation. Is it any wonder that the family today is in a state of crisis? May I suggest that you try some form of family prayer each day: daily devotions or the rosary - “perhaps start with just one decade. Remember, the family that prays together, stays together!

Giving of our Talents

11. Checking the etymology of the word “talent” in Webster’s, we learn that it comes from the parable of the talents recorded in Mt 25:14-30. In that parable, the master dispenses various amounts of gold coins (talents) to his servants with instructions to invest them until he returns. On his return, he rewards the diligent servants who invested their talents wisely, while he punishes the lazy servant who buried his talent in the ground for fear of losing it. The lesson is clear. God has given each of us special talents - “abilities, skills - “which we are to use for the good of others. We did nothing to merit them;

we received them in order to serve others. “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, how can you carry on as if you did not?” (1 Cor 4:7)

12. Are we making good use of the skills we’ve been given to help others? To volunteer is a good indicator that we are. There are many areas that need our services. The parish needs volunteers as choir members, lectors at Mass, and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. Without volunteers many of our Catholic schools would have to close their doors. Teachers of religious education are almost exclusively volunteers. Volunteering our skills of painting, plumbing, or landscaping would permit a parish to use its funds for other needed projects. Furthermore, serving as a hospital visitor and participating in prison ministry are excellent ways to practice the corporal works of mercy. We may receive scant recognition for our services now, but we’ll rejoice to hear Jesus summon us on the last day with the words: “Come, blessed of my Father...For I was hungry and you gave me food... I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you came to see me.” (Mt 25:34-37)

Giving of our Treasure

13. Among Christian denominations, Catholics enjoy the second highest median income, but are the least generous contributors to their church. In a report released by the Barna Group, the mean amount of money donated to churches in 2003 was \$824. The mean annual donation in our diocese for the same year was \$623. In general, Catholics are quite generous in giving to a specific need - “a new worship center, a new church roof, a tuition bill, etc. And Catholics respond well to parish bingos, carnivals, bazaars, and silent auctions. While the social component of these events may be beneficial, they could well blur the vision of what Christian stewardship of one’s possessions should be.

14. Let’s take a moment to examine what Jesus taught regarding the matter of possessions and the use we make of them:

- Possessions must be secondary in our lives: “Do not worry, asking, ‘What are we going to eat...or drink...or wear?’ For that’s what the pagans do. Your heavenly Father already knows what you need. So set your hearts on his kingdom first...and all these other things will be given you besides.” (Mt 6:31-33)
- Possessions can make us greedy: Recall the parable of the rich man who did not know where to store his bumper crop. “I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and store all my grain there. Then I will eat, drink, and be merry; for I have plenty of goods stored up for years to come.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night you will die. And all those things you’ve hoarded, whose will they be?” (Lk 12:16-21)
- Possessions can endanger our eternal salvation: “How hard it is for those with riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mk 10:23-25)

15. In pointing out the danger of riches, Jesus was not implying that rich people are evil. He had some close friends who were very wealthy. Mary of Bethany anointed his feet with a precious ointment that was worth almost a year’s wages (Jn 12:3-5); and Joseph of Arimathea was so well off that he offered his new tomb to bury Jesus. (Mt 27:57-60) What Jesus stressed, however, is that riches pose a real danger. The rich man Dives was not condemned because he was wealthy, but because seeing the beggar Lazarus at his doorstep, he did not lift a finger to help him. As St. John points out: “If someone blessed with this world’s goods sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart to him, how can the love of God be in him?” (1 Jn 3:17) Once again, we prove our love for God through love of neighbor. It’s not money that’s evil; what’s evil is the misuse of money. As St. Paul stated in one of the most misquoted verses in Scripture, “The love of money is the root of all evil.” (1 Tm 6:10)

16. What should be the norm for sharing our financial resources with the Lord? In the Old Testament the biblical norm was tithing, that is, ten percent of one’s income. But such a benchmark could be very disproportionate. Ten percent of a millionaire’s thick portfolio would be a pittance compared with ten

percent of a single parent's minimum-wage earnings. Jesus affirmed as much when he praised the poor widow for the two coins she dropped into the temple treasury, compared to the generous donations from the wealthy. Still, as a starting point, we should all be as generous as our means allow. Let's bear in mind the following points:

- God will not be outdone in generosity: "Bring in the whole tithe...Try me in this, says the Lord, and see if I will not...pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it." (Malachi 3:10)
- Rewards should not be our motive for being generous: "Even if the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food; even if there are no sheep in the corral, or cattle in the stall, still will I rejoice in the Lord! (Hab 3:17-18) Our sole motive for giving is to prove our love for God.
- Our harvest depends on how much we plant. Don't expect to harvest twenty acres if you plant only one: "Bear this in mind: meager sowing means meager reaping; the more you sow, the more you reap. Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not because he has to; for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor 9:6-7)
- Sharing leads to life; hoarding leads to death: In Israel, the Sea of Galilee empties into the Jordan River, which flows south into the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is ripe with countless species of fish. Marine life is nonexistent in the Dead Sea, due to its high salt content. Why is that? Many springs feed the Sea of Galilee, which, in turn, flows into the Jordan. Namely, it shares what it receives. The Dead Sea, however, has no outlet. Its selfish hoarding renders life impossible. This is an apt analogy of authentic stewardship. Just as God is generous with us, we must be generous in sharing with others. Otherwise we run the risk of becoming barren branches joined to Jesus the living vine. "My Father cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit...such branches are thrown into the fire and burned." (Jn 15:2, 6)

17. While the Church has no mandate about tithing, she does ask all the faithful to contribute to the support of their parish. How much should one contribute? Before deciding, consider the following two points. First, 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? In the restaurant? Is what you spent on any one item more than you put in the offertory basket last Sunday? And second, last fall when the diocese was experiencing the \$1.3 million deficit, due mostly to the subsidy for the new diocesan high schools, I made a general appeal to all parishioners to help us out of our dilemma. You responded generously. However, if everyone would commit to contribute to the parish offertory collection in proportion to one's income, the diocese would have no need to come begging for more help. So I challenge everyone, myself included, to take this leap of faith of sacrificial giving at the parish level. And one final suggestion: Gift-wrap your sacrifice in an offertory envelope.

18. In deciding what your weekly contribution should be, get specific about the amount. If you decide to tithe - "ten percent of every dollar earned or received - "then you might place five percent in the Sunday collection, and set aside five percent for charitable causes: the missions, special collections, local appeals for the needy and Catholic school tuition. If ten percent seems unrealistic at this time, begin with five or even two percent. Then, if possible, gradually increase your giving to a higher level year by year. But regardless of what you can give, give with a grateful heart, "for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor 9:7)

Brief Summary:

- Always put God first in your life. God does not want leftovers.
- Jesus is God's greatest gift to us. Stewardship tells us to share a portion of our time, talent and treasure so that the gift of Jesus may be given to those who do not know him.
- Stewardship expresses an attitude of deep thanks to God for his many gifts to us and of boundless trust in him as the ultimate source of our security.

- Jesus said: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in to steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in to steal. For where your treasure is, that’s where your heart will be too.” (Mt 6:19-21)