

STEWARDSHIP: It is More than a Matter of Money

At the 1992 annual meeting of the Bishops of the United States, one issue dominated the discussion and debate. The proposed Pastoral Letter on the role of women in society and the Church was the focus of media attention in our country and world. It happens often that when one issue has the limelight in the NCCB agenda, so much else that the Bishops discuss and vote upon becomes far less newsworthy.

The 1992 NCCB agenda also included a discussion and vote on a Pastoral Letter entitled, STEWARDSHIP: A Disciple's Response. The bishops approved this Pastoral Letter by an overwhelming majority. As the Pastoral Letter on Stewardship approaches its first anniversary, it would be worthwhile to reflect on its implementation and implications.

The Stewardship Pastoral has its roots in a varium introduced in 1988. It asked the question: "How do we develop among ourselves, our priests, our seminarians and our people a spirituality of giving, a biblical concept of stewardship?" There is no doubt that the original intent of the varium was to seek ways to increase the financial resources of the Church in light of new needs and escalating costs. Furthermore, the quest for additional financial resources would demand greater accountability of the Church at all levels.

NCCB Committee Formed

Archbishop John May, President of the NCCB, formed an Ad Hoc Committee to address the varium. For almost a year, the Ad Hoc Committee discussed the question and recognized the dilemma that became immediately apparent. The Committee had two choices. It could propose and suggest various fund-raising programs that were successful in parishes and dioceses. Or, it could address the radical question of stewardship as a way of life. The Committee chose the latter.

Moreover, the Committee believed it could best accomplish its task by writing a Pastoral Letter on Stewardship that would be the basis for personal and group reflection. The Committee offered its proposal to the full NCCB and received unanimous approval to pursue its task.

The Committee also realized it needed the support of the Bishops for its basic assumptions in the development of the Pastoral Letter. It developed a series of themes or convictions that described stewardship in terms of faith and spirituality as a way of life. The Bishops responded most positively to the core themes of the proposed Pastoral Letter. Yet, it was also obvious that some bishops were looking for ways to increase the level of giving in their parishes and dioceses.

Stewardship Convictions:

Three convictions serve as the basis for the Pastoral Letter on Stewardship. These three convictions are: (1) Each and every baptized person is called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. However, above and beyond this basic call to ministry and the Christian vocation, 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, a change of heart, this commitment is expressed not in a single action, nor even in a series 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 out 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.

These three convictions are hardly startling or innovative. They are part and parcel of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. They reflect the foundation principles of the Ignatian Exercises. The Pastoral Letter on Stewardship is a call to personal and community spiritual renewal. The serious reader of the Pastoral Letter soon discovers that the call to stewardship is a call to conversion.

Implications:

Bishop William E. McManus sums up well some of the implications of the Pastoral Letter on Stewardship (National Catholic Stewardship Conference, RESOURCE, Summer, 1993). He indicates that the pastoral could have a potential negative impact. It could become a "general blessing on all programs, projects and schemes named 'stewardship.'" Likewise, for some, the Pastoral Letter could serve as a pious approach to raise more money to meet escalating church costs.

Bishop McManus goes on to point out what could happen if individuals took the Pastoral Letter seriously. "Conscientious, careful, prayerful readers could be inspired to change their lives either completely or partially." This conversion calls for a shift from selfishness to generosity of all that one possesses. A devout Catholic could become the advocate for social justice, a dedicated environmentalist, a zealous evangelist, a patriotic citizen.

When diocesan parish pastoral councils take time to reflect prayerfully on the Pastoral Letter, they may discover "sound premises for bold, progressive plans to make Jesus Christ's gospel standards and values operative in the community, be it the world or nation, or diocese, or parish." The community's prayer of "Thy will be done" could become more than a "stoical acceptance of the inevitable but rather a prayerful quest for a discernment of God's expectations of His stewards."

What has been done?

The full text of the Pastoral Letter is now available in both English and Spanish. Its layout includes graphics as well as additional resources for reflection with questions for discussion at the end of each chapter. The Pastoral Letter attempts to be "reader friendly." A four-color attractive pamphlet style summary of the Pastoral Letter in English and Spanish is also in print to provide an overview of the pastoral letter with the hope it will encourage the reader to obtain the full text.

Many dioceses have already initiated Stewardship Days where pastors and lay leaders come together to discuss the challenge of the Pastoral Letter. It is obvious that stewardship as a religious experience cannot take place in a diocese or parish unless the leadership appropriates the conversion process in their own lives. The Pastoral Letter on Stewardship is NOT a new program that will yield immediate and incredible financial results for parishes, institutions and needs of the Christian community. Rather, the Pastoral Letter is an invitation to reflect on one's faith and what that faith asks us to be and to do.

A program is in place to provide an overview of the Pastoral Letter with four Theologates in the United States as a pilot project. A meeting with theological faculties and seminarians approaching ordination to the priesthood will hopefully acquaint them as well with the challenge of the Pastoral Letter.

It is amazing to note the initiative taken by dioceses and parishes to develop resources to help in the formation and education process of stewardship. These resources range from posters to quotations from the Pastoral to complement the Sunday readings, from a six-week RENEW format on stewardship to practical suggestions on how to share one's time and talents to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Both the National Catholic Development Conference and the National Catholic Stewardship Council, the professional organizations for stewardship and fund-raising, endorse and support the thrust of the Stewardship Pastoral. They recognize that their own success is dependent on whether people appropriate the message of the Pastoral Letter.

What needs to be done?

The Ad Hoc Committee on Stewardship continues in existence until November of 1994. A Pastoral Letter cannot remain in a vacuum. It needs to come alive in the hearts and minds of people. It is the conviction of the Stewardship Committee that we have just begun to recognize the theme of stewardship as an expression of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

There is an urgency to the Pastoral Letter on Stewardship. As the Introduction states, 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.

What needs to be done in the coming years is to tap into the wisdom and experience of people who recognize the challenge of the Pastoral Letter on Stewardship. We need to be good stewards of what we learn in order to share this gift with others.

A personal note

Committee membership is a satisfying experience if the committee accomplishes its task. One can usually expect no more satisfaction than a completed project. However, the responsibility of chairing the Ad Hoc Committee on Stewardship became a unique grace for myself and other members of the Committee as well.

What began as a project to achieve a balance in the financial statements of dioceses and parishes became a process of seeking a balance in one's life as a person of faith. More than anything else, the process of developing the Stewardship Pastoral provided a refreshing new vision of seeing one's life, talents, and possessions with Gospel eyes. It prompted the question that haunts me each day, "What do I own, and what owns me?"

What will happen to the Pastoral Letter on Stewardship in the years ahead? I don't know. But I do hope it will be the basis for ongoing reflection, development, and revision. I hope it will help to call all people to ongoing spiritual renewal and conversion. After all, stewardship is more than a matter of money.

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