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Ten Essential Building Blocks for Developing a Stewardship Parish

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One of the most misunderstood terms in contemporary Catholic parish life is “stewardship.” For many parishioners, it is simply a synonym for fund-raising. But stewardship is much more than that. It has variously been described as

- a recognition that everything we have is really a gift from God, who asks us to return a portion in the form of our time, talent, and treasure to support God’s work on earth;
- an understanding of a total way of life, a conversion of mind and heart;
- not about something we do, but about who we are, and whose we are;
- developing a need to give, rather than merely giving to a need;
- asking ourselves what we own and what owns us.

In this context, introducing stewardship into a parish is actually a spiritual activity, meant to make the parish a more spiritual place. One of the happy consequences of becoming a stewardship parish is that parishioners become more generous in providing their time, talent, and treasure.

The fact is, Catholics are not nearly as generous as Protestants in supporting their church, especially in the area of treasure. Study after study has found a remarkable pattern—US Catholics contribute about half as much to their parish as Protestants do to their congregation. The typical Catholic household contributes about 1.1 to 1.2 percent of its

income to the parish, while the typical Protestant household contributes 2.2 to 2.5 percent of its income to their congregation. In dollar terms, this means that US Catholic parishes could receive another \$8 billion a year in revenue if their parishioners contributed at just the same rate as their Protestant friends. I'm not talking about tithing, but just the same 2.2 to 2.5 percent of their household income.

To put it another way, each parish would see its annual revenue double! Imagine what your parish could do with twice the revenues. Think of the scandalously low salaries that we pay our lay staff. Think of the maintenance that we keep putting off year after year because we can't afford it. Think of the outreach we could do. The list goes on and on. That is what is at stake here.

For a variety of reasons many priests find it easy to preach on the time and talent aspects of stewardship but are reluctant to openly discuss the treasure component. It might be helpful for them to recall the theological basis for stewardship and to recognize that raising treasure is in itself a spiritual activity.

Theological Basis for Parish Stewardship

We're all familiar with the biblical notion of stewardship. The master has gone on a trip and charged the steward with overseeing the household in his absence. When the master returns he calls for an accounting. The lesson is that God has entrusted all creation to humankind. In doing so, God has given each of us a unique endowment of gifts. We are expected to use those gifts to further God's work on earth, and someday we too will be called to give an accounting of how we used our allotment of time, talent, and treasure.

In their 1992 pastoral *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, the US Catholic bishops provided the following summary of the theology of stewardship:

- Living a stewardship life is a manifestation of mature discipleship. It is a conscious decision to follow Christ no matter what the cost.
- Since it is a conversion of mind and heart, a commitment to stewardship is not expressed in a single action or even a series of actions, but in a person's entire way of life.

- Practicing stewardship can enable parishioners to change their understanding of their lives. Those who have been transformed into good stewards will recognize God as the source of all that they possess.

Spiritual Basis for Stewardship

Henri J. M. Nouwen, the noted spiritual writer, authored a short monograph, *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, in which he argues that raising treasure is first and foremost a form of ministry, an opportunity for us to announce our mission and invite others into our vision. It is also a call to conversion by inviting parishioners to experience a new way of relating to their resources. Nouwen argues that as a form of ministry, raising treasure is as spiritual as praying, giving a homily, or visiting the sick. He observes that raising treasure is a concrete way of helping the kingdom of God come about.¹

Asking parishioners for treasure should involve more than just asking for money. It should be about inviting them into a new spiritual communion. We should tell parishioners that we don't just want their treasure. We want them to get to know us; we want them to get involved in building the community of faith; and we anticipate creating a lasting relationship with them.

Nouwen concludes that once a priest has prayerfully committed to placing his whole trust in God and has recognized that he is not raising money for himself, but rather is only concerned for the kingdom, and once he believes that we have great value to give those who commit their treasure, then he will have no trouble asking parishioners for their treasure. Moreover, his own vocation will be deepened and strengthened as a result.

Stewardship versus What We're Already Doing

Many, if not most, parishioners believe their parish is above average. As long as their needs are being met, they are reluctant to accept major changes, such as the introduction of stewardship. I ran into that problem in my parish when my pastor decided that we should become a stewardship parish and asked me to serve as chair of the newly formed parish

stewardship committee. We ran into resistance not just from many parishioners but from some fellow members of the committee who viewed the introduction of stewardship as an indication that something was wrong with the parish. I tried to explain to them that while we had a very good parish, we could be better, and that becoming a stewardship parish would be a path toward becoming a *great* parish.

To help them understand the difference between a “good parish” and a “stewardship parish,” I have adopted a table (see below) from Thomas Jeavons and Rebekah Basinger’s book, *Growing Givers’ Hearts*.² I argue that when parishioners are motivated by the stewardship side of the table, they become more generous givers. But beyond that, even greater opportunities for spiritual growth exist.

	What We’re Already Doing	Stewardship
<i>Focus and Goals</i>	To bring people into a relationship with our parish and with the work it does in a way that makes them want to support it.	To bring people into a closer relationship with God through the experiences of giving time, talent, and treasure that we help to create by offering occasions where this giving is consciously evoked as a spiritual act and practice.
<i>Ideal Outcomes</i>	Parishioners make a contribution to the parish in recognition that the parish needs resources if it is to continue its work (that is, parishioners give to a need).	Parishioners are more generous in their gifts to the parish of their time, talent, and treasure because every gift becomes an occasion for and a celebration of growth in faith (that is, parishioners develop a need to give).

<i>Philosophical and Cultural Underpinnings</i>	The philosophical and cultural root is philanthropy, “private action for public purposes.” The intent is to encourage people to feel a commitment to the “common good of the parish,” and voluntarily give of their resources—material goods that they feel they own—for the benefit of others.	The philosophical and cultural root of stewardship is a commitment to personal and collective behavior that recognizes and honors God’s ultimate ownership of and profound generosity in all things. The intent is to encourage people to see all resources as gifts temporarily entrusted to us to be used and shared to promote the welfare of all of God’s creation.
<i>Ultimate Objective</i>	To provide financial (and other) support for our parish, so that it may carry out the Godly work to which we believe it has been called.	To “build the household of God” so there will be more human and spiritual, as well as material, resources to carry out the work of building the kingdom, in whatever form that work may take.

So, what are the steps in becoming a stewardship parish? I’ve identified ten essential building blocks that will help a parish transform itself into a stewardship parish. Some of these I consider to be “unintentional stewardship” blocks, that is, activities that a parish should be undertaking anyway (happily leading to more generous parishioners). Others could be labeled “intentional stewardship” blocks, activities that a parish would initiate only if it were trying to implement stewardship.

Ten Essential Building Blocks

1. *Be a welcoming parish that works hard at building community.* A basic tenet of fund-raising is that people give to people. While a parish

might be able to rally parishioners to support a particular need (e.g., the organ needs to be replaced), long-term, sustained giving necessitates a sense of commitment to the community. Every parish should be working hard at building community. This is admittedly difficult in many of today's parishes, which may serve as many as two thousand to four thousand households. But it must be done. A parish needs to take every opportunity to be a welcoming, community-building center, a place where people want to come. This could include introducing small faith-sharing groups and programs such as RENEW. It might include adopting a sister parish or a refugee family. It surely includes encouraging parishioners to be welcoming toward strangers as well as embracing parish-sponsored social events such as potluck dinners, parish festivals, or athletic leagues and Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts.

2. *Make the connection between spirituality and giving.* The most generous givers in a parish are typically motivated by their relationship with God, not out of some sense of guilt or obligation. Stewardship needs to be introduced to parishioners as a holistic approach to spiritual renewal that challenges them to contemplate the role that money and possessions play in their lives, rather than as just another fund-raising gimmick. (The preceding table spells this out.)

3. *Help parishioners to develop an attitude of abundance, not of scarcity.* Implied in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures is a world of plenty. When God's righteousness reigns there is abundance for everyone. Unfortunately, we live in a consumerist society that views the world through a lens of scarcity, with limited resources that must be competed for. The result is a tendency for us to focus on our own survival. Selfishness and narrowly defined interests prevail.

Jesus taught that seeking first the reign of God will provide us with all that we truly need. After all, he fed the multitudes with just a few loaves and fishes. When we focus on the abundance that God has provided it becomes easier for us to become more generous givers. Supporting our parish becomes an essential element of Christian life, rather than a burden or merely a charitable act.

4. *Emphasize that the parish has a mission, and that it is not merely a vendor of religious goods and services.* Related to developing an attitude of abundance is ensuring that the parish is mission-centered rather than

need-centered. In our consumerist society it is tempting for parishes to tailor their efforts to meeting the needs and wants of parishioners through multiple programs, rather than by addressing the common good. In a stewardship parish, every element of parish life is evaluated on the basis of how extensively it leads parishioners to a better understanding and more meaningful participation in the mission of the parish.

Related to this mind-set is how the parish leadership views the budget. It is easy for them to get caught up in the importance of meeting perceived parishioner needs when they present the budget to the parish. Instead, they need to divert attention from a consumerist sense of the budget to how the budget relates to the parish's mission and vision of where it is going and what it will become. Parishioners whose primary concern is to contribute their fair share of this year's budget won't be as generous as those who have bought into the parish's mission and vision.

5. The pastor and other parish leaders must model good stewardship. First and foremost, the pastor must be on board with the parish's stewardship effort. As noted above, many priests are uncomfortable asking their parishioners for money. But if the pastor fails to communicate that giving is important, many parishioners will deduce that it's not. And as disdainful as it may be, this message needs to be repeated throughout the year, as the Sunday readings warrant. Not necessarily the importance of contributing to the parish, but an examination of the larger issue: the role of money and possessions in each parishioner's life. Preaching on the topic of stewardship is essential to both the financial health of the parish and the spiritual health of parishioners and, to reiterate, such preaching can strengthen a priest's vocation, as well.

Second, it is imperative that the pastor and his leadership team (including the parish business manager and parish finance council) exhibit the highest standards of integrity and responsibility in managing the parish's financial assets. The most direct way to defend against the improper use of parish resources is to maintain transparency and accountability in all parish financial matters. This requires regular (more than annual) release of parish financial statements. But it also entails more.

Third, Vatican II has taught us that through baptism parishioners have not only a right but a responsibility to participate in parish decision making, including matters involving parish finances. This extends beyond merely keeping parishioners informed. It also involves consulting with them and giving them some direct input. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

often referred to the “co-responsibility between the clergy and the laity for the welfare of the parish.” Shared parish decision making leads to the development of mature stewardship on the part of parishioners.

Let me be very clear. If a pastor hopes to introduce stewardship into his parish, he and his staff must be examples of good stewardship. This not only means using good judgment in all parish financial matters but providing parishioners with the opportunity to share in financial decisions. I strongly believe that if my pastor wants me to contribute more to the parish, he better be prepared to demonstrate that the funds are being put to good use.

6. *Establish a parish stewardship committee.* While a pastor needs to be on board with the parish’s stewardship effort, he need not be the only player or even the lead player. Introducing stewardship into a parish can be complex and time-consuming. It is best handled by a specially designated committee.

How should this committee be organized? Some parishes establish their stewardship committee as a subcommittee of the parish pastoral council. Others make it a subcommittee of the parish finance council. This latter approach is unsuitable, in my opinion, since it sends the message to parishioners that stewardship is only about money, which many already believe.

My recommendation is that the parish stewardship committee be established as a separate committee, on the same level, and with the same stature, as the parish pastoral and parish finance councils. This would send a strong message to parishioners concerning the high priority being accorded stewardship in the parish.

What would the parish stewardship council do? Certainly, one role would be to communicate to the parish about stewardship: what it is (a change of minds and hearts) and what it isn’t (a mere fund-raising scheme), while presenting examples of good stewardship already taking place in the parish. It would also recruit and train lay “witnesses” who would speak to the parish about their own stewardship journeys. It would organize some sort of “ministry fair,” an annual event in which each ministry presents itself to the parish, opening up opportunities for parishioners to not only learn more but join these important groups. And finally, the parish stewardship committee would play a major role in implementing building blocks 7, 8, 9, and 10.

7. *Parishioners are expected to make a commitment.* One of the major differences in the way Catholic parishes and Protestant congregations support themselves is the degree of financial commitment they expect of their members. Most Protestant congregations expect members to make a financial commitment, either through tithing or pledging. Most Catholic parishes rely on voluntary contributions through the collection basket, with no specific financial commitment. My studies show that nearly 40 percent of regular Mass-attending Catholics base their giving on how much is in their checkbook that week. If the checkbook is flush (usually at the beginning of the month), they'll contribute more. If the checkbook is a little low that week, they'll contribute less (or perhaps nothing). If they miss Mass for whatever reason, Catholics frequently don't make up their contributions later. They truly treat their giving as a voluntary act.

It is difficult to imagine a good steward who has not made a commitment. Tithing or pledging are critical components of formalizing that commitment. Making a financial commitment to their parish is often foreign to Catholics, however, who tend to resist. But there are creative ways to make it more attractive. For example, I know of a parish that holds an annual "Commitment Sunday." At Mass on that day, right after the homily, parishioners proceed to the altar and drop their commitment cards (e.g., pledge cards) in a basket. At the end of the procession, the priest starts a fire and dumps the commitment cards in. The message is clear: your commitment is between you and God.

An increasingly popular method of making a financial commitment is through electronic transfers. Parishioners arrange with their bank to have funds automatically transferred from their account to the parish's account, usually at the beginning of the month. This way, they are giving of their "firstfruits," a sound biblical concept. My studies show that when a household starts contributing electronically, its annual contributions increase by 30 percent. Not only do they contribute when their checkbooks are more flush, they contribute whether or not they happen to be at Mass on a particular Sunday.

Some priests object to electronic transfers since they fear it diminishes participation in the offertory. But most offertory envelope companies, like Our Sunday Visitor, now print their envelopes with a check-off box that says, "I have contributed electronically." Thus, parishioners who opt for electronic transfers can still participate in the offertory by dropping these envelopes in the collection basket.

Regardless of how it's done, the practical theology of stewardship requires a financial commitment from parishioners.

8. Stewardship formation and education for all. In order for a parish to become a stewardship parish, it must work at implementing stewardship year-round, as well as age-appropriate stewardship formation for all parishioners. Stewardship should be included in the curriculum for both parochial school religion classes and religious education. There should also be stewardship activities for parish youth groups. Adult education, for its part, should target its stewardship message about the sharing of time, talent, and treasure to its specific audience—whether it's all adults or certain segments, such as widowed, separated and divorced, singles, or married couples—and their status in life.

Because there is such confusion among Catholics about the meaning of stewardship, making it an integral part of parish education and formation activities can help to clear the air.

9. Treat parishioner contributions of time and talent as a ministry, not as a volunteer activity. I have a big problem with the term “parish volunteer.” The connotation is that since I'm only a volunteer, it's okay if I show up on time or not because, after all, I'm only a volunteer; or if I do a good job or not in handling my parish duties, after all, I'm only a volunteer.

I much prefer to tell parishioners they're engaged in a ministry, and what they do is vital to the parish. The parish depends on them. In fact, through their baptism they have joined the priesthood of the laity. Parishioners who serve as eucharistic ministers, lectors, ushers, catechists, parish house receptionists, and more are not volunteers. They are ministers carrying out their baptismal vows. And when they view their roles as such, they tend to take them more seriously. It should also be noted that studies have shown as members become more engaged with the parish, they become more generous financial contributors.

But this doesn't happen overnight. Most parishioners start out with a volunteer mentality. It is up to the parish leadership to convert these volunteers into active members of a ministry. To do so, the leadership needs to ensure they are trained, receive support, and, yes, are held accountable. This, of course, requires a certain competence on the part of parish staff. They need to be capable of training and supporting parishioners who are involved in a ministry, and even holding them

accountable. The parish is depending on them. And if someone is not performing well in a particular ministry, the parish leadership needs to be informed.

In my parish, we have an annual dinner for those engaged in parish life. We used to call it our “Volunteer Appreciation Dinner.” You might not be surprised to learn we’ve changed the name to our “Ministry Appreciation Dinner.”

10. Include stewardship as a key component of the parish pastoral plan. Every parish should be involved in pastoral planning. By including stewardship as a key goal, you underscore its importance and send the message to the entire parish about the need for every ministry to evaluate its role in contributing to the formation of a stewardship parish. The reality is that stewardship won’t take off if just a handful of parishioners are promoting it, no matter how dedicated they are. In order for stewardship to be successful, it must permeate every aspect of parish life. Every parish ministry must be involved.

Becoming a Great Parish through Stewardship

As we’ve seen time and again, good parishes can become great parishes by introducing a stewardship approach. Great not only in the sense of having more resources but in terms of becoming more spiritually driven.

But moving decisively toward stewardship can be a daunting task in a parish where members lack an understanding and appreciation of the concept. It requires considerable education, support, and patience by the parish’s leadership and staff. And it requires getting all parishioners on board. It won’t happen overnight, and it won’t happen if only a handful of parishioners are committed to being a stewardship parish.

While it’s important for the pastor to be supportive and actively involved, he shouldn’t be the only player, or necessarily the sole leader, of this movement. A special parish stewardship committee should be formed to take the leadership reins. It should be tasked with educating members about the meaning and benefits of stewardship, and with presenting examples of good stewardship already taking place within the parish. As Nouwen proposed, by getting a critical mass of parishioners committed to the notion of stewardship and to its implementation, the

pastor can focus on the spiritual aspects and, in the process, markedly strengthen his own vocation.

Endnotes

1. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, The Henri Nouwen Spirituality Series (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2010).

2. Thomas H. Jeavons and Rebekah Basinger, *Growing Givers' Hearts: Treating Fundraising as Ministry* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). Used by permission.