

# 8

## *Fundraising as Christian Stewardship*

---

*Kerry A. Robinson*

I was born to a family with a long and proud history of philanthropic support of the Catholic Church. My great-grandparents, John and Helena Raskob, made the decision nearly sixty-five years ago to set up a private philanthropic organization and designated the money to be used exclusively to support Catholic Church apostolates and ministries around the world.

They also wanted their children and descendants to be stewards of the foundation's resources, and at last count there were nearly one hundred of us—including cousins, aunts, and uncles — actively engaged in service to the church as volunteers with the Raskob Foundation. All of us take this invitation and work very seriously and consider it a great privilege.

At the earliest age I can remember, I was introduced to this curious word “stewardship” and to assorted heroes and heroines — your brother priests and sisters in religious life and, on occasion, lay pioneers who were devoting their lives, just like each of you, in service to advancing the mission of the church. Just as importantly, I got to see as a young girl the Catholic Church from local, diocesan, national, and international levels and absolutely fell in love with it. I was struck by how all of you have given yourselves in service to a greater good, brought consolation to others, alleviated suffering, and advanced social justice. And whether you were doing ministry under very wrenching social conditions around the globe, or here in the United States, you possessed common traits which, from my perspective, were extremely compelling. One of those was a groundedness, a sense of purpose, and a deep faith. You also had a palpable sense of joy. And I remember thinking, I'll never be that holy, but if I could spend my life helping to advance your ministry, then my life too might be imbued with such purpose.

With that as background, it's an incredible privilege for me to speak to you about anything to do with the church, especially the importance of raising money.

Reared as I was in formal Catholic philanthropy, my role was essentially to advise on how best to give money away. I never, ever wanted to be responsible for raising it. I had all the biases, which I think are still quite prevalent in the church when it comes to the task of raising money. That started to change about twelve years ago when I received a call from the Catholic chaplain at Yale University. Fr. Bob Beloin had just left parish life after being appointed by his bishop as chaplain at Yale. Among his first tasks were raising money and countering the fiscal distress, tending to crumbling and inadequate facilities, and increasing student participation, particularly at the Sunday liturgy. He called me and invited me to be the director of a five-million-dollar capital campaign, which I vehemently resisted. After all, I had no experience, knew I'd be terrible at it, and didn't even like the idea of fundraising, not to mention the fact I was seven months pregnant with my second child. Before I could decline the invitation, however, he asked me to pray about it for five days and call him back at the end of that period with my decision.

To my astonishment, after the allotted five days I called him back and said, "Yes, I will do it. But fundamentally, I don't see it as an opportunity to raise money so much as an invitation to advance and elevate Catholic campus ministry across the country by holding up a model of what a vibrant, intellectual, and spiritual center can look like at a secular university." There was a long silence on the phone, and Fr. Bob said, "I wish I had thought of that when I first called you."

### **Obstacles to Fundraising**

Like many of you, I was forced to learn fundraising on the job, and the first thing I did at Yale was identify the key obstacles that prevented church leaders — people with passion, conviction, and vision — from being successful at raising money. I thought and prayed long and hard about this and examined my own inner self. The first obstacle I observed was that we have a theological ambivalence about wealth. Is it holy? Is it sinful? Is it only holy or sinful under certain circumstances? Until we focus on and resolve questions like these, I don't believe we can approach the activity of raising money without some level of cognitive dissonance.

The second obstacle I observed — and had a hard time believing — was the negative language associated with raising money. "Hit her up for money." "Put the squeeze on him." "Nail it." "Seal the deal." It seemed to me the expressions I was routinely hearing in connection with my new profession were really the language of violation, which is totally contrary to what it means to be a person of faith.

The third obstacle can be described this way. The Yale chaplain knew he had to raise money, saw it as a major focus of his apostolate, but had never been trained for this discipline at the seminary. Indeed, there was a radical disconnect between what was being taught at the seminary and the reality of coping with the day-to-day concerns and responsibilities in the temporal arena, in particular anything related to money. So, a huge learning curve existed, and one of the things I discovered about many of the priests and women religious I've since worked with is that they look upon asking people for money as tantamount to a personal favor, rather than seeing it as an opportunity and a possibility to advance an important ministry.

The fourth obstacle to fundraising is one I've heard from priests many times: "I discerned a vocation to the priesthood to bring solace to others, to bring Christ to others, not to make them uncomfortable with subjects like their personal finances."

The fifth obstacle is fear or rejection. What if they say no? There is often the fear that if a prospective donor says no to my grant request, it's really a rejection of who I am and how effective I am as a priest.

The sixth obstacle revolves around the conviction that your real ministry is about something other than temporal affairs, particularly fiscal and fundraising, even when those are integral to church life.

To sum up, the activity of fundraising, even when seen as an essential component and chief responsibility of a pastor, is regarded as a distraction from his real ministry or, at worst, a contradiction of it. This is no small challenge, I'm sure you'll agree, when your mission includes raising money and ensuring the full financial health of your parish.

### **Fundraising as Ministry**

How do we overcome these obstacles? What I propose is a radical shift in the way we think about raising money. The activity of fundraising is not a distraction or a contradiction to ministry but should be seen as an effective and profound ministry in itself. Let me give you an example of why I believe this is true.

I mentioned that our fundraising campaign at Yale was five million dollars. As we showed signs of success, the trustees raised the goal to ten million dollars. It often felt like a labor of Sisyphus, where we never quite reached the end. And yet, we treated every prospective donor equally. We were so eager for anyone to show an interest in our vision — the vision of vibrant Catholic intellectual and spiritual ministry — that it didn't matter if they were capable of a small or large financial gift, or none at all. We believed that if our intentions were sound, some good would come of all of our encounters with alumni to discuss our

vision of Catholic life at Yale. In the end, our most generous donors turned out to be the most unassuming, modest, and humble individuals.

The most important thing is that we treated development as a ministry and participated in animated discussions of a vision grounded in faith and benefiting others—one that was full of joy and passion and had the potential to outlive all of us. That conversation is an example of the great intimacy that takes place among the Catholic chaplain, the development director, and the donor prospect. We were touching the very core of what is meaningful in a person's life, and this new perspective on fundraising, as I like to call it, is not a contradiction to ministry. It embodies the important notion that donors are not objects from which we try to extract as much money as quickly as possible, but subjects who, like all of us here, are looking for something meaningful to do with their lives, something that blesses the lives of others and is well-conceived, well-articulated, and has merit and great possibility.

Indeed, seeing donors as subjects rather than objects allows priests to approach the activity of development the same way they approach the rest of their ministry, which is with confidence, focus, attentiveness, humility, and joy. That important insight fundamentally changed the way we conducted our campaign at Yale.

### **Trusting in God's Providence**

What also changed our focus was the realization that many of the key maxims to effective fundraising mirrored the tenets of spiritual maturation. Among them were hope, confidence, and a profound trust in providence. I'd like to illustrate the latter with the following story.

One of my tasks during the school semester was to go with Fr. Bob to meet with Yale alumni at their homes or offices. This often required us to travel to their cities, and on one such trip we drove two-and-a-half hours from New Haven to Boston to meet with this very nice prospective donor for about thirty minutes. He told us, "I applaud your vision, I like what you've accomplished, and I'll make a donation." We thanked him for his time and pledge, but on the long ride back to New Haven we spoke about whether the modest gift he made was worth the dedication of nearly a full day. I remember saying to Fr. Bob that the size of the gift was all a matter of perspective, and had it been day one of the campaign, we would be celebrating wildly our first gift. Second, I impressed upon him that we have to have confidence that we're doing everything possible and working very hard. And while we can't predict the specific outcomes each time, we have to have the confidence and trust that some good will come from this dedication to purpose and hard work. Upon reflection, Fr. Bob agreed.

Fast-forward six months. We received a call from a Yale alumnus who said he had just been to a party with a friend who had met with Fr. Bob and me in Boston, and he spoke glowingly of our programmatic vision at Yale. He went on to say that he wanted to meet with us with an eye toward getting involved. We held that meeting soon afterward, and the upshot was that this man presented us with a bequest for approximately five million dollars. Looking back, it's clear that contact would never have occurred if we hadn't faithfully and purposefully advanced our ministry of development. That kind of fidelity and trust in God's providence — coupled with incredibly hard work and tenacity — will invariably lead to positive results. And never losing sight of that fact is, I believe, a key to both successful fundraising and spiritual enrichment.

### **Money Follows Mission**

This new perspective to fundraising also calls for a sense of joy. I mentioned above that what I as a child saw in your brother priests and women religious was a palpable sense of joy, a purpose, and an incredible closeness to God. Without joy, I don't think anyone can be truly successful in raising funds. Who wants to give to somebody who doesn't have confidence in what they're presenting or doesn't have a joyfulness about the possibilities at hand?

It's not so surprising that our overriding maxim became “money follows mission.” The starting point for me, even in those five days of prayer when I had no idea what I was getting myself into, was that this was never about money. It was not an invitation to raise money, but an invitation to bring to fruition all the possibilities at hand. And to articulate well and compellingly what our mission was.

As I grew in my new role, it almost seemed to me that the buildings we built and the money we raised were a distraction from our real work.

And that was to hold up to everyone who had a vested interest in the future of the church a compelling example of a Catholic intellectual and spiritual center of excellence. I never once believed that our purpose was to reach a seventy-five-million-dollar goal or to build a thirty-thousand-square-foot Catholic center. For me, it was always about insuring that the bright and talented Catholic young adults attending Yale were properly catechized so that when they became leaders across every industry and sector around the globe they would be informed by the rich tradition of our faith, guided by Catholic social teaching and sustained and inspired by their faith. This was the overriding reason to get up every day and report to work. It was another shining example of the guiding principle I mentioned above: money will always follow mission.

## **The Call to Stewardship**

A sense of stewardship has almost nothing to do with money, yet it's at the heart of every fundraising program. Stewardship can be defined as the proper care of all that's been entrusted to us. But I think it goes much deeper. Stewardship is the proper recognition of and care for what is possible, for the potential at hand. As Christian stewards, what we do with the potential for good in our midst—whether we ignore it by saying, “I'm too busy, I've got other responsibilities,” or we act courageously on it, even knowing we might fail—is the mark of a wonderful, spiritually alive Christian steward.

If you think about it, over the past thirty or forty years Catholics have risen to levels of affluence and influence in this country that are staggering. They number among the highest echelons of leadership in every sector in the United States and abroad. This raises the question,

“Why as stewards would we not want to avail ourselves and the church of the expertise, managerial insights, and communication strengths, as well as the financial and investing acumen, of these individuals who care so deeply about the mission of the church?”

We should strive for excellence across the board, even in areas where we don't feel prepared or proficient, including the temporal affairs of the church. And as part of that, we should be identifying Catholics who want to give back to the church. You would not believe how grateful so many of these men and women — who include executive leaders that compose the membership of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management — are. They feel a debt of gratitude to the church and want to give back.

The bottom line is this: giving what you do best in service to the church you love is so much more meaningful than writing out a check of any amount. What happens is, you become even more engaged in the mission of the church, and the money eventually follows. Best of all, it's the purest example of evangelization.

So, try not to have the starting point of your efforts be about the collection totals but about re-envisioning a vibrant, relevant, welcoming, and exciting parish community. The world is hungry for that. And don't be afraid of identifying people who can move you toward that goal, and enlisting their leadership. Because when this endeavor takes on a life of its own, the money will follow.

I also think there are plenty of people who contribute to apostolates run out of local parishes who don't necessarily belong to them. And therein lies another opportunity. If you say to people, “This is what we're doing, here's where we're meeting unmet needs and responding as a faith community to a broken world,” then you're giving them a chance to invest and be part of something that is such a hopeful opportunity.

## **Breaking the Mold**

What often happens is, we get stuck in a maintenance mind-set. You know, we've always done it this way, so let's keep the tradition going. But the result is that it becomes stale, and then we have to ask ourselves, "Is our mission still relevant?" Because life changes, circumstances change.

I'm sure as pastors you see this or will see it in your parishes. So, the question always has to be, "What is our mission, and how can we advance it in the most compelling, faithful, inspiring way?" When you operate with that mind-set as a community, you invariably take risks, you introduce novel ways of doing things, and you launch new initiatives.

And when you start new initiatives that are faithful to the mission, the money always follows.

Another example from Yale makes this a little more concrete. We were in serious debt. But the response of the predominantly lay board of trustees before Fr. Bob came on the scene was to send a general appeal letter once a year that wasn't even customized. Not surprisingly, they weren't getting any responses to this very negative, generically written letter, and what happened over the course of ten years was that donations really ebbed. To make matters worse, the board decided to delete a huge percentage of the mailing list to cut expenses.

When we initiated our campaign, the first thing we had to do was massive damage control, and that meant finding those people whose names had been deleted and reclaiming their data. That strategy began to pay off-literally. One of our first million-dollar gifts came from a gentleman whose name had been deleted. In fact, he had never given before to Saint Thomas More Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale. Once we got beyond damage control, we knew that to be successful we had to be worthy in the eyes of prospective donors of their generosity. It wasn't fair to ask anybody to contribute to a campaign we wouldn't contribute to ourselves. So the starting point for us was to make sure that our mission was relevant, that we could communicate it well, and that we were actively advancing our mission in a manner worthy of generosity.

To that end, we began to introduce some bold new programs, like the one we called "Life as a Scholar and a Believer." It worked this way: once a month after the 5:00 p.m. Sunday liturgy, we would invite a Catholic professor from various departments or disciplines at Yale to speak, not about their scholarship but about their personal life of faith.

Students were mesmerized by this first-of-its-kind program. They knew their professors were intellectual heroes and heroines, but they had no idea of the degree to which their personal faith informed their scholarship and their personal sense of vocation. Another

attractive feature was that the program cost us almost nothing to run. We didn't have to fly in speakers or put them up in hotels. They were already on campus.

And guess what happened? When alumni around the country heard about the speakers program, they loved it and started sending in donations to support the chapel's operating and programmatic expenses. So it again illustrates several key points I'm hoping you'll leave with today: money follows mission, and successful fundraising means doing things differently from how they've always been done. Be bold and imaginative when the circumstances demand it.

### **Putting the Pieces Together**

In addition to imaginative programs, it's critical that as fundraisers you assemble really competent people, both volunteers and staff. I frankly have a bias against professional fundraising companies. They're often expensive, and sometimes they're successful, sometimes they're not. I think it's better — though admittedly harder — to find an individual you have confidence in who possesses four essential strengths. First is being able to speak and write well. Second is showing drive and initiative and not waiting for a set of tasks. Third is being enthusiastic, passionate, and totally committed to the mission of the parish and vision of the campaign. And fourth is having somebody who is committed to and articulate about Catholicism and genuine in their love of the church.

Once you have the talent and programs in place and start thinking of fundraising as evangelization and engagement rather than as a distraction from your pastoral duties, then you'll be well on your way to a successful development program. As I've tried to emphasize, fundraising is ministry, and seeing prospective donors as subjects rather than objects allows us to approach our task with confidence, humility, and joy.

As Henri Nouwen stated in his book, *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, "From beginning to end, fundraising as ministry is grounded in prayer, and undertaken in gratitude."

### **Endnotes**

See Henri Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising* [The Henri Nouwen Spirituality Series] (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2010), 55.