

# Hearing the Call: Understanding Stewardship



"Goodness is easier to recognize than to define."

-W. H. Auden

## Pre-study Exercise

The word "stewardship" can have many different meanings. Take a moment to describe the words or ideas that come to mind when you hear the word "stewardship." Would you view your responses as positive or negative?

In their pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, the U.S. Bishops tell us that Christ is reaching out for us to follow Him; "Jesus' call is urgent. He does not tell people to follow him at some time in the future but here and now-at this moment, in these circumstances."

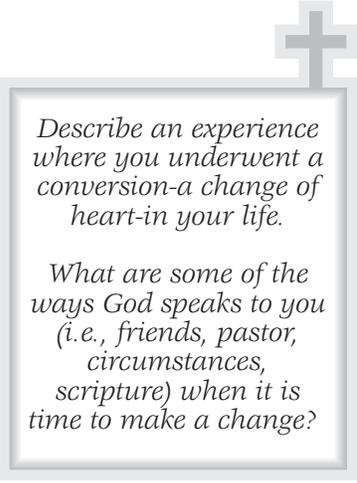
But what does it mean to respond to this call and grow in our life of discipleship? The answer to this question is not found in a new program or a particular spiritual habit, but rather in a way of life. And that way of life is called stewardship: "Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ leads naturally to the practice of stewardship. These linked realities, discipleship and stewardship, then make up the fabric of a Christian life in which each day is lived in an intimate, personal relationship with the Lord" (*Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, hereafter called DR).

Stewardship takes us on a journey that lasts a lifetime, but in its essence, stewardship asks us to "receive God's gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly in justice with others, and return them with increase to the Lord" (DR).

Let us examine how we embark on this journey and how we mature into our lives of stewardship.

## Stewardship - A Conversion of the Heart

Christ's call to his disciples is simple yet profound, "Follow me." Responding to that call means conversion. Literally, a change of our hearts. And this conversion process happens throughout our lives as our understanding of Christ's call deepens. The Church teaches that our salvation unfolds in history, in this time and this place. We must discern the call of Christ as we discover our vocation and how we should we live at this moment. The very nature of our relationship to God in history requires a continual conversion, changes, as we respond to his call to follow in the manner unique to us.



*Describe an experience where you underwent a conversion-a change of heart-in your life.*

*What are some of the ways God speaks to you (i.e., friends, pastor, circumstances, scripture) when it is time to make a change?*

One way to think about the connection between discipleship and stewardship is to see discipleship as the willingness to say yes, to be converted, to change, and stewardship as the conscious, practical, and concrete ways we say yes and then act in our personal lives to carry out Christ's call and our vocation.

Our desire to follow Christ in this life of stewardship finds strength from the community of the Church that encourages and helps us to discern our call. We must seek to place ourselves within this community and look to both its nourishment and our responsibility to it. We must also remember that as conversion takes place in the heart, each member of the body will be at different places in this journey. We must have patience as the Holy Spirit teaches us all things (John 14:26) and leads us to the truth.

Some will hear the message of stewardship and immediately respond to its beckoning. Others will resist, because stewardship strikes at the core of who we are and how we live; change can prove difficult. We will have to remain committed and diligent to meet each other with encouragement for the particular place we find ourselves in our understanding of stewardship. Most importantly, we will pray for the strength to continue our journey and to do the work of the Kingdom.

### **Prayer - The Gateway to Stewardship**

Prayer is hard work. The Catechism makes this clear:

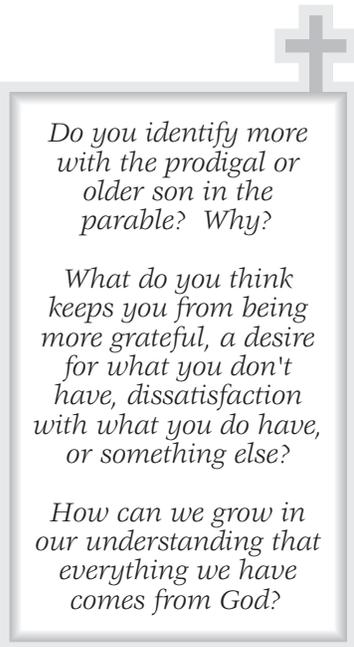
Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort...We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. The "spiritual battle" of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer. (2725)

As we seek to grow in stewardship, especially as a church and a community, we must begin in prayer. The act of prayer unifies us and focuses our attention toward God. It recognizes our need for His grace to aid us in our efforts. It transforms us to become the agents of Christ and minister in a broken world. And when we enter the very heart of prayer, as St. John of the Cross tells us, we find silence, a place to hear what God longs to share with us.

Hopefully we can enter into a special season of prayer as stewardship unfolds in our parishes. The pastor and stewardship committee can emphasize prayer in all their planning and implementation meetings; the parish can be encouraged to pray to receive the stewardship message with an open heart; we can all pray to let the Spirit lead us to the decisions and commitments we can make to become better stewards.

### **Gratitude - The Foundation of Stewardship**

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, not everyone rejoices at the prodigal's return. As the household feasts and celebrates, the older brother complains to the father, "Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends" (Luke 15:29). The reply of the father should give us pause, "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours" (Luke 15:31).



*Do you identify more with the prodigal or older son in the parable? Why?*

*What do you think keeps you from being more grateful, a desire for what you don't have, dissatisfaction with what you do have, or something else?*

*How can we grow in our understanding that everything we have comes from God?*

How many Catholics live like the older son? Born into the faith, they receive the sacraments and dutifully attend mass and the other functions of the church, yet they feel God has denied them something either spiritually or materially. Where are all the blessings and happiness everyone else seems to receive? But all the while the Father says to us, "Everything I have is yours."

The roots of this problem can be traced directly back to a lack of gratitude. Often that lack stems from the inability to comprehend what God has done for us. In his endless reaching toward us in love, God changed the fabric of creation by sending us His Son who gave His life for our salvation. He continues to reach out through the Eucharist and His many acts of goodness and blessing in our daily lives. When we reach a proper understanding of all God has done on our behalf, can our response consist of anything less than an overwhelming sense of gratitude and praise?

In his allegorical novel, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis creates a universe where the inhabitants of hell are allowed to take a bus ride to heaven and remain if they like. Sadly, most return to hell. But one passenger who stays rightly asks an angel, "I thought whether you dwelt in heaven or hell had already been decided before your death." The angel replies that from the moment of salvation to "the end of all things...the Blessed will say, 'We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,' and the Lost, 'We were always in Hell.' And both will speak truly."

In much the same way, those with gratitude see every good thing in their lives flowing from God's grace and they understand their responsibility for the gifts given them by the Father because everything originates from Him and not themselves. They cannot perceive the world in any other way but as an outpouring of His blessings. Those without a heart of gratitude cannot even receive the awesome sacrifice of Christ, the divine taking on the limitations of the temporal, including death, without turning it into that most American of phrases, "I accepted Christ," as if the unmerited gift of salvation depends upon our will and action. Such an attitude leads to a life of spiritual immaturity where, like spoiled children, we constantly cry, "Mine! Mine! Mine!" never realizing, like the older son, that God offers us all we need as a gift but can give us nothing when it is demanded because our lives remain closed to His presence.

We live in a culture driven by the engines of desire and dissatisfaction. To consume more we must be convinced we need more; to trade what we have for something more shiny and new we must be persuaded that what we possess falls far short of what we might acquire. This constant pressure to consume makes us selfish; how can I possibly share what I have when I don't yet have enough for myself? Desire and dissatisfaction blind us to the uncomfortable truth: for an ungrateful heart there will never be enough.

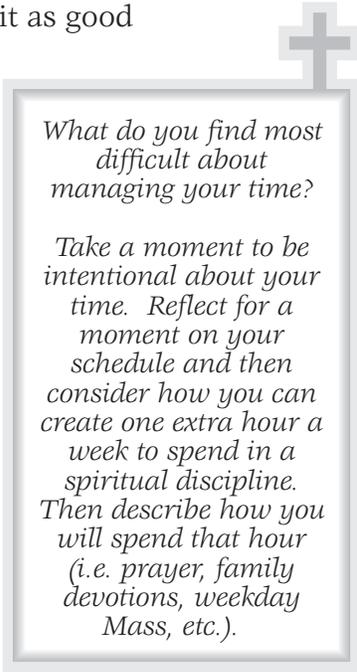
Paradoxically, stewardship will never mean anything to us until we realize we are stewards. If, like the older son, we believe God has never given us anything, then we will never feel compelled to offer anything back to God. Gratitude slowly awakens us to the fact that all we have and all we are, not just the surplus or the leftovers, flows from God. In thankfulness we begin to consider what to do with these gracious gifts. We have not earned our life; it has been entrusted to us to use in a way that brings glory to the One that bestowed it. Thoughtfully living that reality is stewardship.

## Time - The Stewardship Life

As we find ourselves converted to discipleship and look upon everything God has given us in gratitude, we rightfully ask, "How should I live as a good steward of these gifts?" Perhaps we should start with a commonality we all share: time. As people living in history, all of us have only a finite amount of time to accomplish what we value. As good stewards, we will begin to orient ourselves to invest time in a way that responds to God's call in our lives.

Prioritizing our time will inevitably lead us to the Eucharist. Here we find the strength and encouragement of Christ himself; here we join together as the Church to do His work; here we listen for where stewardship will lead us next. But all too often we come to the Eucharist empty-handed for we have not used our time to prepare for this encounter with Christ. This preparation can include prayer and meditating on scripture, family devotions, and spiritual exercises and reflection. As the pastoral letter asks, "And what do Christians bring to the Eucharistic celebration and join there with Jesus' offering? Their lives as Christian disciples; their personal vocations and the stewardship they have exercised regarding them; their individual contributions to the great work of restoring all things in Christ" (DR).

When Mass becomes a moment of inconvenience wedged between other activities, we have failed to think about time and the use of it as good stewards. One of the chief characteristics of stewardship is its emphasis on intention: we start considering all we do in light of our responsibility as stewards and we act in all areas of our lives for a reason. This intentionality begins with our time, our deep commitment to the Eucharist, spending time with God in prayer, and other decisions radiate outward from it. A quote attributed to St. Francis should sum up our attitude to time, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." What we say will never tell the true story of our stewardship; what we do always will. And we cannot be about the Father's business unless we make time to do so. Often we tell ourselves we will find time "when." "When my children are grown, I will have time...", "When work at the office slows down...", "When I retire..." But "when" never arrives because something else always arrives to distract us. We make time for what truly matters to us: "For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be" (Luke 12:34).



*What do you find most difficult about managing your time?*

*Take a moment to be intentional about your time. Reflect for a moment on your schedule and then consider how you can create one extra hour a week to spend in a spiritual discipline. Then describe how you will spend that hour (i.e. prayer, family devotions, weekday Mass, etc.).*

As we grow in stewardship, we will also grow in our ability to make the choices that give us the time to serve Christ. But we must be patient as we mature in this process. We can start with simple acts such as turning off the television thirty minutes sooner than usual; making daily Mass once a week; praying the rosary with our family. Stewardship of time means making time for the disciplines that must have priority in our lives.

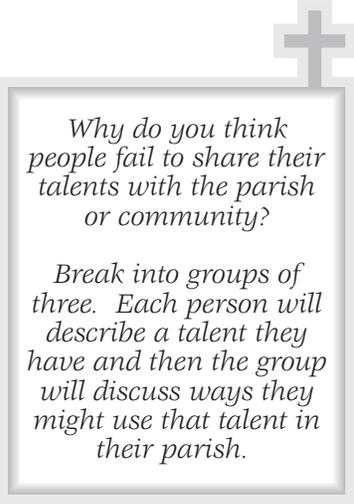
## Talent - The Stewardship Life

Someone once asked Herman Edwards, coach of the Kansas City Chiefs, the most important characteristic he looked for in a player. "I want a player that is available," replied Edwards. The coach went on to explain that a player can have all the talent in the world but unless he practices hard, avoids injury, is willing to learn, and gives everything he has to the team, he won't make a difference.

Are we available or unavailable when it comes to using our talents for the Church and the Kingdom? We return to the disciple's willingness to say yes when God calls us for his work because the "harvest is abundant but the laborers are few" (Matthew 9:37). As good stewards we stand ready to discover our place in the fields.

Often we look at the lives of priests and religious and wonder what we can do, whether our talents and skills matter. St. Paul faced the same issue with the church in Corinth, and he used the analogy of the body to explain the role we all play:

But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you," nor again the head to the feet, "I do not need you." Indeed the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary, and those parts of the body that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor, and our less presentable parts are treated with greater propriety, whereas our more presentable parts do not need this. But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy. (I Corinthians 12:20-26)



*Why do you think people fail to share their talents with the parish or community?*

*Break into groups of three. Each person will describe a talent they have and then the group will discuss ways they might use that talent in their parish.*

The US Bishops' pastoral letter describes this relationship of the part to the body as "cherishing and fostering the gifts of all, while using one's own gifts to serve the community of faith" (DR). Each of us has a part to play in the proper functioning of the body. All too often, our churches are weakened or even crippled because all the parts of the body are not working. We have not embraced the call to stewardship to find our place and use our talent to ensure a healthy body ready to accomplish Christ's work.

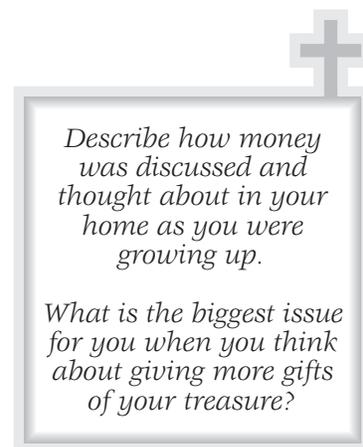
We cannot assume that how we can use our talent for the good of the body will always be apparent. Through prayer, discernment, and the help of the Spirit, we might have to find creative ways to best put our talents to work. Sometimes we have to resist the urge to fill in the blank of every sign-up sheet; stewards understand they have unique gifts and a vocation that will lead them to the ministries that will make the most of their talents. Once we become available to God, we will be ready for the right opportunity no matter when it appears. Stewards know that in addition to employing their talents for the community of the Church, they have been sent into the wider world: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). What does it mean to exercise the stewardship of our talents in our homes, our jobs, and in the community? These questions require great reflection and wisdom. No wonder that St. Paul tells us to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). We will reflect on the wider implications of stewardship a bit later.

Although stewardship brings great responsibility, it also brings great comfort. Just like the teaching on the body, we do not have to reach beyond the part God has asked us to play in His work. Sometimes the challenges and needs of the Church and the world can overwhelm and paralyze us. God never asks for more than what He has provided. We must thoughtfully consider our unique contribution given our unique gifts, talents, and place. Certainly "much will be required of the person entrusted with much" (Luke 12:48), but equally, "my yoke is easy, my burden light" (Luke 11:30). And that yoke grows easier as we become more and more available to God because we know He will never ask what we cannot accomplish with the talents He has provided us.

## **Treasure - The Stewardship Life**

"Don't talk about money!" This refrain often echoes through the halls of our churches. Pastors are reluctant to discuss money, because it makes people uncomfortable and defensive. Parishoners don't want to hear about money because they view it as a matter of privacy. "People will figure that out for themselves," both sides say. Few things can create tension faster than a discussion about money. Is it any wonder couples cite money as the leading source of friction in their marriages?

But the real struggle with treasure and stewardship is far more complicated. In money, the Spirit of Christ collides with the spirit of the times. Americans use money to measure their worth against other people and to create their identity. In our culture the possession of money has become equated with security, and no one likes to confront their fears about losing the ability to make their own choices. Father Henri Nouwen describes the situation well, "money has something to do with that intimate place in our heart where we need security, and we do not want to reveal our need or give away our security to someone who, maybe only accidentally, might betray us."



Perhaps things haven't changed all that much. Jesus talks about money four times more than any other topic in the gospels. When He tells the disciples that "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God," the disciples ask in disbelief, "Who then can be saved" (Matthew 19:24-25)? Jesus, a master of language, always sought to create a metaphor that would drive home the essence of his teaching. In this case, the point seems clear: our relationship to money will be one of the most difficult issues in our spiritual lives. But we need not lose hope; as Jesus replies to the disciples, "For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

God does not want our money. He wants us. And we can tell anyone who will listen that money does not matter to us even as we cling more tightly to it. As we travel the road of stewardship, we will all reach a crossroads where God asks for all of us. For many in our consumption-driven culture, that choice will be tied both literally and symbolically to our relationship towards money.

How much should we give? That question can only be answered as we listen to God's call in our lives. Guidelines from the parish and diocese provide a good and challenging place to start, but as we mature we will find our giving changes according to our position in life, the needs of the church and community, and the ways God leads us deeper into fellowship with Him. The question at any moment will always be, "Am I trusting in what I have or in the One that provides what I have?"

Stewardship quickly moves us away from money as a possession that we must protect to focusing on the good it can accomplish. Nouwen sees giving as "the opportunity to put [our] resources at the disposal of the Kingdom ...[it is] the chance to invest what [we] have in the work of God." When we begin to understand that what we have can enable Christ to transform people and communities, we start thinking about money in a very different way. Suddenly we cannot give enough. We look for ways to simplify our lives so more can become available for the Kingdom. Instead of giving to a need we become stewards with a need to give.

### **Stewards of All Creation**

"God wishes human beings to be his collaborators in the work of creation, redemption, and sanctification; and such collaboration involves stewardship in its most profound sense." (DR)

Annie Dillard once wrote that she believed a handful of monks and other religious people kept the world from collapsing by their prayers of intercession. Her thoughts strike at the heart of our widening vision of stewardship. We are, in a way that should astound us, God's partner in accomplishing His purposes in the world. This responsibility should both humble and energize us as we think about the way we live each day.

As Americans, we must remain vigilant to listen for the voice of the Spirit and attend to the teachings of the Church as we live our stewardship lives. Our national past and identity can sometimes cause obstacles to partnering with God in the work of the Kingdom. Chief among these obstacles is a long American tradition of fatalism.

We see this fatalism from the first incursions of European settlement. A Puritan worldview that saw salvation and damnation as predestined; a belief in Manifest Destiny that permitted the destruction of indigenous peoples during westward expansion; foreign policy that assumes the triumph of American ideology and military power; a tendency to view social injustice and environmental destruction as inevitable situations that cannot be changed or improved; a faith in markets as the only economic model for the world.



*How can we widen our perspective of stewardship to include the global as well as the local?*

*Describe some practical ways we can join with God as a "collaborator" in the stewardship of creation.*

The Church has taught from its beginnings that our lives and the world are not determined. St. Paul declares, "For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). Whenever we believe any person, power, or system is greater than Christ's redeeming love, we are in slavery. We can never reach the fullness of stewardship until we affirm there are no exceptions to what God might do through us and the Church when we offer ourselves fully to Him. We are called to be heralds of hope.

"It ain't nobody's business if I do," sang Billie Holliday. Those words might very well serve as America's official motto. We have taken our gift of individual freedom to mean all decisions and all sense of responsibility begins and ends with our personal choices and emotions. This rampant individualism turns everyone into a god whose credo becomes, "I have to do what's right for me," which very often means in reality, "I'm going to do what's most convenient for me."

Christ made it clear in the Garden that He would have preferred another option to the cross, but He submitted to a greater authority and a greater good, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Christ chose the salvation of humanity over his own personal desire and comfort. Our life of stewardship will always lead us back to community and relationships in stark contrast to the individualism around us.

Christ calls us to a life of discipleship. The life of stewardship bears witness to the truth of our response. Are you ready for the journey?

# Group Reflection and Prayer for Hearing the Call

## Reflections and Prayer

Session I - To occur after finishing Prayer - The Gateway to Stewardship

Begin the reflection and prayer time by slowly praying the Diocesan Stewardship Prayer (in the front of the guide) together. The leader should allow three to five minutes of silent prayer for each reflection.

**Leader:** When we meet with God in silence, we have an opportunity to hear His call to us. Let us reflect on where God is leading us in our stewardship journey.

**Reflection 1:**

Father, what does Christ's invitation, "Follow me," mean for my life at this time?

**Reflection 2:**

Father, in what ways do I need a change of heart to serve you better?

**Reflection 3:**

Father, show me how I might deepen my life of prayer to pray as I live and live as I pray.

## Reflections and Prayer

Session II - To occur after completion of formation section of guide

Begin the reflection and prayer time by slowly praying the Diocesan Stewardship Prayer (in the front of the guide) together. The leader should allow three to five minutes of silent prayer for each reflection.

**Leader:** As we consider our lives as stewards, let us reflect on the key elements of the stewardship life.

**Reflection 1:**

Reflect and pray on changes you might need to make in your priorities of time.

**Reflection 2:**

Reflect and pray on how God is inviting you to use your talents for the Kingdom.

**Reflection 3:**

Reflect and pray on the ways you might have to change your relationship to money to become more generous.