

# “Who Says Stewardship Isn't About Money?”

MARIANNE MURPHY

**Y**es, this may be a controversial approach to our subject, and yes, I run the risk of the reader misunderstanding the premise before I really begin. So much discussion and controversy surround the very mention of "money" in the same sentence with stewardship that I felt the discussion worth the risk. This discussion really revved up after the third pastor from my diocese proudly but discreetly let me know that his parish was a true stewardship parish—a parish where money was never mentioned!

So let me first make clear my premise: What we do with our money says a lot about who we are. The late Archbishop Thomas Murphy used to say if you want to know what you stand for, open your checkbook register and look at what

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you spend your money on. I am not proposing that we begin to use homilies and bulletins to badger or guilt people into giving more. But I do believe that teaching a moral perspective on our choices about money has a place in our parishes. We all complain of the consumerism and materialism rampant in our culture, but our churches have little to offer people honestly looking for a way to tackle the issue.

Money, for good or bad, is a major driving force in our culture, and responsible for much of the good and evil in our world. To ignore money in the one realm of our lives where moral dimensions are examined is to do a disservice to the people who come to our churches hoping to find some perspective on issues that touch their lives. I believe the Church should not be reluctant or skittish about challenging its people regarding money issues.

## WHY SO CONTROVERSIAL?

Let's examine this issue by answering a series of questions. Why is this such a controversial and touchy issue in the first place? A pastor would never be reluctant to challenge the flock when asking them to offer their gifts of time and talent as choir members or Eucharistic ministers or religious education volunteers. Why does the tenor change so when we talk about the offering of material blessings?

There has been a pendulum swing in attitudes about offertory and money over the last 35 to 40 years due to bad experiences. We have gone from posting giving lists on the back wall of the church and constant begging practices, to currently, almost a total avoidance of the subject of money except when in dire need of funds to pay bills. Historically, our Catholic culture has been one of the immigrant masses giving to institutional need—bricks and mortar, programs, schools and boilers. But as the immigrant masses have become affluent suburbanites, the culture and attitudes of minimal giving have remained the same.

Last year at a meeting on stewardship at the Alban Institute in Louisville, Kentucky, one of the researchers discussing differences in congregational giving pointed to a recent

survey. One of the survey questions was "Why do you give to your church?" Among Presbyterians and Catholics, the majority answered: "I love this institution-it is an important part of my life." Among Pentecostal and Assembly of God members, the majority said, "God asks it of us."

Interesting and telling responses that reflect different perspectives on the same touchy issue. And, let's face it, among Catholics there is sometimes the misunderstanding that to speak about money matters in Church *only and always* means ASKING FOR MONEY, which is not at all what I'm talking about.

Actually, I'm sometimes discouraged that we tend to look at stewardship as purely a Church issue. Like "foxhole converts," the conversion to a stewardship way of life happens somewhere in the living of our lives, not usually while sitting in church on Sunday. Someone once described stewardship conversion as a three step process: first comes the heart, second the mind, and third is the pocketbook.

Stewards see themselves as God's agents, caretakers of all they have and are, willing to share what they have to help those in need materially and spiritually. This way of living is done mostly outside of our parishes. It influences everything we decide and the choices we make about how we live.

### **OBLIGATION OR WAY OF LIFE?**

Another question we need to ask ourselves is, "Do we really believe stewardship is a way of life or do we deep down believe it to be simply an obligation and a way to pay for parish

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services?" When we understand stewardship as a way of life it becomes easier to see money not as a necessary evil but as a gift, something we can share as we share our other gifts. How do we move people beyond the lifelong quest for the "minimal *respectable gift*" to an attitude that makes them comfortable with trusting and sharing their abundance?

As Dan Conway, a nationally recognized leader in the Catholic stewardship movement, has written in his collection of essays, *The Good Steward*, the answer lies in helping people to understand giving not as an obligation, but as a generous giving-back to God in gratitude for many gifts received. In other words, be intentional and *teach* stewardship. Gratitude and generosity go hand in hand. You can't require someone to be generous-it comes from the heart. It does not measure giving according to a respectable minimum or obligation, but rather from faith and trust.

From the parish perspective, we can help people understand that when we give, we involve ourselves in all areas of the parish's

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mission: we *all* visit the parish sick; we *all* help teach religious education; we *all* share in the administration of the sacraments; we *all* counsel the bereaved. We cannot personally participate in all of these activities in our parishes, but because we give as stewards, we make it possible for others in the parish to carry out these activities. And though giving money is never, alone and of itself, enough, it becomes a representation of our

own outreach to those around us. We are not just paying our dues or somehow keeping

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God happy. Financial support of the Church's mission then becomes important to each of us because of what it enables us to do and what it enables us to be.

### **WHO WILL TAKE THE RISK AND RAISE THE ISSUE**

The way we use and view our money has a moral dimension: it says who we are. We are *Christians*. Does that, and should that, affect our perspective, our choices? Of course it should. Add to this the overwhelming consumer-driven culture we live in. Who will offer guidance and counsel to our people in these matters if our spiritual leaders are afraid to?

Those who want some control over the rat race look to books for some insights. Read through the best-seller list. You will find Suze Orman's philosophical look at our attitudes toward money in, *The Courage to Be Rich*. Another long timer on the list is *Simple*

*Abundance* by Sarah Ban Breathnach. Her book takes the approach that more people want to live simply and opt out of the materialistic culture of more, more, more. Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* is not so much about money, but more about the gratitude and generosity of the Depression and World War II generation. It gives me pause to think about how succeeding generations, including my own, are learning gratitude and generosity without much adversity in our

lives-adversity that helps form character. One special book is Mitch Albom's, *Tuesday's With Morrie*, the true story of a successful writer's re-acquaintance with a beloved and terminally ill college professor named Morrie. One chapter, The Eighth Tuesday--"We Talk About Money"-fits our discussion. Here is just one paragraph from this rich chapter:

*"When people die, you always hear the expression 'You can't take it with you.' Morrie seemed to know that a long time ago. 'We've got a form of brainwashing going on in our country,' Morrie sighed. 'Do you know how they brainwash people? They repeat something over and over. And that's what we do in this country. Owning things is good. More money is good. More property is good. More commercialism is good. More is good. More is good. We repeat it-and have it repeated to us-over and over until nobody bothers to even think otherwise. The average person is so fogged up by all this, he has no perspective on what's really important anymore. Money is not a substitute for tenderness, and power is not a substitute for tenderness. I can tell you, as I'm sitting here dying, when you most need it, neither money nor power will give you the feeling you're looking for, no matter how much of them you have.'"*

Wouldn't that chapter make the basis for a fine homily some Sunday? I think so. Isn't that just what our Lord said many times to His disciples? It doesn't have anything to do with asking people to put more in their envelopes, but has everything to do with stewardship and asking them to think about their priorities.

### **HOW DO WE APPROACH THE MONEY ISSUES AT THE PARISH?**

First, we need to teach and reinforce that stewardship of time, talent and treasure is a way of life, not just what we do for the parish but how we give of ourselves in our families, the workplace, the community as well as the parish. Secondly, we need to integrate stewardship of time, talent and treasure into all

areas of parish life-look for examples in scripture that will reinforce the idea. Third, change the internal process that stresses parish need to one that sees the personal need of the giver to give. Talk about giving in proportion to blessings as a way to express gratitude. Remind them that although proportional giving gets harder to do as we make more, it is no less expected of us.

Fourth, parish accountability should be a model of stewardship, a reflection of the U. S. Bishop's pastoral letter on stewardship: *"receive gifts gratefully, tend them responsibly, share them with others and return them with increase to the Lord."* We cannot ask of our people what we do not practice ourselves in parish resource management. Fifth, know what motivates people to give. What are the human and spiritual needs in the parish that motivate giving-what do we do that inspires?

And lastly, use contemporary stories that people relate to, and use the stories we have, the stories of the New Testament and those Jesus told to those who had serious questions. He often used money in his stories. Life then wasn't as different as we might think. Money was as central an issue to the people of Jesus' time as it is to ours, and He knew it. In one gospel, Jesus uses a unit of money, the talent, to show Peter how to measure forgiveness. In another, the Pharisees try to trick Jesus with a question about paying tribute to Rome with money. St. Paul chose to single out the

Macedonians for their generosity as an example to others he visited. The stories are there.

But one of the best, the parable of the Good Samaritan, fully develops the idea of stewardship as using our time, talent and treasure to advance the Kingdom. Remember it is a parable, fashioned by our Lord in response to a very important question: "What must I do to gain eternal life?" He ends the story of the man beaten by robbers and ignored by several important fellow-travelers: Time, Talent & Treasure in the Gospel of Luke: "But a Samaritan who was traveling that way came upon the man, and when he saw him, his heart was filled with pity. He went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them; then he took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Take care of him,' he told the innkeeper, 'and when I come back this way, I will pay you whatever else you spend on him'" (Lk 10:33-35).

**Marianne Murphy**  
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