

Giving Back to God the First Fruits of Our Labor

The fourth fundamental aspect of Christian stewardship is acknowledging with gratitude that even our material wealth and financial resources come from God. The Christian steward not only recognizes the gifts of assets and income, but also commits to giving God back the very "first fruits" of these resources. This commitment is referred to as "sacrificial giving."

American Spending Priorities

Many consider Americans to live in the most profligate consumer society in the world. Consider how the average American spends his or her discretionary income. According to studies completed within the last ten years, Americans spend their discretionary income in some of the following ways:

- \$44 billion a year on soft drinks
- \$35 billion a year on sports activities
- \$29 billion a year on diets
- \$19.5 billion on state lottery tickets
- \$12 billion a year on candy
- \$ 8 billion a year on pets
- \$5.5 billion a year on pinball machines and video games
- \$3.5 billion a year on cut flowers
- \$2.2 billion for church activities
- \$1.5 billion on fingernails

This list is a reflection of our culture's priorities. It is a culture in which we must educate Catholics about what it means to be a Christian steward. The challenge is practicing stewardship in a culture that is not receptive to it. Our culture defines the above list of spending habits as normal. The question that challenges us is: Does the above list suggest something about our own patterns of spending? Is our own consumer behavior consistent with the Gospel message?

Putting God First

The Christian steward understands that the slavery to consumerism must be challenged by consciously deciding to give God the first fruits of our labors. Sacrificial giving is how we as Christians describe giving the first fruits of our labors back to God. It means giving the first portion of our material wealth, our financial resources, our money. Implicit in sacrificial giving is the recognition by Christian disciples that everything that we have, our time, our health, our relationships, our material possessions, our money, are gifts from God. The Holy Spirit helps us recognize the need we have in our hearts to give a portion of these gifts back to God with a generous heart.

Sacrificial giving is accomplished most concretely by giving generously to the local Church, to the parish communion, and to the community at large through charitable and civic organizations. As the bishops' pastoral states: "And parishioners must accept responsibility for their parishes and contribute generously, both money and personal service - to their programs and projects" (34).

Sacrificial Giving

After conscious decisions have been made to make prayer a daily habit, to spend time nurturing our family relationships, and giving something of ourselves to the worshiping community, it is now time to make a prayerful decision about giving back to God the first fruits of our labors, our money.

ONE: A prayerful decision - The first element of sacrificial giving is that it is a decision borne out of prayer, recognizing the Holy Spirit urging on our need to return to God the "first fruits" of the material wealth we have earned or acquired. This step means taking time out, a pause, to pray and make a deliberate decision to change our spending habits that will make God the first recipient of our income.

TWO: Deliberately planned - The second element of sacrificial giving means being responsible to budget a certain amount to give back to the Lord, taking care to account for family needs and obligations, and taking into consideration the family's resources and personal circumstances.

How much should we give? There is no magic number. But we can start with an assessment of our level of giving now. Is the proportion of our income that we give back to God the first portion? And does that portion adequately reflect our gratitude for God's generosity?

Giving Back to God the First Fruits of Our Labor ...Continued....

Some people use the biblical title of the first 10% of their income as a guideline. Many Christian thinkers in the area of stewardship recommend that we give 5% to our Church through the offertory collection, 1% to the Archdiocese and 4% to other charities that serve the poor and needy and support the common good in our communities.

The chart on the next page will give you an idea of how total household income translates into percentages of giving to the offertory collection. Again, there is no "right" answer. Your gift is your return to God a proportion of the gifts God has given you, which you choose to share with your parish and other charities. Your decision about the amount you give will be one which makes sense and truly reflects your gratefulness to God for the gifts you have received.

"Every one shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which God has given you" (Deut. 16:17).

THREE: Calling for sacrifice - The third element is that a commitment be made that requires us to go beyond our consumer behavior's "comfort zone." The proportion of our gift becomes sacrificial when it causes us to cut back on other spending habits. When we give out of our need, like the Gospel story of the Widow's mite, then we experience spiritual transformation.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can take from this third element is that if you can give your gift and not notice it, it is not a sacrificial gift. The element of sacrifice is present when something about your life has to change in order for you to be able to give the gift. You re-prioritize your spending habits, you re-consider your values. Then, every time you make your sacrificial gift, you are able to recall the reasons why you chose to give.

Sacrificial giving is the steward's way of following the Lord, who sacrificed everything so that we might have eternal life. We give up something of ourselves so that others can flourish. Then, we in turn, experience an even deeper relationship with Christ.

When giving becomes sacrificial, it compels us to look toward our true source of security. When we give away something we think we need to survive, we acknowledge that our material gains will not take care of us, will not save us. Only God will make us safe, and recognizing that reality helps to raise our consciousness about discipleship.

"Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7).

Household Income		Weekly giving to The Parish Envelope		
Monthly	Yearly	3% Weekly To The Parish	4% Weekly To The Parish	5% Weekly To The Parish
\$500	\$6,000	\$3.50	\$4.50	\$5.75
\$835	\$10,000	\$6.00	\$8.00	\$10.00
\$1,665	\$20,000	\$12.00	\$15.00	\$19.00
\$2,085	\$25,000	\$14.00	\$19.00	\$24.00
\$2,500	\$30,000	\$17.00	\$23.00	\$29.00
\$2,915	\$35,000	\$20.00	\$27.00	\$34.00
\$3,335	\$40,000	\$23.00	\$31.00	\$38.00
\$3,750	\$45,000	\$26.00	\$35.00	\$43.00
\$4,165	\$50,000	\$29.00	\$38.00	\$48.00
\$5,000	\$60,000	\$35.00	\$46.00	\$58.00
\$5,835	\$70,000	\$40.00	\$54.00	\$67.00
\$6,665	\$80,000	\$46.00	\$62.00	\$77.00
\$7,500	\$90,000	\$52.00	\$69.00	\$87.00
\$8,335	\$100,000	\$58.00	\$77.00	\$96.00



Stewardship