
Session 5

Stewards of the Church

Focus

As baptized members of the Church we are called to be stewards of the Church, sharing in the responsibility for its mission. We are also invited to put ourselves at the service of the whole human family.

Sharing Experience

BACKGROUND

Stewardship of the Church means cherishing and fostering the gifts of all while using our own gifts to participate in and support the Church's mission of proclaiming and teaching, serving and sanctifying. "This participation takes different forms according to people's different gifts and offices, but there is a fundamental obligation arising from the sacrament of baptism (cf: Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 15): that people place their gifts, their resources—themselves—at God's service in and through the church. Here also, Jesus is the model. Even though his self-emptying is unique, it is within the power of disciples, and a duty, that they be generous stewards of the church, giving freely of their time, talent, and treasure" (*Stewardship*, 34).

The focus in stewardship is often on the giving, but the giving is not without reward. In the words of St. Francis of Assisi, "it is in giving that we receive." The poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it this way:

A poor man served by thee shall make
thee rich;
A sick man helped by thee shall make
thee strong;
Thou shalt be served thyself by every sense
Of service which thou renderest.

(*A Drama of Exile*)

Understanding this makes our stewardship not a burden to be shouldered wearily, but an opportunity to be embraced with joy.

QUESTION

When have you found yourself helped and healed by those you set out to help and heal?

Listening to the Word

INVOCATION

Begin the reading of the Scriptures with this short prayer (or another of your own choosing) followed by a few moments of silence: **Come, Lord Jesus! You promised that when two or more are gathered in Your name, You would be there also. Help us to see You in the reading of Your Word. Amen.** Then read the passages aloud.

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift . . . And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of

faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ, so that we may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming. Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love.

Mark 8:1-8

In those days when there again was a great crowd without anything to eat, he summoned the disciples and said, "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will collapse on the way, and some of them have come a great distance." His disciples answered him, "Where can anyone get enough bread to satisfy them here in this deserted place?" Still he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" "Seven," they replied. He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then, taking the seven loaves he gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to his disciples to distribute, and they distributed them to the crowd. They also had a few fish. He said the blessing over them and ordered them distributed also. They ate and were satisfied. They picked up the fragments left over—seven baskets. There were about four thousand people.

BACKGROUND

"Those who enter into Jesus' new covenant find themselves growing in a union of minds and hearts with others who also have responded to God's call. They find their hearts and minds expanding to embrace all men and women, especially those in need, in a communion of mercy and love.

"The Eucharist is the great sign and agent of this expansive communion of charity. 'Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are

one body, for we all partake of the one loaf' (1 Cor 10:17). Here people enjoy a unique union with Christ and, in him, with one another. Here his love—indeed, his very self—flows into his disciples and, through them and their practice of stewardship, to the entire human race. Here Jesus renews his covenant-forming act of perfect fidelity to God, while also making it possible for us to cooperate. In the Eucharist, Christians reaffirm their participation in the new covenant, they give thanks to God for blessings received and they strengthen their bonds of commitment to one another as members of the covenant community Jesus forms.

"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. Disciples give thanks to God for gifts received and strive to share them with others" (*Stewardship*, 37).

Sharing the Word

QUESTIONS

(Read the Scriptures again silently; then share your responses to these questions:)

- St. Paul is really talking about stewardship when he urges the Ephesians "to live in a manner worthy of the call [they] have received" and to "live the truth in love." What does that mean to me as a twentieth-century Catholic?
- Is there more to stewardship of the Church than donations of "time, talent, and treasure"?
- One interpretation of the Gospel story is that God's gifts, *shared*, will always be more than enough. What connections do I see between Eucharist and stewardship?
- If we have found this group to be an example of the "union of minds and hearts" that the bishops mention, what can we do to assure that this unity will not be lost when the six sessions have ended?

Prayer

Begin the prayer for this session with this responsorial prayer, based on the song, "One Bread, One Body" by John Foley, S.J.:

**One bread, one Body, oh Lord of all,
We, though many, would be one in You!**

**Gentile or Jew, neighbor or stranger,
We who are many, Lord—make us one!**

**Servant or free, worker or owner,
We who are many, Lord—make us one!**

**Woman or man, grown-up or child,
We who are many, Lord—make us one!**

**One bread, one Body, oh Lord of all,
We, though many, would be one in You!**

**Many the gifts, many the works,
One is their source, it's You!**

**Grain in the fields, scattered and grown,
Gathered and shared, it's You!**

**Grapes on the vine, ripened and crushed,
Poured out and shared, it's You!**

**One bread, one Body, oh Lord of all,
We who are many are one in You!**

(Allow time for shared prayer, and conclude by praying together this stewardship prayer:)

"O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature. Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God forever and ever. Amen"

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Follow Through

Together, we have read and reflected on parts of the bishops' pastoral letter on stewardship, we have heard and meditated on portions of Scripture in order to better understand the life of discipleship and stewardship to which our faith calls us, and we have shared our insights, our experiences, and our prayers. But St. Paul exhorts us to "build up the body of Christ"—chal-

lenging us to commit ourselves to constructive, concrete actions to reinforce what we have learned and encourage our growth in faith.

The following are some examples to spur your thinking:

- Pray daily for each member of this group, individually and by name.
- Make plans to attend Mass together as a group, perhaps inviting roommates, spouses, or friends to join you.
- Write a thank you note to someone whose "stewardship of the Church" has made a difference in your life. It might be a baptismal or confirmation sponsor, a teacher, the director of the music group, or anyone else whose ministry has enhanced your practice or understanding of the faith.
- Read and reflect on the Scriptures appointed for daily Mass this week. Attend a weekday Mass at your own parish or at a church near your workplace.

Because those intentions we have defined most clearly are the ones we are most likely to act upon, write your "follow through" intention here, and share it with the group if you are comfortable doing so.

Date: _____