
A SUMMARY OF THE 1992 U.S. BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTER, *STEWARDSHIP: A DISCIPLE'S RESPONSE*

To be a Christian steward

What identifies a Steward? Safeguarding material and human resources and using them responsibly is one answer; so is generous giving of time, talent, and treasure. But being a Christian steward means more. As Christian stewards, we receive God's gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly in justice with others, and return them with increase to the Lord.

Disciples as stewards

Let us begin with what it means to be a disciple—a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ. As members of the Church, Jesus calls us to be disciples. This has astonishing implications:

- ◆ Mature disciples make a conscious decision to follow Jesus, no matter what the cost.
- ◆ Christian disciples experience conversion, life-shaping changes of mind and heart and commit themselves to the Lord.
- ◆ Christian stewards respond in a particular way to the call to be a disciple. Stewardship has the power to shape and mold our understanding of our lives and the way in which we live.
- ◆ Jesus' disciples living as stewards recognize God as the origin of life, giver of freedom, and source of all things. We are grateful for the gifts we have received and are eager to use them to show our love for God and for one another. We look to the life and teaching of Jesus for guidance in living as Christian stewards.

Stewards of creation

The Bible contains a profound message about the stewardship of material creation: God created the world but entrusts it to human beings. Caring for and cultivating the world involves the following:

- ◆ Joyful appreciation for the God-given beauty and wonder of nature.
- ◆ Protection and preservation of the environment, which would be the stewardship of ecological concern.
- ◆ Respect for human life; shielding life from threat and assault, doing everything that can be done to enhance this gift and make life flourish.
- ◆ Development of this world through noble human effort, physical labor, the trades and professions, the arts and sciences. We call such effort work.

- ◆ Work is a fulfilling human vocation. The Second Vatican Council points out that, through work, we build up not only our world but also the kingdom of God, already present among us. Work is a partnership with God; our share in a divine-human collaboration. It occupies a central place in our lives as Christian stewards.

Stewards of vocation

Jesus calls us as his disciples to a new way of life, the Christian way of life, of which stewardship is a part.

Jesus does not call us as nameless people in a faceless crowd. He calls us individually, by name. Each one of us, clergy, religious, lay person; married, single; adult, child receives a personal call and a personal vocation. God intends each one of us to play a unique role in carrying out the divine plan.

The challenge, then, is to discover and understand our role, our vocation, and to respond generously to this call from God. Answering the call of Jesus Christ the Christian vocation entails the practice of stewardship. In addition, Christ calls each of us to be stewards of our personal vocations, which we receive from God.

Stewards of the church

Stewards of God's gifts are not passive beneficiaries. We cooperate with God in our own redemption and in the redemption of others. We are also obliged to be stewards of the Church, collaborators and cooperators in continuing the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which is the Church's essential mission. This mission is proclaiming and teaching, serving and sanctifying is our task. It is the personal responsibility of each one of us as stewards of the Church.

All members of the Church have their own roles to play in carrying out its mission:

- ◆ Parents, who nurture their children in the ways of the faith.
- ◆ Parishioners, who work in concrete ways to make their parishes true communities of faith and vibrant sources of service to the larger community.
- ◆ All Catholics, who give generous support, time, money, prayers, and personal service according to their circumstances to parish and diocesan programs and to the universal Church.

Obstacles to Stewardship

People who want to live as Christian disciples and Christian stewards face serious obstacles. In the United States and other nations, a dominant secular culture often contradicts religious convictions about the meaning of life. This culture frequently encourages us to focus on our pleasures and ourselves. At times, we can find it far too easy to ignore spiritual realities and to deny religion a role in shaping human and social values.

Catholics have entered into the mainstream of American society and experienced its advantages; many of us also have been adversely influenced by this secular culture. We know what it

is to struggle against selfishness and greed, and we realize that it is harder for many today to accept the challenge of being a Christian steward. It is essential, therefore, that we make a special effort to understand the true meaning of stewardship and live accordingly.

A Steward's Way

The life of a Christian steward models the life of Jesus. It is challenging and even difficult, in many respects, yet intense joy comes to those who take the risk to live as Christian stewards. Women and men who seek to live as stewards learn that "all things work for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

After Jesus, we look to Mary as an ideal steward. As the Mother of Christ, she lived her ministry in a spirit of fidelity and service. She responded generously to the call. We must ask ourselves: Do we also wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ and Christian stewards of our world and our Church?

Central to our human and Christian vocations, as well as to the unique vocation each of us receives from God, is that we be good stewards of the gifts we possess. God gives us this divine-human workshop, this world and Church of ours. The Spirit shows us the way. Stewardship is part of that journey.

Thoughts on the Pastoral Letter

The U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, has situated stewardship within the context of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. "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" (p.13). Stewards as Disciples see themselves as caretakers of God's many gifts. They are grateful for what they have received and eager to cultivate their gifts out of love for God and one another. Being a disciple and practicing stewardship are aspects of the same reality.

The U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter powerfully supports our efforts to promote stewardship.

The Pastoral:

1. Introduces a theology of stewardship for Catholics in America.
2. Emphasizes that stewardship is integral, not optional.
3. Links stewardship with our discipleship.

Some parishes use the Bishops' Pastoral Letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* as a study and prayer activity. Parishioners spend a specified amount of time between meetings reading and reflecting on one chapter of the pastoral letter and then gather in small groups to respond to the questions at the end of each chapter.

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