

# **CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP:**

## **REACHING OUR SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL**

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## **CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP**

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## CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP

To gain a complete understanding of Stewardship we must first look at the book of Genesis. These three truths are revealed:

1. God created man from the dust of the earth and breathed life into him
2. God created woman from the rib of man
3. God created the world we live in; the air, the seas, the sky and all living things

Thus, we realize that God is the source of all life.

The first aspect of Stewardship then, is the realization that our lives belong to God. My life and your life are not really our own; they belong to God.

Once this realization is made we must act. We must give back to God what is really His - our lives.

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament, the offering of different animals in the Temple, is in fact a "giving back" to God. Man acknowledges God as Creator and then returns to Him in gratitude and love what is His in the first place.

We see the same "giving back" attitude reflected in the Divine Liturgy. As the priest raises the host he says the following words: "Of thine own gifts we offer to Thee. . ." We offer to God the Eucharistic Gifts realizing that they are not ours but His. We are "giving back" to God.

However, the most important giving back is an individual and personal one. We must give ourselves back to God. This is done in gratitude as we acknowledge Him as the source of our lives.

This "giving back" of ourselves is made reference to in Scripture by the Apostle Paul as he exhorts us to "present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable worship". (Romans 12:1) This same principle is alluded to in each Liturgy as we pray to "commit ourselves, one another, and our whole lives to Christ our God".

Stewardship is a transferal of ownership. Just as we have seen a restaurant come under "new management", we too, must bring our lives under "new management", the management of God. "New management" means a new way of doing things - God's way. "New management" means a transformation takes place - God's transformation. "New management" means a new attitude, God's attitude.

Let us be more specific now and see what areas of our lives should be "given back" and come under "new management".

1. TALENTS - Each of us has been endowed with natural abilities. These abilities can be physical, social or intellectual. Besides these natural abilities, we have also been endowed with spiritual gifts which we received from the Holy Spirit at our Baptism. All of our natural abilities and spiritual gifts must be given back to God and brought under "new management."
2. TIME - The reality of time began with God at the point of creation. Thus, we can say that time comes from God and belongs to God. We might then ask ourselves, "How much time should we give to God?" The answer is very simple. All time belongs to God. We must always see ourselves as God's representatives. This includes all of life's activities, whether we are shopping, playing, working, driving or walking. Our Christian life must be more than a weekly Liturgy or an occasional meeting. We must strive to cultivate a Christ-consciousness that permeates our entire life. Our time must be "given back" to God and come under "new management".
3. FINANCES - Again we must realize that all comes from God. Whatever our occupation is, it involves interaction with resources that God has provided. The health that we have, which allows us to work, comes from God. We might then ask ourselves another question. "How much of our finances should we give to God?" This question was addressed by our Lord in His encounter with the rich young ruler. Jesus told him, "Sell all that you have and give it to the poor. " The message here is that the Christian should be possessionless. Yes, we must, and do have many things, but we must realize that we are only guardians of these possessions.

Our finances must be given back to God and come under "new management". Bringing our finances under "new management" includes the privilege of giving to our Church. With our giving, we support the local and National Ministries of our Archdiocese.

Let us remember these things:

1. Life comes from God and should be given back to God.
2. Our time, talents and finances must come under "new management" - God's management.

As we give ourselves to God, the result will be similar to what happens in the Eucharist. We offer bread and wine and the Lord consecrates and blesses these gifts. The same will happen in our lives. As we offer ourselves, the Lord will bless and consecrate our lives.

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## CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP AND TITHING

Tithe, coming from "tenths", is the offering of the faithful for the support of the clergy and the organization of the Church. Originally, it meant one tenth of one's income. Tithes were obligatory of the Jews of the Old Testament for the support of the priesthood and the Temple. They usually consisted of grains or animals.

Although the words "tithe" and "tithing" frequently appear in the New Testament, they are predominantly used to denote the Old Testament practice of the Israelites. The New Testament does not explicitly promote or encourage tithing per se, that is, the offering of one tenth of one's income to the Church.

Instead, the New Testament promotes the concept of "proportionate giving", which may even exceed the ten percent limitation denoted by the word "tithe". A glimpse at two New Testament passages will attest to this.

Regular and proportionate giving is emphasized by St. Paul in I Corinthians 16:2 whereby "on the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and store it up, as he may prosper. . ."; St. Luke relates to us the incident during which a poor widow offered two mites, "all the living that she had", an offering which far exceeded the gifts of the rich men because she cast in all that she possessed, not merely the "required" one tenth. (Luke 1:1-4)

On the basis of this precept of "proportionate giving" our Orthodox Church, in recent years, has adopted the principle commonly referred to as Christian Stewardship. Christian Stewardship refers to an attitude, our attitude toward ourselves and our world. It has to do with all that we are and have. Most basically, the understanding of life to mankind and holds man responsible for the use of His creation. This is precisely what is meant each time the priest recites the words from the Old Testament while pouring the dirt over the remains of the deceased during the funeral service: The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and all that dwell therein. You are dust and to dust you will return."

Christian Stewardship requires that:

1. We recognize ourselves and our world as belonging to God.
2. We affirm all life, possessions, talents, gifts - both actual and potential - are entrusted to us for our lifetime use and management. (Genesis 1:26-28)
3. We acknowledge that we are not only responsible, but also accountable for how we exercise this Stewardship. (Malachi 3:7-11)

4. We share a portion of God's gifts to us with the rest of His creation, out of gratitude for His first loving us. (II Corinthians 9:7)

Having digested the full meaning of Christian Stewardship, two or points become significant. First, Christian Stewardship is no longer limited to just current and accumulated monies and properties as applied by the Old Testament. It also connotes the proper and proportionate use of our time and talents. Everything we have is given to us by God. A Christian Steward serves God out of love and gratitude these gifts knowing that it is not how much we have, but what we do with what we have that is important.

This leads us to the second observation. If we truly understand the principle of Christian Stewardship, we would never again pose the questions to our local parish priest or Parish Council: "How much do I have to give to become a member of this parish?" "What are your parish dues?"

Instead, we will begin to abide by Scriptural direction, settling to give our "first fruits", offering God the first portion not the leftovers". When we understand fully that our whole life is a partnership with God, we will realize that we cannot "give" anything to God but we can "fulfill" God by using our gifts wisely and sharing with others.

No longer we carelessly snare a bit of our time, talents and resources and use the balance without regard for the needs of others. The question will no longer be about ten percent, but about one hundred percent. To discover those things most earnestly believed in, we need to look at how we expend our resources.

For our Lord said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart also". For the Christian, the practice of Christian Stewardship is in reality an autobiographical statement of faith.

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## STEWARDSHIP PASSAGES

### NEW TESTAMENT

Upon the first day of the week let everyone of you lay by him in store as God has prospered him. (I Corinthians 16:2)

He which sows sparingly shall reap sparingly; and he which sows bountifully shall reap bountifully. (II Corinthians 9:6)

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver. (II Corinthians 9:7)

Happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves. (Romans 14:22)

It is more blessed to give than to receive. (Acts 20:35)

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:21)

Whoever drinks from the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling to eternal life. (John 4:14)

Give to others and God will give to you and you will receive a full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands - all that you can hold. One measure you use for others is the one God will use for you. (Luke 4:38)

Every good gift and every perfect, gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. (James 1:17)

### OLD TESTAMENT

Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord, Your God which He has given you. (Deuteronomy 16:17)

And thou shall keep the feast of weeks unto the Lord thy God with a tribute of a free will offering of thine hand, which thou shall give onto the Lord thy God, according as the Lord thy God hath blessed thee. (Deuteronomy 16:10)

Everything in Heaven and Earth is yours . . . Everything is a gift from you and we have only given back what is yours already. (I Chronicles 19:11-14)

And is soon as the commandment came abroad, the children of Israel brought in abundance the first fruits of corn, wine,

oil and honey and of all the increase of the field; and the tithe of all things brought they in abundantly. (II Chronicles 31:5)

Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name; bring an offering and come into His courts. Psalm 96:8)

Commit thy works unto the glory due unto his name; bring an offering and come into His courts. Psalm 96:8)

Commit thy works unto the Lord and thy thoughts shall be established. (Proverbs 16:3)

## **ROMANS 12: AN EXPOSITION ON STEWARDSHIP**

Celebration must be combined with service.

The relationship between man and God is a two-way street.

Our great God gives; we must respond to His gracious gifts.

Our response is the offering of our lives, the placing of ourselves at His disposal, for the accomplishment of His purposes in our world about us.

We are, once we acknowledge God's love and accept His salvation, under new management.

This is what worship is all about.

It is not confined to loud singing or verbal exclamations.

It is turning our hearts, minds, and bodies over to God's ownership, and dedicating our abilities and gifts to His service.

We have all received such gifts for this very purpose.

They are not given to us to enhance our beauty or assure our worldly security, or even to make us more desirable or respected among the people with whom we live and labor.

They are committed to us in order to be committed back to God in and through and by way of service to our fellow man for God's sake.

This is precisely the way in which our God meets the needs of our neighbor - through us and through these gifts entrusted to us.

Not all of us have those gifts that enable us to administer or preach or teach or finance important projects.

But we all have specific abilities - love, energy, persistence, patience, sincerity, concern, creativity.

We are to exercise these things upon one another and on behalf of one another.

We are to care for each other even as much as we care for ourselves.

We are to allow our God to reach and touch others, even our very enemies, with His care and concern for them through us.

(From Epistles Now by L. Brandt)

## THE GREAT STEWARD OF THE CHURCH

St. John the Almsgiver was a seventh century Patriarch of Alexandria. What does Patriarch John have to do with Stewardship? If we look more carefully at his life, we will see that he was one of the great Stewards of the Church of Christ. His was the true embodiment of giving because of the many philanthropic programs he initiated as Patriarch.

Those who knew him spoke of his great compassion for the needy. He would never think of ignoring a beggar, a prisoner, or any afflicted person that he met in the street. As often as he gave, though, he never seemed to run out of resources for the work of the Church. God abundantly blessed him in every conceivable way because of his charity to others. The following episodes in the life of St. John the Almsgiver allow us the opportunity to learn from this great Steward of the Church who taught us about giving.

An indication of the kind of Patriarch that he was to become is given to us upon the occasion of his enthronement to the Patriarchal See of Alexandria. His first act as Patriarch was to summon the treasurers and financial administrators of the various branches of the Church. He addressed them in the following words:

"It is not right, brethren, that we should prefer anyone over Christ."

The whole assembly which had gathered together was deeply touched by his words and in complete agreement with him. Then the holy man continued:

"Go, therefore, through the whole city, please, and make a list of all my masters down to the last. "

But his listeners could not imagine who his masters could be. In astonishment they asked him to reveal the names of those who were above him in stature. After all, he was the Patriarch. He opened his mouth and again said:

"Those whom you call poor and beggars, these I proclaim my masters and helpers. For they, and they only, are really able to help us and bestow upon us the Kingdom of Heaven."

Once his command was carried out with all speed, he instructed his private treasurer to set aside a daily sum sufficient for the needs of these poor; and there were more than seven thousand of them.

St. John, we are told, was in the habit of sleeping on the cheapest of beds and using only very poor coverings in his room. One of the city's wealthy landowners once went into the Patriarch's room and saw that he was only covered with a torn and worn quilt, so he sent him a new quilt costing thirty-six

nomismata. He urged the Patriarch to cover himself with the quilt, remembering the one who gave it to him in prayer.

John took and used it for one night because of the giver's insistence, but throughout the night he kept saying to himself, "How can I lie under a blanket costing thirty-six nomismata while Christ's brethren are pinched with cold? How many are there this minute grinding their teeth because of the cold? How many have only a rough blanket half below and half above them so that they cannot stretch out their legs but lie shivering, roiled up like a ball of thread? How many have no second garment either in summer or winter and so live in misery? Mad yet, I who hope to obtain everlasting bliss, am being kept warm by a blanket worth thirty-six nomismata. Indeed, if I live like this and pass my life in such ease I cannot expect to enjoy the good things prepared for us on high; but I will certainly be told, as was the other rich man:...You in your lifetime received good things, and Lazarus, in like manner, evil things; but now he is comforted here and you are in anguish'"

"Blessed be God!" I shall not be covered with it another night. For it is right and proper that one hundred and forty-four of my brothers and masters should be covered rather than me, one miserable creature." For four simple blankets could be purchased for one nomisma. Early on the following morning, therefore, he sent it to be sold, but the man who gave it to him saw it and bought it for thirty-six nomismata and again brought it to the Patriarch.

When the wealthy landowner saw it put up for sale again the next day, he bought it once more and carried it to the Patriarch and implored him to use it. When he had done this for the third time, the Saint said to him jokingly, "Let us see whether you or I will give up first!" For the man was exceedingly wealthy and the Saint took pleasure in getting money out of him for the sake of the poor. The Patriarch used to say that if, with the object of giving to the poor, anyone were able, without ill-will, to strip the right down to their shirts, he would do no wrong, especially if they were heartless skinflints. For in so doing, he would save their souls.

One day the Patriarch heard of a generous giver and so he sent for him privately and said jokingly, "How is it that you became so generous? Was it natural for you, or did you have to force yourself?" The man answered, "I used to be very hardhearted and unsympathetic and one day I lost my money and was reduced to poverty. Then my reason began to say to me, 'Truly, if you had been generous, God would not have forsaken you.' And immediately I decided to give five coppers a day to the poor. But when I started giving them, Satan immediately checked me by saying, 'Those coppers would really have been enough to buy a bath ticket or vegetables for your family.' When I felt at once that I was taking the money out of my

children's mouths and so I gave nothing. But I noticed that I was being mastered by greed, so I said to my servant, "I want you to steal five coppers each day without my noticing it, and give them to charity.'"

"My servant, a worthy fellow, began by stealing ten coppers, and occasionally even more. As he noticed that we were being blessed, he began to steal larger sums of money and give them away."

"One day I was expressing my astonishment at God's blessings to us! I said to him, "Those five coppers, boy, have greatly benefited us. So now I want to give ten.' At that the servant said to me with a smile, "Yes, be thankful for my thefts, since but for them we should not even have bread to eat today. However, if there can be a just thief, I am he!' And he told me that he had given larger amounts than the five or ten coppers. So it was through my servant's faith that I grew accustomed to giving with all my heart." The holy Patriarch was much edified by this story.

One last story in the life of St. John has to do with his practice of giving money to every poor person that he met. A stranger to the city, one who noticed the remarkable sympathy of the Holy Patriarch, decided to put him to the test. The stranger dressed himself up in old clothes and approached the Patriarch as he made his rounds of the hospitals. He came to John and said, "Have mercy on me for I am a prisoner of war." John said to his purse-bearer, "Give him six coins." After the man had received his money he left, changed his clothes, met John in the street a second time and falling at his feet said. "Have pity on me for I am in need." Again the Patriarch said to his purse-bearer, "Give him six coins." As the man left, the purse-bearer nudged the Patriarch to let him know that it was the same man. This time the Patriarch responded, "Give him twelve coins, for it might be my Christ come to test me."

Our Church, too, calls upon each of us to become Stewards. Unlike the man in disguise, our Church comes openly seeking support for the worthy work of the Church. If Patriarch John was doubly generous to the disguised man, thinking that he might be Christ, how generous should we be to the Church which is the body of Christ?

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## THE STORY OF MARCION

Marcion was a very holy person and a priest in Constantinople. Among his many virtues were a disdain for worldly goods and his philanthropy, a rare combination. Since he stood aloof from worldly possessions, he never acquired anything of his own that had value - not even a second set of clothes. Whenever his friends gave him something, he gave it immediately to the first poor person that he met in the street.

The Sunday that his parish of the Holy Resurrection was to be consecrated, he left early from his tiny room to prepare the Holy Altar. The Patriarch, together with other hierarchs, would liturgize with him that day. The Emperor, with all of his entourage, was expected as well, at the consecration.

As Marcion arrived at the outside door of the magnificent Church, one that he, with unrivaled effort helped to build, a poor man approached him, naked and frostbitten from the cold. He was suffering greatly. He hesitantly held out his hand to ask for charity. Marcion emptied his pockets, but as usual he had no money to give. Nevertheless, he had to give something to the man, yes, something of value. The shivering nakedness of the man tore at Marcion's heart. The kind-hearted priest made a decision. He was going to give him his only set of clothes. Although he did not have another set of clothes to wear, this did not bother him. Since he was going to celebrate the Liturgy in his vestments, he gave his clothes to the poor man. The poor man's mouth hung from so much goodness.

In the meantime, the Patriarch and the other clergy arrived, and the Liturgy began. But something very strange took place that day. All eyes, including those of the Emperor, down to the last member of the faithful, were fixed on Marcion. The same occurred with the clergy from inside the altar. Indeed, two of the clergy began to murmur *with* criticism, "Where did he find those ornate gold vestment? He never had money, or so it appeared." "Are you joking . . . this is hypocrisy. Look, my brother, he is adorned with diamonds. What a scandal!"

At the end of the Divine Liturgy, Marcion came out to give Holy Communion. An astonished murmur was heard on everyone's lips. The church glistened from the brightness of his vestments. One of the senior priests angrily approached the Patriarch, saying, "Your Holiness should say something to straighten out this insignificant priest. His vestments are those of a king."

The venerable and aged Patriarch became dismayed with the statements of his priests. He, too, was perplexed by the richness of the vestments worn by Marcion for the consecration. He knew him too well, though, to characterize

him as vain. Therefore, he decided to talk to Marcion. As soon as the service ended, just before the two had removed their vestments, he called Marion to his side.

"Where did you find these vestments, Marcion?" he asked in an austere tone of voice. "Someone would think that you were competing with the Emperor for elegance. A priest has to be modest in his appearance, so that he will not scandalize the people especially the poorer classes."

Marcion took a quick glance at his poor linen vestments, the only set he had. Then, he looked with perplexity at the Patriarch.

"Which vestments are you talking about, Your Holiness? If you are talking about the ones that I am wearing, they are the same ones you gave me when I was ordained a priest twenty-five years ago."

The Patriarch was stunned. He knew that Marcion could not have changed vestments before his very eyes. "And what about this?" the Patriarch asked, taking hold of Marcion's cape. Then he noticed that Marcian had no clothes under his vestments. Furthermore, the vestments that caused so much commotion and amazement were none other than the ones that the Patriarch had given him twenty-five years ago; the ones in which he had seen Marcion liturgizing for so many years.

"Who took your clothes, Marcion?" the Patriarch asked with amazement. This worthy priest of Most High took the Holy Bible from the altar and showed it to the Patriarch. "This has stripped me, Holy Master," Marcion said to the Patriarch. Overwhelmed by all of this, the aged Patriarch hugged Marcion and kissed him paternally, saying, "Oh, if only all my priests would imitate you, my child, we would not have need of preachers in the Church. Their radiant example would do the preaching for them."

Church history is replete with such stirring accounts of heroic generosity. Such was the effect of the "Good News" on countless men and women of the Church. The Gospel contains a very special message of God's love and philanthropy toward the world. He extended Himself to us in an act of unparalleled kindness. Because of this "Good News" - which tells us about the saving work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, we, too, are motivated to give in a reciprocal spirit of love and generosity.

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