Glory to Jesus Christ!

Overview: this study applies the concept of “First Fruits” from the Old and New Testament to the ideas and attitudes about stewardship. It is for use by groups or individuals. The statements in italics give suggestions for personal reflection and/or group discussion.

Objectives: those who work through this study will:

- Consider shifting the focus of their concern about stewardship from money to the offering of one’s whole life to God
- Better understand the connection between worship and stewardship as a way of life
- Discover a deeper purpose to giving of time, talent, and treasure

Materials: only this study. The Bible references are quoted.

Sources: see below for the sources used in the study. The scripture quotations are from The Orthodox Study Bible.

Follow up: send questions and comments about this study to the diocesan Stewardship Commission <fr.frederick@comcast.net>

Sample Opinions about Stewardship

Attend any parish meeting and you will hear about the critical need for more people to give more time, talent, and treasure “to the Church.” But you will also hear many competing ideas on the reason people should give, how they should give, how much they should give, and even who should give.

Here are a few examples of the different ideas and attitudes of the Orthodox faithful in America on the subject of stewardship.

1. George has been a member of the parish since his childhood. He remembers the past when the parish was overflowing with children and youth. Now he is comfortable in his own church and he supports it as best he can. But he says that he is getting older and it is time that the younger generation takes responsibility for keeping the parish going.

2. Thomas and Katherine have supported both the parish and the diocese faithfully for years. Recently, however, Katherine was laid off from work. At about the same time, Thomas was laid up with health problems. Often, Thomas cannot even attend the Divine Liturgy. Both of them miss the activities of the parish and diocese that they were so involved in. The subject of stewardship makes them uncomfortable because they can no longer keep up their offerings.

3. Stephanie will not say much at parish meetings because she is new to her parish and to Orthodoxy. Right now she is eager to promote the Church and the Orthodox faith but she is uncertain how to do it. She is waiting to be asked to give more and do more.

4. Emily is a college student who also works part time. When she comes to worship and parish activities, everyone says how glad they are to see her. The unspoken message is that the parish does not expect her to give offerings to support the church. That will come later when she has a full time job. She probably will not stay for the parish meeting.
5. Michael believes that the money problems of the parish would be solved if everyone contributed his “fair share” for its support. He gets upset whenever he detects a “freerider” who does not pay his assessments but who seems to enjoy the benefits of the parish.

6. Ted is a member of the Parish Council. He is well aware of the need for both finances and volunteers in the parish. He is sometimes frustrated that others seem to know about the needs of the parish but are not doing anything about it.

If you are reading this study as an individual or discussing it as a group, you might consider whether these composite profiles are typical of the views about stewardship that are found in your parish. What other views do you hear in your parish? Do some members hold more than one of these views?

Results from a Sample Survey on Stewardship

Now that you have reflected on some typical views of stewardship in the American Orthodox Church, let’s continue. A 2005 survey of four American Orthodox jurisdictions in the Western United States found that a single concern was foremost on the minds of the Orthodox in the Western states, no matter what church they belonged to. Those surveyed said that the most urgent need for the growth and strength of their parishes was money. This focus on finances ranked ahead other concerns that included the involvement of youth, more prayer and reflection, a clearer vision of the parish’s future, and more lay leadership.

But what did those surveyed think was the answer to the critical challenges of their parishes? Surprisingly, the suggestions did not include the obvious thought that the members should increase their financial support. In fact, the answer that came in third was “financial assistance.” The expressed need for outside financial help closely followed the top two responses: more outreach to the wider community and more adult education.

You might consider what the respondents meant by these ideas on how their parishes can address their situation and what their responses suggest about their attitudes toward financial giving.

The survey did give some clues about the thoughts of those surveyed on their own support of their parishes. Those who responded to the survey were almost equally divided about whether the members’ financial support of their parishes was satisfactory. Over half (54%) said that their church members give generously to the parish, or at least give what they can. But just 46% of the respondents said that only the few support the parish or take its needs into consideration.

You might discuss what you think about the giving level of your parish in terms of time, talent, and treasure.

Now to complete your picture of the opinions about stewardship in our Orthodox parishes, take a second look at the ideas and attitudes of the people described above.

Consider or discuss the different ideas that George, Thomas & Katherine, Stephanie, Emily, Michael, and Ted have about what the standard of giving in their parish should be. How would they describe a “good and faithful steward”?

When we analyze the ideas above about the proper motivation for giving we can summarize that George believes that giving should maintain the past accomplishments of the parish. Thomas and Katherine measure their giving by how much they can be involved in
church activities. Stephanie, perhaps, thinks that giving should promote Orthodoxy. Emily has been led to believe that she should give to the church when she can afford it. Sam’s standard of giving is the “fair share” obligation. Ted thinks of giving in terms of the church budget.

List what other answers to the question of what makes a “good and faithful steward” might be.

Perhaps these ideas are not as different as they seem. They all have something in common. A parish leader said it when he replied to the latest sermon on stewardship. He said, “Father, I never heard a sermon on stewardship that was not a veiled appeal for money. Why don’t you just come out and say it?” All the ideas and attitudes about stewardship presented above seem to agree. It’s about money!

Consider whether you would agree or disagree.

Our analysis seems to have found the bottom line of stewardship. But wait! Let’s think about a few questions:

- **Would the main problems of your parish be solved if a large donor came forward and promised to fully fund your parish for the next ten years? Why or why not?**

- **Suppose you would divide your church budget by the number of members and send them a bill. Would that practice be adequate to fund the church budget? Would that practice be fair? Could that practice be called “stewardship”?**

- **What if your parish discovered a highly effective way to reach out to newcomers? What would you do if suddenly more than enough newcomers joined your parish to take care of all your money problems? How would the longstanding members of the parish respond?**

- **What is missing in the ideas of stewardship that we have encountered so far?**

**Shifting the Center of Our Concern**

This study is offered to suggest that there is something that is often missing in our ideas and attitudes of stewardship. But we can discover what is missing in the way we describe ourselves. In its “An Introduction to Orthodox Christianity,” our diocesan website states,

“It [Orthodoxy] is not a set of rational beliefs, held more or less abstractly, but an all-encompassing way of life. For Orthodoxy, the touchstone of this life and faith is her liturgy, her corporate and public worship.”

This self-description provides two basic principles for stewardship in the Orthodox Church. First, it declares that Orthodoxy is a way of life. If so, then the theme is this booklet follows: stewardship is one way to describe the Orthodox way of life. Second, the statement says worship plays the central and defining role in this way of life. Our understanding of worship, therefore must determine our understanding of stewardship as a way of life.

Let’s begin to explore what we mean by asking ourselves this question: What happens when we think of giving in terms of worship? Immediately the center of our concern shifts. The giving of time, talent, and treasure has a new reference, context, motive, and purpose. It is offering. In the Divine Liturgy, we do not pray for those who support the church budget, get involved, or pay their “fair share” of parish expenses. We pray “for those who give their offerings and do good works in this holy and venerable church…” The Divine Liturgy itself is defined in terms of offering. It refers to “this liturgical and bloodless sacrifice.” And the priest prays in the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil that the Lord will accept this sacrifice:
“as thou didst accept the gifts of Abel, the sacrifices of Noah, the burnt-offerings of Abraham, the priestly offices of Moses and Aaron, the peace-offerings of Samuel…”

Our understanding of offering can therefore give us a deeper understanding of stewardship.

You might stop here to consider or discuss the way offerings are treated in your parish. How does your parish demonstrate and teach that gifts of time, talent, treasure are offerings to the Lord? What teachings about the relationship between worship and offering have you heard? Should there be more education of stewardship in terms of worship?

The late Protopresbyter, Father Alexander Schmemann, wrote in The Eucharist that when we bring bread and wine and place them on the altar of God in the Divine Liturgy, we fulfill a fundamental need of humankind. He says that one thing is clear from all the explanations of the topic of sacrifice that scholars have given:

“…wherever and whenever man turns to God, he necessarily senses the need to offer the most precious things that he has, what is most vital to his life as gift and sacrifice.”

This human urge for sacrifice is so strong that the first violent conflict between human beings was over sacrifice, the offerings of Cain and Abel. But according to Fr. Schmemann, to this very day, the core of religion is offering and sacrifice. When you think of religious sacrifices, what comes to mind? In our time, do you think that human persons have a need to give offerings? Why or why not?

The Old Testament Offering of “First Fruits”

One of the types of sacrifice that especially illumines our understanding of offering is the Old Testament offering of “First Fruits.” According to The Orthodox Study Bible, “First Fruits” were offered to Lord during the “Feast of Weeks.” This was a seven week festival in which offerings of the first of the harvest of various crops were presented to the Lord in the tabernacle. In Leviticus 23, we read of the first of these “First Fruit sacrifices:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall offer [wave] the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted on your behalf; on the morning after the first day the priest shall wave it. Then you shall offer on that day, when you offer [wave] the sheaf, a sheep of the first year, without blemish, as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. Its grain offering shall be two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, a sacrifice to the Lord, for a sweet aroma; and its drink offering shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin. You shall eat neither bread nor roasted fresh ears until the same day that you have offered gifts to your God; it shall be an ordinance forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings"

(Leviticus 23:9-14)

According to Bible commentaries, this passage describes the offering of the first sheaf of the barley harvest, the first grain to ripen in the land. This “wave offering” was to be followed in fifty days by the offering of loaves made of wheat, the last grain to be harvested. In those fifty days, various crops were harvested. Thus the barley offering was the beginning of the season of harvest. Note that the first part of the harvest is to be offered to God. The people were to reap the first sheaf of barley and bring it to the priest. The priest was to “wave” at the altar as an act of lifting it up as an offering to the Lord. Also note that nothing is to be eaten and the rest of the crop was not be harvested before the offering is given.

The thinking behind this offering is plain:
1. The “First Fruits” offering begins the harvest season. It is a joyful sign of the abundance of the harvest to come.

2. By this offering, the whole ensuing harvest is blessed. The structure of this thinking is found in the prayer of the incense in Orthodox worship:

   “We offer Thee incense, O Christ, our God as an odor of spiritual fragrance. Receive it upon Thine heavenly altar and send down upon us in return the gift of Thy Holy Spirit.”

   In general this prayer shows that offerings are sent up to God with the prayer that God will send down his blessings. According to this way of thinking, the offering of the “First Fruits” of the harvest makes all the harvest holy with the blessings of God.

3. In summary, the “First Fruits” offering is expression of thanksgiving to God. It recognizes that all things come from God and belong to God. It is only right that the Giver of Life should be given a portion of what is His. This offering honors Him and returns thanks to Him for His providential mercy.

“First Fruits” Offerings in the Orthodox Church

At first glance, we might think that these rituals not longer apply to Orthodox Christians since they are part of the Old Testament Law. However, they still have important meaning in the Orthodox Church. First, the actual practice of the “First Fruits” of the harvest survives at the Feast of the Transfiguration when the faithful bring offerings of fruit. Prayers of blessing are said for an:

   “abundant harvest of your earthy benefits, together with all things that are profitable to them.”

For example, the priest prays,

   “May these first fruits preserve the life and heath of those who are present, as well as those who are absent… May those who partake of them enjoy the fullness of your goodness and blessing.”

In particular, the priest blesses the harvest of grapes as the “new fruit of the vine.” The priest prays,

   “May our partaking of this offering of the vine be to gladness for us and may we offer it as a gift to You for the purification of our sins, through the sacred and holy Body of your Christ…”

Consider what practices like these exist in your parish. What do these practices teach about stewardship? What meanings of stewardship might those of us who no longer have farms, gardens, and orchards forget?

Our Offerings as “First Fruits”

These offerings are specifically for the fruits of the harvest. But Orthodox Christians still offer many other kinds of offerings to God. The church father Irenaeus teaches that we may also consider these offerings to be “First Fruits.” This church father who lived in the second century after Christ said,

   “For it behooves us to make an oblation [sacrifice] to God, and in all things to be found grateful to God our Maker, in a pure mind, and in faith without hypocrisy, in well-grounded hope, in fervent love, offering the first-fruits of His own created things. And
the Church alone offers this pure oblation to the Creator, offering to Him, with giving of thanks, [the things taken] from His creation” (Book 4, Chapter 18.1, emphasis added).13

The meaning that the church father derives from the idea that our offerings are “First Fruits” is that we should not come to the Lord “empty-handed” (Deuteronomy 16:6) (Book 4, Chapter 18.1).14 But by our offerings we express our thanksgiving and devotion to the Lord. When we honor the God of mercy in this way, he honors us with His blessings. The Lord God does not need our sacrifices. But we need to offer them lest we be “unfruitful” (Book 4, Chapter 18.5).15

How are our offerings fruitful? Ireneaus seems to be thinking of several things.

1. As the “First Fruits” made all the following harvest holy, so our offerings on the altar sanctify all things in creation (Book 4, Chapter 18.6).16 We see this especially when the paten and chalice are lifted up and the priest proclaims, “And offering to You Yours of Your Own, in behalf of all and for all.”17

2. By the Holy Spirit bread and wine that the faithful offer become the Body and Blood of Christ (Book 4, Chapter 18.5).18 In this way, the Lord receives our material offerings and transforms them into spiritual blessings, the “Medicine of Immortality.”

3. Irenaeus also seems to have in mind the practice of distributing the offerings given in the Church to the widows, the poor, and the needy (Book 4, Chapter 18.6).19 He refers to the Parable of the Last Judgment to say that our offerings are a means of serving “Christ” in the person of the poor and needy. And therefore they are a means by which we attain the promise that is given that everyone who serves Christ in this way will inherit the Kingdom” (Book 4, Chapter18.6).20

Considering what Irenaeus says, does everyone whether child, youth, or adult have a need to give offerings of time, talent, and treasure? If we do not expect the faithful to give or do not treat their gifts as offerings, do we deprive them of essential ways of expressing their thanksgiving, devotion, and honor to God? Moreover are we depriving them of significant ways to minister to Christ by service to the poor and outcast? And are we even making their worship “unfruitful” according to Irenaeus’ ideas?

“First Fruits” Applied to Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church

In addition to these two lasting meaning of the “First Fruit” offerings, there is one more set of meanings. The New Testament applies the idea of “First Fruits” metaphorically to refer to the resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church.

Most important, the “First Fruits” offering foreshadows the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul describes the Risen Christ as “First Fruits.”

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming” (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil echoes this teaching when it says of Jesus Christ:

“He…rose again from the dead on the third day, making a way for all flesh through the Resurrection from the dead—for it was not possible that the Author of Life should be
holden to corruption—that he might be the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep, the first-born of the dead; and he shall be all things, the first in all things.”

The meaning is clear. The “First Fruits” are only the beginning. The rest of the harvest of the resurrection is to follow. But as the “First Fruits,” the Risen Christ not only is the pledge and guarantee of the resurrection of those that are His. He also sanctifies those who belong to Him whom God will raise from the dead as the new harvest of God.

In our study of the Old Testament “First Fruits” offering, we said that this offering was a sign of the harvest to come, a means of blessing that harvest, and a recognition that the harvest belonged to God who gave it. How is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ a sign of future resurrection, a sanctification of those to be raised from the dead, and recognition that it is God who gives the New Life of the Resurrection?

Furthermore, the idea of “First Fruits” was so compelling that the Apostle Paul also applied it to the Holy Spirit. He said,

“…we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23b).

The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil again echoes this teaching when it speaks about the Holy Spirit as:

“the Spirit of Truth, the Gift of Adoption, the Earnest of an inheritance to come, the First-fruits of eternal good things”

As we see in the Divine Liturgy, the meaning is that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not only a promise of eternity but the very reality of the good things of eternity. Yet this initial gift is to be followed by an even greater harvest of “the things that God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9b). Likewise, in speaking of the seal of the Holy Spirit given in baptism, the Apostle says that the Holy Spirit is

“… the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:14.)

Again, we see that the “First Fruits” assures the harvest.

Finally, the Church itself is called the “First Fruits.” According to the Apostle James:

“Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (James 1:18).

Remember that the Church was born on Pentecost. Pentecost meaning “fiftieth” was the conclusion and completion of the seven week time of the Feast of Weeks. In the Old Testament this period was the time of offering the “First Fruits” of the crops. But this harvest time foreshadowed the time of the harvest of the Church. As the culmination and fulfillment of the prophetic “Feast of Weeks,” those who were baptized on the final day of the “Feast of Weeks” were the “First Fruits” of the Church. They were the first of a great worldwide harvest of believers in Christ. Moreover, according to the Apostle James, we who are now part of that harvest are also a “First Fruit” offering to God. As part of the “First Fruits” of God’s creation, we are the pledge that the harvest of souls will continue until all have been gathered in. Just as the Old Testament offering of the “First Fruits” was made holy to the Lord and with it the entire harvest, so we are also made holy as an offering to the Lord. And by our offering those to follow us into the Kingdom will be made holy.
If the term “earnest” refers to a down payment or deposit, consider what it means to say that the Holy Spirit is the “earnest of our future inheritance.” If God has given us a deposit of our inheritance, will he fail to deliver on the future promise? If the Church is the “First Fruit” harvest of God, then what does that say about the future of the Church? What confidence can we have that the Church will continue to survive and grow according to the will and the work of Holy Spirit?

The Meaning of “First Fruits” for Our Orthodox Way of Life

The concept of the “First Fruits” has profound meaning for our Orthodox faith and our Orthodox way of life. But the New Testament and the church fathers show us that we should not apply it legalistically to our stewardship. The church father Irenaeus teaches that there were sacrifices in the Old Testament. There are still sacrifices in the Church. Yet because of the death and resurrection of Christ, the nature of these sacrifices has changed. As Irenaeus says, the former were made by slaves: the present ones are done by freemen. The former were done out of obligation: the present ones are done in freedom (Book 4, Chapter 18.2)

This short section presents a New Testament understanding of the Old Testament Law. Consider why we no longer treat the Law “legalistically”? What does the teaching of Irenaeus about Christian freedom suggest about how we treat church assessments, tithing, or other “guidelines for giving” in our parishes?

But the change of the nature of our sacrifices is even more dramatic, according to Irenaeus. Our offerings are no longer the sacrifices of bulls and goats, burnt offerings, and sin offerings (Hebrews 10:4-6.) The Lord Jesus Christ has offered the “one offering” and “one sacrifice forever” for sin and sanctification (Hebrews 10:12-13). So then it is of the greatest importance that we understand the relationship of our offerings to the one offering of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We can begin to understand this is if we note that the bloodless and reasonable sacrifice offered in the Divine Liturgy is not a new sacrifice. It is not a repetition of or addition to the “once-for-all” sacrifice of Christ. It is a participation in His single and eternal sacrifice.

But let’s take this thought farther. In his “An Introduction to Orthodox Spirituality,” George C. Papademetriou says, “We are saved by Christ and in Christ.” Therefore he says, “Orthodox spirituality is described throughout the centuries as life in Christ, striving for moral and spiritual perfection” (emphasis added).

If this is true then what we said about the sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy must be expanded. As Orthodox Christians, we do not give any offerings apart from Christ. We give, even as we live, only “in Christ.” It was the Lord Jesus Christ who said:

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4).

Our offerings may be sincere and sacrificial but they have no worth before God unless they are given in union with the Lord Jesus Christ.

St. Paul expressed this complete identification of the baptized believer with Christ when he said,
“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me…” (Galatians 2:20a).

This identification means that the Orthodox way of life must be the way of the cross. If we put this thought in terms of worship, it means that our whole life is to be an offering to God. Father Schmemann put it this way:

“For if Christ’s life is offering and sacrifice, then also our life in Him and the whole life of the Church are offering and sacrifice…”26

The Apostle Paul sums up this Orthodox understanding of the all-embracing scope of our worship:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service [worship]” (Romans 12:1 RSV).

In keeping with this teaching, the litanies (prayers of petition) of our Orthodox worship end, “…let us commend ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God.” 27

These thoughts lead to the conclusion that if our whole life is joined to Christ-- if we only have our life and salvation “in Him”-- then we must see all our lives and every part of them as offerings given “in Christ” to God. In this sense, we do not give a portion of God’s blessings as “First Fruits” to the Lord. We offer our whole selves as “First Fruits” of God’s New Creation in Christ.

But now let’s complete the thought. We who are baptized and have “put on Christ” are so joined to Christ that the offering of our whole lives to God is like the offering of the Divine Liturgy. It is a participation in the offering of Christ who “gave Himself up for the life of the world.” The Apostle Peter says

“…you also, as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5)

All members of the Church share in the one priesthood of Christ. We give our “spiritual sacrifices” through Him and in Him. Ultimately our stewardship is the offering up of ourselves as priests before God as “we commend ourselves, one another, and our whole life to Christ our God.”

Carefully read this section. Then reflect on how these thoughts might affect our ideas and attitudes of stewardship. The theme of this booklet is “Stewardship: a Way of Life.” Our diocesan self-description says that Orthodoxy is not a set of beliefs but “an all-encompassing way of life.” This study has tried to show that this “way of life” is the life of “First Fruits” offering that is inseparably joined to the one and eternal offering of our Lord Jesus Christ. How might these ideas affect the way we conduct ourselves in our parish—not only in worship but in parish meetings, fellowship times, etc. How would these ideas affect the way we live our daily lives?

The Meaning of “First Fruits” for Our Offerings of Time, Talent, and Treasure

Finally, to come full circle, let’s consider what these understandings of “First Fruit” worship mean for our giving of our time, talent, and treasure to the parish and diocese. From the viewpoint of our study of “First Fruits,” we can see that the ideas and attitudes that reduce the Church to a club to which we pay dues, a voluntary organization in which we donate time, a cause that we promote, or an organization that we must support do not match our Orthodox faith.
Especially in worship we realize that we are members of the Body of Christ. But when we leave the church building we do not leave our membership in the Body of Christ behind. If we gather together as the Church on Sundays and holy days to offer the sacrifice of our praise and worship, the chief concern of every Orthodox believer should be to offer oneself as a “living sacrifice to God” twenty-four/seven. Will these thoughts answer the concerns of the persons described at the beginning of this study? The hope is that these thoughts will not so much address them as transform them. Will these understandings of stewardship as a sacrificial way of life support our parishes and their ministry in the Name of Christ? The real question is whether we have faith that the God of mercy will support and nourish our whole life “in Christ”? That is the crucial question because our parish life is only part and parcel of that life that we commend to Christ our God.

You have come to the end of this study. One last question is intended to bring its lofty ending back to earth. If stewardship is the offering of our whole life to God, then what kind of offering should we give to the Lord? What kind of offering is worthy to be placed on the altar of God? How are our offerings of time, talent, and treasure related to the offerings of ourselves to God in worship? To the total offering (commendation) of “our whole life” to God?

Glory to the Lord Jesus Christ forever!

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