

STEWARDSHIP WORKSHOP
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(Note: [#] denotes slide number in PowerPoint)

[1] An Introduction to Stewardship

[2] Stewardship is a Biblical word. It is a word which is familiar to us. In the vocabulary of the Church Fathers, especially St. John Chrysostom, the word stewardship has as its best equivalent “almsgiving,” the sharing of one’s self with the poor. The unfortunate fact is that stewardship as a Biblical word and a word from our Holy Church Fathers has either been misunderstood, or, perhaps better, reinterpreted in our modern era.

There are two main reasons for this. First, much of what we have learned has been incomplete. Second, much of what we think is Orthodox Christian teaching on stewardship is not. We have learned what we know about stewardship basically from our modern Western world.

Orthodoxy is only now beginning to unfold the meaning of stewardship as both a teaching of the Bible and of the Church Fathers. It seems that most Orthodox Christians hear about the subject of stewardship only when it is related to money. [3] When does this happen? Unfortunately, often. You might hear about stewardship when dues are being assessed. You might hear about stewardship when there is a fund drive or some other financial program. Whenever the parish, the diocese or some organization needs money, then sermons are preached on stewardship (but more likely the subject is fundraising!). When there is a need for money, there is a sudden

rise in talk about "giving." And we are, of course, challenged to practice Christian stewardship simply by giving more money! In other words, for most of us, stewardship and the giving of money to the Church are one and the same. Brothers and Sisters, that is *not* Christian stewardship. That understanding of stewardship is, to put it simply, incomplete. It does not tell the whole story of what Christian Stewardship is all about.

As if that problem is not bad enough, much of what we know and practice as stewardship has been shaped by the world around us. I don't have to tell you that we live in a society where material advancement and personal pleasure are the number one goals. [4] The purpose of life, in 21st century America, is personal satisfaction. This American (can we say Western?) perspective on the purpose of life often shapes our thinking about everything. And, may even shape how we live out our faith. The value of life as being personal satisfaction is the exact opposite of what Christian stewardship is all about. We are persons created in the image and likeness of God, and we were created *not* for the sole purpose personal satisfaction. We are created to be *stewards*. We find our personal satisfaction in our service to God and His Church. We are called to live a life of stewardship, caring for the life and creation of which we have been created a part. And we are to do so in the most responsible and productive way possible. The modern, Western, message that our purpose is to "live the good life," is the opposite of our purpose as Christians. Stewardship is the common action of all who profess to live as Christians. In other words, simply put, stewardship is a Way of Life.

[5] **Stewardship As a Way of Life**

Let's go back to that Biblical usage of the term "steward." [6] Our English word steward is a translation of the Greek word *oikonomos*, and literally means "*house manager*." *Oikonomia*, or stewardship, literally refers to the management of a household. Stewardship is a task, a responsibility bestowed on one person by another - usually by a master. [7] Our Lord used the terms steward and servant frequently, as recorded in the Gospels. St. Paul uses them the same way in his epistles. In I Peter, every Christian is charged to "be a good steward of God's grace." (I Peter 4:10) St. Ignatius of Antioch told the faithful that they were "stewards in God's house, members of His household, and His servants." (*Epistle to Polycarp*, 99) St. Ignatius can encourage us to work, suffer, run, and rest, because these important aspects constitute our way of life as Christians. I think the Holy Martyr would be appalled to think that stewardship today might mean only being hit up for an annual pledge to the Church or only being enlisted in a financial campaign for the new building. Or that stewardship would be equated to tithing.

[8] As Orthodox Christians, we must begin with the acknowledgment that all of life is sacramental. That means that, in that in every aspect of life, we may experience and commune with God. This communion ranges from experiencing a beautiful sunset, to the most divine, communion with God in the Holy Eucharist. We must come to see that "all the earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world and those who dwell in it." (Psalm 24:1)

Out of this comes our understanding of Christian stewardship: we manage the resources that God has given us. We become administrators of God's gifts. After all, stewardship, that is, good management of the God-given resources of our lives, is the

only truly appropriate human response to God who has provided everything. We experience all of life as an opportunity to commune with God, and we steward all of life in a response of thanksgiving for that which God has given.

[9] We own nothing. Nothing belongs to us. God is our Master. We have, so to speak, borrowed from Him that which is not ours. It is a temporary borrowing. We use what is His while we have life on this earth. What we do with what we have borrowed, how we care for it, how we return it to Him – that is stewardship. This Orthodox understanding of stewardship is enshrined in our Divine Liturgy, when after the priest proclaims with the Gifts of bread and wine elevated, "*We offer unto You Yours of Your own, in behalf of all, and for all.*"

Thus, stewardship is a way of life. It is putting flesh and blood on a view based on the Tradition of Orthodoxy. It is the giving back of what has been given to us: time and talent and treasure. Stewardship is a state of being, and actual way of living. It is based in service. The steward is in the employ of his Master. Therefore the most important aspect of being a steward is serving.

Stewardship in our Modern World

Many people, contrary to this Orthodox view, act as if we "own" the creation and can do with it as we wish including destroy it. [10] We have a world full of examples of bad stewardship: e.g., pollution, brutality, pornography, waste, servitude, apathy, abortion, environmental destruction. Good stewardship starts where I live, how I live, and how I interact with all with which I come into contact. It moves from there to the world and how I interact with it, and how I am a responsible member of the human race.

Bad stewardship is changing our world in precisely the wrong way. We live with it. We hear it on the news every day. It is in print and on the internet. Our children are beginning to accept it as a way of life. [11] Such things as the deforestation of the Amazon, global warming, the changes of weather due to depletion of the ozone layer, the unchecked release of pollutants that destroy ozone -- these are directly caused by bad stewardship.

Consider the relationship of bad stewardship with overpopulation. [12] The imbalance between available food supplies and rampant population growth fuels much of the death and suffering in our world today. Consider the growth in world population: in 200 AD it was approximately 200 million people; by 1825 it reached the one billion mark. "The next billion was added in only a hundred years. A further billion (taking the total to 3 billion) took about thirty-five years from 1925 to 1960. The next billion was added in only fifteen years (by 1975) while the increase from 4 billion to 5 billion took about twelve years and was completed in the late 1980s." (Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World*, New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 240).

Need we be concerned with such growth? Benjamin D. Williams, an Orthodox observer of these things, answers.

In one sense, perhaps we needn't, as long as we can feed and care for all those people and not irreparably damage the earth. But we cannot. Notwithstanding the development of agriculture and industrialization, most of the people in the world live a meager existence with inadequate food and shelter. However, since stewards are supposed to care for the world and to "steward" its resources, consider a very graphic example of the consequences of human population growth: animal extinction. "Between 1600 and 1900 an animal species was made extinct about one every four years. By the 1970s this had risen to a rate of about 1,000 a year. At present about 25,000 species of plants, 1,000 species of birds and over 700 species of animals are on the verge of extinction. In the tropical forests

about fifty species of plants and animals are being eliminated every day. At this rate it is estimated that in the 1990s about 1 million species (almost 20 percent of the total in the world) will become extinct." (Ibid., p. 193)

"So what?" That is what many say. "So what? These are the concerns of the environmentalists. They are not our concerns. I do my part: I use energy-saving light bulbs. I try not to use paper towels any more – I've saved my share of trees!" [14] When global and local concerns about the use of our resources become "not my concern" then we fall into the trap of bad stewardship – and such bad stewardship moves very easily from environmental concerns to how we use our time, talents, and money in the service of God and His Church.

A Spiritual Crisis

This calls for a turn around. It calls for a 180 degree turn away from a worldview of waste, pollution and poor management of God's gifts. You know what we call such a thing in Orthodoxy, that 180-degree turn around? Yes, you do know it. I suspect that you priests have preached often enough about it during the Great Lent, and you lay folk have heard many times about it when your priest talks to you about confession. The Biblical and Orthodox term for the 180-degree turn around is **repentance**. In Greek it is *metanoia*. It is significant that our Father among the Saints John Chrysostom wrote a series of sermons on the subject of stewardship, or as he would call it "almsgiving." The series is called "*On Repentance and Almsgiving*." Chrysostom realized that it would take a 180-degree turn in the lives of his people to move them to care for those in need and to share among his people the wealth that was so unevenly distributed in society.

In a sermon on **Acts 4:32–37**, Chrysostom challenged his listeners to imagine themselves living as the first Christians had lived, just three-and-a-half centuries

earlier. Listen as Chrysostom booms forth from the amvon of the Cathedral in Constantinople:

“And great grace,” it says, “was upon them all; for neither was there any among them that lacked.” Grace was among them, since nobody suffered want, that is, since they gave so willingly that no one remained poor. For they did not give a part, keeping another part for themselves; they gave everything in their possession. They did away with inequality and lived in great abundance; and this they did in the most praiseworthy fashion. They did not dare to put their offering into the hands of the needy, nor give it with lofty condescension. but they laid it at the feet of the apostles and made them the masters and distributors of the gifts. What a man needed was then taken from the treasure of the community, not from the private property of individuals. Thereby the givers did not become arrogant.

Should we do so much today, we should all live much more happily, rich as well as poor; and the poor would not be more the gainers than the rich. And if you please, let us now for a while depict it in words, and derive at least this pleasure from it, since you have no mind for it in your actions. For at any rate this is evident, even from the facts which took place then, that by selling their possessions they did not come to be in need.

Let us imagine things as happening in this way: All give all that they have into a common fund. No one would have to concern himself about it, neither the rich nor the poor. How much money do you think would be collected? I infer – for it cannot be said with certainty – that if every individual contributed all his money, his lands, his estates, his houses (I will not speak of slaves, for the first Christians had none, probably giving them their freedom), then a million pounds of gold would be obtained, and most likely two or three times that amount. Then tell me how many people our city (Constantinople) contains? How many Christians? Will it not come to a hundred thousand? And how many pagans and Jews! How many thousands of pounds of gold would be gathered in! And how many of the poor do we have? I doubt that there are more than 50,000. How much would be required to feed them daily? If they all ate at a common table, the cost could not be very great. What could we not undertake with our huge treasure! Do you believe it could ever be exhausted?

And will not the blessing of God pour down on us a thousand-fold richer? Will we not make a heaven on earth? Would not the grace of God be indeed richly poured out?

If this turned out so brilliantly for three or five thousand (the first Christians) and none of them was in want, how much more would this be so with such a great quantity? Will not each newcomer add something more? The dispersion of property is the cause of greater expenditure and so of poverty. Consider a household with husband and wife and ten children. She does weaving and he goes to the market to make a living; will they need more if they live in a single house or when they live separately? Clearly, when they live separately. If the ten sons each go his own way, they need ten houses, ten tables, ten servants and everything else in proportion. And how of the mass of slaves? Are these not fed at a single table, in order to save money? Dispersion regularly leads to waste, bringing together leads to economy.

This is how people now live in monasteries and how the faithful once lived. Who died of hunger then? Who was not fully satisfied?

[15] And yet people are more afraid of this way of life than of a leap into the endless sea. If only we made the attempt and took bold hold of the situation! How great a blessing there would be as a result! For if at that time, when there were so few faithful, only three to five thousand, if at that time when the whole world was hostile to us and there was no comfort anywhere, our predecessors were so resolute in this, how much more confidence should we have today, when by God's grace the faithful are everywhere! Who would still remain a heathen? Nobody, I believe. Everyone would come to us and be friendly.

But yet if we do but make fair progress, I trust in God that even this shall be realized. Only do as I say, and let us successfully achieve things in their regular order; if God grant life, I trust that we shall soon be progressing to this way of life.

Do you think that Chrysostom's call required a 180-degree turn from the way of life of the Constantinopolitans he served?

Personal Stewardship

How do we move, then from the bad stewardship we see in the world? How do we look at our own stewardship, and make that repentant, 180-degree turn around? First, it is necessary to take personal responsibility for doing it.

[16] If on the Day of Judgment you are asked how you cared for the God-given resources put in your charge, how will you answer? Will you just say, "But Lord, come on, nobody ever told me they were resources! How was I to know I was supposed to steward them?" And what will Church leaders say when confronted with the fact that the word "stewardship" has come to be narrowly used as a way to get money? We can no longer let it happen. We can no longer condone bad stewardship.

If we are serious about stewardship, we have to be serious about our Orthodoxy. We are to be serious about our *theosis*, our growing more and more Christ-like in our inner and outer lives. And, if we are serious about our Orthodoxy, we will undertake the spiritual struggle to achieve it - and with the grace of God and many tears, we will attain it.

Hear Ben Williams again:

Have you ever thought about your relationship with the Church from the perspective of good stewardship? It is a challenging proposition. We are to care for and nurture all those resources (God's gifts) within the Church. [17] We are to care for and nurture the Church itself, because she is a resource - a gift from God for the life of the world. We are to love and support, care for and nourish all who are in it - those within and without our little circles, those who dress well and those who don't, those who are cool and those who are crass, those who are successful and those who are failures. And then, recognizing Christ's challenge,

we have to look at being a good steward within the Church as nothing less than practice for being a good steward outside the Church.

We are each ordained (Contrary to what most lay people think, ordination is not reserved for the clergy. Baptism and chrismation are rites of ordination for every believer into the "royal priesthood." See I Peter 2:9) by God to be stewards of His spiritual gifts, seen and unseen, material and immaterial, physical and mystical. Stewardship within the Church is not just limited to the building or to financial offerings. A good steward is concerned with the optimal use of all the gifts, talents, and responsibilities of the organization placed in his or her charge. This means that a caring attitude cannot be limited to some aspects at the expense of others. A good steward's decisions and actions must reflect a caring for the entire body, from the least to the greatest within it.

[18] Good stewardship is a way of life. It includes the loving treatment and care of others. It includes almsgiving, giving to the poor. It includes financial support of the Church. If we have a Christian understanding of stewardship, and if we are good stewards, then all of these elements are our way of life. We move beyond selfishness and stinginess toward giving as Christ gave. We do so because we realize that selfishness is a sin; it deceives us into thinking we "own" things that are, in reality, God's.

Good stewardship is meaningless without spiritual practice, because of the need for dealing with our basic selfishness. Our salvation depends on us being self-less; to give of ourselves to others as Christ gave Himself to us so that we may thereby be restored to the divine image. Our goal as Orthodox Christians is to be restored to the Divine Image in which we were first created. That image is the image of Christ. It is a selfless image. Christ gave Himself completely for us. We, in response, work to give our selfishness away and to become more and more Christlike.

[19] So then, how do we live as stewards? Hear St. Anthony again from out of the desert:

"Indeed, if we too live as if we were to die each new day, we shall not sin . . . When we awaken each day, we should think that we shall not live till evening; and again, when about to go to sleep we should think that we shall not awaken ...If we are so disposed and live our daily life accordingly, we shall not commit sin, nor lust after anything, nor bear a grudge against anyone, nor lay up treasures on earth. . . ." (St. Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, 36)

If we understand stewardship properly, then stewardship will become our way of life. And how will we know that stewardship will have become our way of life? Here is the test. How many of these happen in your and my life? [20] Good stewardship brings joy into the lives of others. It helps those in need. It enables those who desire to improve. It loves and cares for the people in our lives. It cares for God's creation. Good stewardship supports the Church financially. It participates in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. It teaches and guides others. It nurtures the gifts which God has given us. These qualities identify someone who is practicing good stewardship as a way of life.

[21] But, someone may ask: "*What's in it for me?*" This question is typical from one who has been unduly conditioned by the self-centered, personal satisfaction, consumerist society in which we live. "*What's in it for me?*" betrays an outlook that makes decisions based on a selfish (we might say contractual) basis. We have learned from our society that we are supposed to "get something" in return for giving something. There must be justice, equality, in our world: my 40 hours of work earns me a week's paycheck; if I share my knowledge and expertise, I should be compensated for it – such is the view of the world.

Seeking a reward for simple good stewardship is putting the horse behind the cart. We already have been gifted by God with life. We have already been gifted by God with salvation. We have already been rewarded with the love of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. We already have been compensated with Christ's presence among us, even as He comes to us regularly, not as reward, but as gift, in the holy Eucharist. Such are the rewards of good stewardship – already bestowed. Our response to the already bestowed reward and compensation: thanksgiving through good stewardship.

Ben Williams one more time:

God gives to us without strings. We must reach a level of spiritual maturity from which we can give back to God without expecting to get more in return. If we don't, then our attitude and behavior are downright sinful. Broadening this discussion to include God's Church, [22] the problem is that we, in our contractual mindset, expect to receive in like kind from the Church when we give. We expect to get equal or greater value for our money. This attitude can easily degenerate into viewing the Church as a dispenser of goods and services. This is not a Christian attitude, it is a cultural understanding we have accepted. Such a view betrays a lack of understanding of the Church's vision and misunderstands our identity as members of the Body of Christ.

In Conclusion

I read a true story recently about potato farming in Northern China many centuries ago. I want to tell you about what happened when they planted their potato crop. It is directly related to how we understand stewardship properly.

[23] Apparently these ancient Chinese had always planted their potatoes, not from seeds, but like even modern gardeners and farmers do. They cut up some of the previous year's potatoes into small pieces and planted these in the soil instead of seeds as they did for every other vegetable. They did this year after year, until at one point

someone got the bright idea of sorting out all of the very smallest potatoes (some call them “runts”) each year, and they planted them. They would sort out all the large potatoes, save those to eat, and cut up and plant all of the “runts.” Of course, the ancient Chinese did not know anything about genetics. The problem, as you might guess, is that after several years of doing this they found that all the potatoes they grew were very small. By keeping the biggest ones to eat and planting only the smallest, soon all they were able to grow were small potatoes!

As you look out at any of our parishes on any Sunday, consider what kind of treasure is being returned to God, the Master-lender of all things. For the most part, there are some mighty small potatoes being planted. After all, the only thing that grows from small potatoes is – you guessed it – small potatoes!

[24] We cannot scold, or threaten or scare small potato folks. They are God’s people, too. But we can sit down with them and gently, lovingly and in a spirit of prayer let them know that they can receive far more in return on their crop if only they would plant bigger potatoes.

But it does not begin with programs, with great plans and proper execution of procedures. Stewardship is a Way of Life. Making any changes in ways of life takes time, effort and a lot of prayer.

[25] Think again about personal satisfaction; about being a steward; about repentance and change.

THIS IS NOT A TEST

The next part of our Stewardship workshop is to give you, as leaders of parishes and various apostolates and ministries of our Diocese, the opportunity to think about where you are in your own personal understanding of Stewardship as a Way of Life.

On the screen will appear a series of questions with some time between each to ponder, make some notes, or just consider where your life of Stewardship is.

1. [26] What is your response, from your heart, to this statement: All life and life itself is a gift from God?

2. [27] Do you know you have the freedom not to sin? Do you exercise that freedom? How do you do that?

3. [28] Is your “spiritual” life life in the Spirit? Is it characterized by behavior that uses and nurtures the time, talent and treasure entrusted to you by God? Think of specific examples of how that works out.

4. [29] What is the highest motivation of your life? When you have chosen what that is, does it reflect a movement toward self or toward God? Is it personal satisfaction or thankfulness to God? Do you need to re-examine personal motivation?

5. [30] Respond to this statement: “Stewardship is our active commitment to use all our time, talent and treasure for the benefit of humankind in grateful acknowledgement of Christ’s redeeming love.”

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The next part of our workshop will be an examination of the resource that the Stewardship Commission has developed.