

# Stewardship Mission Statement of The American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese

*Orthodox Christian Stewardship is a Christ-centered lifestyle, which acknowledges accountability, reverence, and responsibility before God. Orthodox Christian Stewardship is a call to all of the faithful to share willingly and cheerfully the gifts that God has bestowed on them including sharing these gifts for God's work in His Church.*

## I. Theological Background

The Orthodox way of life and belief has arisen within world history. This history gives us a look at our long, lost past. Reading the Old Testament prophets of Judaism and the ancient philosophers, we learn of their concern for the higher aspects of humanity. They speak of what has been lost by humanity as that has been documented through the ages. History and philosophy have awakened in humanity an awareness of its higher potential. The prophets and philosophers speak of the possibility for participation in what the Eastern thinkers have called the "*Divine economy*." The Greek word for "economy" is οἰκονομία, a word that can also be translated "stewardship." The Divine Economy, first of all, means God's long-term plan for human salvation. That plan can be traced through the Old Testament, the ancient philosophers, through the New Testament and through the history of the Church on earth.

The idea of "original sin" or what some in the East call the "ancestral curse" is the separation of humanity from its true and original intention at creation, that Divine economy. That separation is tied to the idea that human beings have always been aware that they are not what they should be. It is like being set out on that *Divine Economy*, the path set by God, from which men and women have turned aside. Those ancient Eastern philosophers saw this rather clearly. Original sin, rather than being a characterization of human nature as "*totally depraved*," original sin is seen in the East as something that brings a human being to the awareness of his or her inborn *Divinity*, of his or her *higher side that has been lost*. It is in contrast to being in a fallen state with what he or she can and should be. Human beings were created, according to Genesis, in the "*image and likeness of God*." Human beings have lost that image, and for millennia have sought to find a way to have it restored.

This brings us to Christ, the sacrifice of Christ and the consequences of that sacrifice. Very simply put, the consequence of Christ's work on earth is the restoration of Adam and Eve (that is, all humanity) to its former state of being in the image and likeness of God. God had freely offered a course of life in full communion with God Himself. From that course humans *by their own will* chose to differ. Through Jesus Christ's self-sacrifice, an act of great condescension on the part of God, humanity is offered the opportunity to once again pursue the course of the Divine Economy.

The Resurrection of Christ, God become human, broke once and for all the power of death. Death had been introduced into the world by the decision of human beings to seek another course than that which had been laid out by God. By Christ's Resurrection, the grip that death had upon human beings is released. In the words of the ancient Church Fathers, *God became human, so that humans might once again become Divine*. That is, so that human beings might, once again, as in the original creation of Adam and Eve, embrace, express and participate in the very Divine nature of God, humanity's Creator. Humanity can only do this because God chose to become human in Christ, and, through Christ's death and Resurrection, destroyed the power of death over humanity forever. *God became human, so that humans might once again become Divine*.

Thus heaven, for the Eastern Christian, is the final reaching of one's proper nature, of his or her divinity within God. The Orthodox Fathers clearly point out, however, that by the divine nature of humanity, the Eastern believer is participating in the Energies of God and never in God's Essence, which is unknowable and beyond human thought or experience. Thus the created being, who is human, never assumes the unknowable majesty of God Himself. The created being only works to return to the state of being in which he or she was created - in the image and likeness of God.

Because human beings are able to nurture and develop their Divine nature through the Sacrifice of Christ, the path to heaven begins right here on earth. Spiritual life for the Orthodox believer is not only one of imitating Christ, but of participating in His Divine Nature. It is uniting one's self to Christ. Orthodox call this process *theosis* in Greek, meaning deification or divinization - becoming Divine. And this process is done on earth. Through the process of *theosis*, humans seek to reach the highest level of perfection - the image of God. And even though the sinful nature of the ancestral curse continues to be present in the

human, in *theosis*, he chooses to act rather from his inclination *to the holy*. Life on earth, if it works at cultivating the Divine nature in man, stifles the passionate impulses of sin, making the human on earth reflect that human's originally created Divine nature.

As well, someone restored to Divine form (to the extent that is possible in a corrupted body) calls all around him to holiness and Divinity. Such a person inspires in those who can see with the eyes of their own Divine nature a similar spiritual quest. The role of such a person is to be a warrior against evil, being armed by a partial presence in heaven itself. At the faithful Orthodox believer's death, the battle being ended, such a faithful warrior will see the fruits of the spiritual labor in this life. These fruits will be fully revealed in the Last and General Judgment, when all humanity will be called to account for its spiritual state.

## II. Stewardship in the Divine Economy

To be a participant in the "Divine Economy" is to be a participant in the Divine Stewardship. It is to be a participant in God's plan for salvation. Throughout the New Testament, we find the term "economy" (also originally *oikonomia* with that other meaning of "stewardship") often used. St. Paul described his own call to be a missionary as the "*stewardship of God's grace that was given to me*" (Ephesians 3:2). He says that he and those working with him should be regarded as "servants of Christ and stewards (*oikonomoi*) of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1). In his description of bishops, Paul tells Titus "*A bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless . . .*" (Titus 1:7). The Apostle Peter writes to the laity: "*As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace*" (1 Peter 4:10).

Thus stewardship is understood, first of all, to be related to the whole mystery of salvation granted by God through our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. Just as God has allowed us to participate in the life of the Holy Trinity for our salvation (the Divine Economy) so we participate in that life in all we do on earth. We are responsible, then, not only for the way we participate in the Divine life, but how we use our entire lives, our bodies, our minds, our possessions as reflective of that participation in the life of the Holy Trinity.

From the moment of illumination (Baptism) our lives have been changed. We no longer live to self, but to Him who lives in us. We have died and risen again – *“Buried with Christ in Baptism”* – to a new and different life. Our lives are now in Him and reflective of His life. Having been made “temples of the living God, in that *“God’s Spirit dwells in us,”* (1 Corinthians 3:16), we must however recognize that, as St. John Chrysostom says in His 8<sup>th</sup> Sermon on 2 Corinthians: *“This is indeed the chiefest marvel, that an earthen vessel hath been enabled to bear so great a brightness and to keep so high a treasure.”* We must still be on our guard, we “earthen vessels.” For, as a roaring lion, Satan still seeks to devour us. That roaring lion works ceaselessly to convince us that we belong to ourselves and not to God. But – *“No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other”* (Matthew 6:14).

Cyril of Alexandria gets right to the point: *“If a man has not separated himself from passionate attachment to earthly things, he is unable genuinely to love God and his neighbor”* (Commentary on Matthew 6:14). Thus Christ’s words *“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”* (Matthew 6:21) apply directly to the lives of all Christians. The story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 is an excellent example of someone who thinks he is religious, but his devotion is not turned toward God but to love of the world.

It is not a half-way, give-and-take situation. As Christ has redeemed us entirely – heart, mind, body and soul – so all of us belongs to Him entirely. We don’t give to him just a part, a proportion, of what we are and what we have. We give everything. Thus when it comes to our earthly possessions, especially our money and wealth, it is not a certain proportion that belongs to God, as though the rest is ours to do with as we please for ourselves. Every penny belongs to God. Even our time is not our own. So-called “free time” does not exist. “Let us commend ourselves and our whole life unto Christ our God.”

### III. Stewardship in Action

Human beings, in their very nature, have been created in the image and likeness of God. Being constituted like God, humans are by nature, loving creatures – just like God. As well, being of the descendents of one man, Adam, all humans are of one family. Thus all humans are to live in communion with their neighbors in the love that originates in God. That is to say, that all of us have in common the image of God, and the ability to love – we are, in fact,

stewards of each other. Since it is God's intention that we, His creation, live together on one planet, in quite close proximity to each other, it is also His plan that we care for each other in love.

The Church (the *ekklesia*, those who have been called out) has as its first intention the drawing of all humanity into the Body of Christ. This task is accomplished through, first of all, recognition that all people are of the single family of humanity. The center of the Church is Christ Himself and the sharing among those called out of His very Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist. In our modern world, this gathering into and sharing of the Body of Christ can only be accomplished by detaching ourselves from this world and the things in it. After all, the things of this world are only a means, a temporary and fading means, to a far better End.

Thus combining our natural, inborn faculty to love, our calling to gather all humanity into the Body of Christ, and our detachment from the world, we arrive at the very basic definition of stewardship.

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Stewardship is a lifestyle characterized by love and worldly detachment, and is centered in Christ. As such, our stewardship brings us in humility before the Throne of Grace, acknowledging that all we have is not our own – it is God's gift to us. Yet it is a passing gift that we must return to him, having accounted ourselves first of all worthy of the gift, and secondly, as having been responsible for its use while we are alive.

Orthodox Christian stewardship informs us, then how we use our money. Money is perhaps the most representative of the worldly gifts God has given to us. We work hard for our money. We must be economically well-minded in order to support ourselves and our families, especially in days of economic uncertainty. But we must not be attached to it. Money is a tool to meet certain ends. If those ends are simply personal enjoyment, fulfillment of the passions, or hoarding for some future purpose, then the person who holds such money is certainly not detached from it.

The Beatitudes begin, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*” This does not mean that those who are spiritually poor are blessed. Nor does it mean that being in poverty is the most blessed way to live. St. Chromatius, fifth century bishop in northern Italy, and a strong supporter of St. John Chrysostom, says: “*Jesus means that those persons are truly blessed who, having spurned the riches and resources of the world to become rich in God, desire to be poor in the world. Indeed, such people seem to be poor in the sight of the world, but they are rich in God, needy in the world, but wealthy in Christ*” (Tractate on Matthew 17.2.1-2).

“Poor in spirit” means to have the spirit of poverty. This certainly is the stewardship attitude we seek in ourselves. If we have the spirit of poverty in our lives, we will not live like money is the be-all and end-all of life. Money becomes the tool with which we serve and love, not ourselves, but our fellow human beings, created in the image and likeness of God.

The “*desire to be poor in the world,*” as St. Chromatius says, does not mean the total rejection of the world, but the maintenance of the attitude of being poor in the world, while being rich in God. This speaks to our sharing *willingly and cheerfully the gifts that God has bestowed on (us) including sharing these gifts for God’s work in His Church.* Sharing willfully and cheerfully is our attitude of poverty. The way we do this while still living in a world through which God supplies our daily need is by “sharing willfully and cheerfully” in a proportional way.

St. Peter of Damascus in the *Philokalia* (III, p. 156) makes it clear that it is not money that is bad, rather, what is bad is the love of money. He points out that many saints of old were wealthy, but not attached to their wealth and were generous to the poor. Each of us is to find where the line is drawn in our life between what we actually need to exist, and what we can share, especially through the Church. That goes not only for money, but for our time and talents as well. We keep what we need; we give to those who are in need. This is proportional giving.

Our use of money has a direct connection to that which is our real god. If in our hearts we wish to possess God alone, then our actions must bear this out. Stewardship is a lifestyle that represents where our heart is, and in Whom we place our trust.