The Christian Steward
By: Harry Verhiley

Stewardship is a fairly new term in the vocabulary of the modern American Catholic. Yet, the term, and concept, of stewardship is older than Christianity itself—dating back to the creation of the world in the Book of Genesis. God is the source of all things and God gives His creation to human beings, who are made in His image and likeness. We are not made to be passive recipients, merely accepting and consuming God’s gifts. To take these gifts for granted is an extreme misinterpretation of our role in a relationship with a loving Father. We are made, however, to be like God and share the gifts of His creation, just as God shares.

Stewardship defines our relationship with our Creator. Stewardship is an invitation to each of us to draw closer to God our Father with a prayerful response to ask: “What does God want to do through me?” The focus of stewardship is on the Giver—our loving Father, not on the gifts.

Jesus is the ultimate example of a Christian steward. Jesus lived a life one with God, living and acting as He kept His focus on God and God’s Will moment to moment. We, too, as Christian stewards are called to collaborate with God in His work of creation and re-creation throughout all of history.

Jesus shows us how to live as the image and likeness of God. To be like God is to be like Jesus—Christ-like. Jesus spent His entire earthly existence reliant on the Father and seeking to do the will of the Father. Are we not called to live the same?

Stewardship is an invitation, a call to vocation that is rooted in our biblical tradition, which reveals our relationship with God. We are the caretakers, “the stewards,” placed here to care for God’s gifts. A good steward takes on the same Spirit of Jesus and lives as Jesus—always concerned about pleasing the Father. Always asking, “What would God have me do?”

Those who give of themselves to the building of God’s kingdom, to the life and mission of the Church, are “disciples of Jesus.” Being a disciple of Jesus means that we respond to the call of Jesus to follow His examples and teachings. His way of life becomes our way of life. Stewardship constitutes a way of life that is both privileged and challenging. Becoming a disciple of Jesus leads naturally to a life of stewardship and results in intense joy.

Our American Bishops communicated this understanding of stewardship in their 1993 pastoral letter *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*. “The life of a Christian steward models the life of Jesus. It is challenging and even difficult, in many respects, yet intense joy comes to those who take the risk to live as Christian stewards.”

We are called to use our own gifts to participate in and support the Church’s mission of proclaiming, teaching, serving, sanctifying; there are many opportunities to serve
through God’s Church. Each of us has the fundamental obligation that originates from
the Sacrament of Baptism. The US Bishops point out even Jesus’ self-emptying is
unique, it is within the power of disciples and a duty that they be generous stewards of
the church giving freely of their time, talent and treasure.

The U. S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter, Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response, does not
provide a formal definition of the word stewardship. Instead, the Bishops pose the
question, “Who is a Christian steward?” Then they provide us with four characteristics
that describe a Christian steward. The Bishop’s Pastoral Letter on Stewardship
expresses a Christian steward as “one who receives God’s gifts gratefully, cherishes
and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them in justice and
love with others, and returns them with increase to the Lord.”

The first characteristic of a Christian steward is one who lives with gratitude. A
Christian steward is “one who receives God’s gifts gratefully.” Gratitude presumes that
we first acknowledge God as the Giver of all gifts – the true owner of all that we have
and all that we are. A profound sense of gratitude to God provides us a true
perspective of our reliance on God – as children of God and as Disciples of Christ.

The second characteristic of a Christian steward is one who lives with accountability.
A good steward is “one who cherishes and tends God’s gifts in a responsible and
accountable manner.” A true disciple knows that he or she will be held accountable for
how all God’s gifts have been managed or used. We are not solely responsible for what
we do, or fail to do, with the gift of life - our time, our talent, and our possessions. As
disciples of Jesus, we are also very much responsible for proclaiming His Gospel and
for building up His Kingdom, and we will one-day render an account of our stewardship
of this awesome responsibility.

The third characteristic of a good steward is one who lives with generosity. The
Bishops describe a Christian steward as “one who generously shares God’s gifts with
others out of a profound sense of justice and love.” Generosity may be the most
powerful attribute of a Christian steward because it impels us to live outside of
ourselves – often in ways that seem to contradict our own interests. The Scriptures and
the lives of the saints give us countless examples of disciples who lived a radical life of
selflessness. Their lives were counter-cultural, and they pushed the extreme in
following Christ by living generously and won true spiritual freedom and lasting joy.

The fourth characteristic of a Christian steward is one who gives back to the Lord with
increase. Jesus’ parable about the stewards makes it clear that God wants us to take
the gifts that we have been given and develop them – not just for our own sake, but also
for the common good and the building of the Kingdom. A Christian steward is called to
be productive and to make a profound difference in the world.

Stewardship promotes a way of life that is both privileged and challenging. A
stewardship way of life is one that identifies us as Disciples of Christ, and being a
disciple of Christ leads naturally to a life of stewardship. Stewardship is how we live
after we claim to be a “Christian.”
The US Bishop’s Pastoral Letter on Stewardship invites all Catholics to invest themselves - time, talent and treasure - in the mission and ministries of the Church. This invitation is a challenge for each of us to live a life of gratitude, accountability, and generosity. A stewardship way of life is a way that truly seeks to live as a disciple of Jesus.

Stewardship is a conversion process to which all baptized Christians are called to experience. It is a lifestyle based on prayer and the recognition of how we are blessed by God throughout our lives. Stewardship calls each of us to commit ourselves to God and to live that commitment by becoming personally involved in the mission of God, through His church, to the world. Stewardship challenges us to make conscientious decisions about our lives. Stewardship calls each of us to account for what God has given us, not only for the sake of knowing how much we have and how God has blessed us, but also to know how much God is calling us to share what he has given us with others, and to invest his gifts in the building of his Church. In the end, as good stewards, we recognize that we must give God an accounting of how we cared and shared for the gifts that He has given us.

The US Bishops underline three convictions in the pastoral letter on stewardship:

First, each baptized Christian is called to be disciple of Christ. This calling is challenging, it’s difficult, and it requires a daily struggle. We cannot do it on our own and we need God’s help; therefore, we must pray.

Second, we are called to a change of heart through an entire way of life. It is not just tithing. It is not just giving ten percent of our earnings; rather it is giving a proportionate amount and then being held accountable for what we do with the other proportion. This change of heart – conversion – requires us to be involved with the mission of Jesus. It is not just giving a percentage of our time; it is involving us completely in the mission of Jesus. We simply cannot spend time on a worthy parish project and then not be accountable with how we spend our relaxation or entertainment time. Stewardship identifies God as the source of all that I have, even every momentary breath. The Christian steward recognizes that each breath is a gift from God. All that we have in life results from God’s abundant generosity and we need to recognize our reliance on Him and thank Him.

Third, God calls us to look at who we are and what we do with the gift of life. To ask: “what do I own, and what owns me?” Prayerfully consider - on the day you die, are you leaving your treasure or going to it?

There is more to living as Christians, than just calling ourselves Christians. To live as Christians means that we have responded to the call of Jesus to follow Him and imitate His way of life. The imitation of Jesus is a stewardship way of life. Our Catechism teaches, “The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence... Those who hold goods for use and consumption should use them with moderation,
reserving the better part for guests, for the sick and the poor.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2404 and 2405) In other words, we are caretakers of something that does not truly belong to us, and we have a responsibility for how we use these gifts. In the end we must give an account to the One Who Provides – God.

The Bishops talk about a number of destructive “isms”: materialism, relativism, hedonism, individualism, consumerism, all of these exert a power influence on our society and make it more difficult for us to grow as disciples and good Christian stewards as we struggle to live out our lives according to God’s will.

The Bishops see themselves, and us, as Catholic citizens of a wealthy, powerful nation facing many questions about its identity and role in the warning years of troubled century. We are members of a community of faith blessed with many human and material resources, yet often uncertain about how to sustain and use them.

A Christian steward has a deep understanding, an insight of a certain way of seeing life and all that life holds. This insight is a grace in which we can see God present and active in the works of creation, not only at the beginning of time, but moment to moment, throughout our lives in the here and now. This outlook of life is the outlook of a Christian steward.

A stewardship way of life is a set of values, a spirit that affects our entire life, not based on what we have, or do not have, rather, based on gratitude to God for what we have, and awareness that God expects something of us. A good steward knows that life is beyond living with this constant urge of desire whenever we see what we don’t have. We must be careful about what we desire.