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Diocesan Stewardship Day - Stewardship: Now is the Time

St. Mark Parish, Independence, Missouri

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Thank you for spending this time today, to come together as a diocese for this annual stewardship day. I know there are so many things happening in May in the life of the parish and schools. Your presence and participation is a generous gift. Thank you.

I love the Spring: beautiful flowers and trees, milder weather, longer days – maybe even the opportunity for an evening walk. I love the Easter Season as well: full of the joy and peace and hope of the Risen Christ. Though the schedule of Confirmations can be grueling, it is enjoyable to meet with so many of our young people. In addition to the Confirmations, in your parishes you have First Communions, weddings, graduation ceremonies – so many things.

If we remember back several months ago now to the beginning of Lent, you will recall the Ash Wednesday reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. There God speaks to His people, "In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you. Behold," He says, "Now is a very acceptable time."

Easter is certainly the acceptable time – the day of salvation for which we prepared throughout Lent. I wish to spend a few moments with you this morning speaking about Stewardship, and the message I want to leave with you is this: "Now is a very acceptable time." Now is the time.

Like you, I have some experience with stewardship. As I was growing up I knew my folks put an envelope in the collection basket each Sunday. I didn't have any idea how much they gave. They didn't talk about it much, but we wouldn't leave the house without that envelope.

As a student I had a few jobs. I was a paper boy, a bus boy, I worked at a golf driving range. I worked summers for a landscaping company. I worked retail later on for Fox Photo. In these jobs I didn't make too much. I didn't save a lot; and I didn't really give regularly.

I went away to seminary and depended on others' kindness to have a few bucks to travel. It was in my second assignment as a priest (in 1981) that I encountered a pastor who spoke about this spiritual notion of stewardship. It was largely about tithing. As a priest I was already pretty engaged in terms of time and talent. I started donating to the parish, and throughout my priesthood I continued to tithe. Although now I don't have a parish assignment, I still keep a tithe including various special efforts I have been associated with along the way – and I have been better off for it. I don't budget it. I just take it off the top, and sort out what's left.

Now I don't have hardly any of the financial obligations most of you have, but I truly look at my stewardship as a spiritual thing: tied to simplicity of life.

Most of you are clearly as expert as I am, or more, on giving, tithing, and stewardship. Many of our pastors preach beautifully about this and have helped to establish opportunities and programs in your parishes. So many of the staff – both as staff, and also as individual or family contributors, participate with this conviction of giving back to God.

Someone recently told me, “Bishop, Stewardship is not going to work in the diocese. I think we have to look for a different approach.” When I asked him why he said that, he said, “Two things: Stewardship is a more protestant notion and it doesn’t have meaning to our people. Secondly, Stewardship doesn’t have a goal. Tithing, by comparison,” he said, “has a quantifiable goal – the ten percent. Stewardship doesn’t work because it is not concrete.”

I had to think about that a bit. I know the idea of being a steward is scriptural, but I couldn’t say much about the history of stewardship over the centuries; and whether or not it came out of a protestant tradition.

Scriptural stewardship reminds us that we don’t exclusively own the things we often regard as ours – first and foremost our lives. We are entrusted with them for a time. We are obliged, morally, to use them for their proper end. That is clear in Scripture and in tradition. But maybe we have borrowed some of the wording from the protestants – if so I would suggest that it may be in a kind of “best practices” way.

The second claim is simpler to respond to. Does Stewardship have a goal? I think it is true that parishes – or dioceses for that matter – begin stewardship programs, at times, in order to raise money, or increase giving. If so, and we are trying to reach a particular threshold amount through giving, it would be difficult to do so without setting some more specific benchmarks. The strategy of setting concrete goals is certainly legitimate. Projects have price tags. Bills require budgets and budgets have to be met or revised in order to keep things going. Right now we are working with some professional consultants on offertory enhancement programs in the diocese. This is a part of responsible stewardship.

Still, I believe Stewardship has a goal; but a different goal. The goal of Stewardship is not ultimately money. It is something spiritual. It has to do with building holiness: and a particular set of virtues within holiness. It has to do with becoming more thankful; less material and therefore more spiritual; It involves growing in trust of God, in relying on Providence to a greater degree than we might otherwise. As such, it has to do with what the Gospel calls spiritual poverty, what Jesus referred to when he proclaimed, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” It might help us to say, “God, I don’t have the material means to conquer every trial or challenge. My life is in your hands. I may have to do without, but I know You will help me get through, perhaps more simply.”

Stewardship has a goal. It is to grow more holy, more detached, more peaceful even if we don’t acquire all the things we might be able to acquire. As a bishop, as a priest before that, and as a person striving for holiness, I think stewardship is a worthy effort. It has to do with our salvation as described by Jesus Himself. And so I want to say “Now is a very appropriate time. Now is the day of salvation.”

We all know the three “T’s” of stewardship: Time, talent and treasure. I think they have stood the test of time. I cannot help but recommend them, today and always, as a framework within which we can grow in generosity and trust through stewardship.

Recently I read a talk by Archbishop Robert Carlson. He is about one year into his tenure as Archbishop of St. Louis and he addressed a similar conference there on stewardship. He spoke about three “P’s”: Prayer, Participation, and Payback.” The three “P’s” offer a slightly different twist on the way we grow in holiness through stewardship.

First, I checked myself on **Prayer**. Regarding prayer, do I tithe? Do I spend the best one-tenth of my time each day in conversation with God, talking but also listening to Him? If this is about growing in holiness, and my time is a gift from God, am I giving Him, not only an invitation, but ample opportunity to take charge of my life? It was in 1996 (not really that long ago) that I first started to make a daily holy hour. Are you giving God the best time in your day? If we are going to let God guide things, including our decisions about material goods, we need to listen to Him better and more frequently. Is time valuable? You bet! One priest I know suggests that if you want to find out what is important in your life, chart what you spend your money on, and what you spend your time doing. Our budgets and our calendars can tell us something very interesting about ourselves and our priorities. The challenge is this: to give God a big chunk of your most valuable and high quality time in prayer.

Archbishop Carlson next mentions **Participation**. You all give a lot to the work of the Church. We might also check ourselves concerning the quality and spirit of our participation. When the Church at the Second Vatican Council taught about the Sacred Liturgy, she said that all the baptized were called to a “full, active and conscious participation” in Holy Mass. This is not necessarily about taking a ministry as reader or Extraordinary Minister of Communion, or leading music. What is the spirit and quality of our participation in Mass, and in the life of the Church?

But also, do we participate in and contribute to the life of our communities, our neighborhoods, our workplace? Do we bring our faith to bear in all the arenas of our life, particularly our secular life? If we do not choose to participate fully as baptized persons of living and active faith, who is going to transform the culture of death into the civilization of life and love? What would our parishes look like if we all gave a tithe of our time in serious prayer? How would our communities be better homes for our parishes if we were actively influencing them through authentic – full, active and conscious – participation?

When Archbishop Carlson spoke about **Payback**, he used the example of a man who was challenged about the value of the gift he had received through Catholic education. Many of us are who we are because of someone who was faithful – perhaps a parent, a teacher or mentor. From them we learned what it meant to be people of faithful love. Many of us received a Catholic education. If so it is likely that our parents made some sacrifices – some generous choices that cost them. Now, it is pay back time. What have we received? What have we inherited in the parishes where we worship? It is payback time. What will our generation create for those who come after us? Clearly, the payback is to God. He is the giver of the lasting gifts we have received – and which make us who we are.

I liked Archbishop Carlson’s three “P’s,” and I found them helpful for reflection. You can find his talk, of January, 2010, on the Archdiocese’s website.

The real purpose of my words today, when all is said and done, is not to offer you the decisive insight into stewardship. Most of you know these things; many of you much better than I. I believe my responsibility today, as your bishop, is to entrust to you this message: **now is the time for us**. I charge us all to a new moment for stewardship in our diocese.

Don't get me wrong – I know my predecessors have done this in their own time. I am aware, with admiration, of some amazing things many of you have done and are doing in your parishes in this area of spirituality and stewardship. Don't stop. Please don't stop. But what can we do as a diocese beyond what we are doing in some blessed individual efforts? I believe that it is God's plan for the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph that we are great stewards, and that we can be exemplary in living this way as a diocese. We can learn from what others have done well, and we are called to do so. As bishop I want to call you – call us – to this. I challenge you to join me in a new moment of stewardship in our diocese. Can we build a culture of this spiritual "giving back" to God? Can we pray, participate, and pay back? Can we give God the best of our time, talent, and treasure?

Believe it or not, my friends, I have learned a few lessons in my first six years as a bishop; in my first five years as shepherd of the diocese. I have learned that – even as powerful as the bishop is – even the bishop cannot accomplish all things by "fiat." I cannot just say – as God would say – "let there be stewardship!" But together we can accomplish wonderful things. It is part of my responsibility to lead us in worthy and good works. I firmly believe that creating a deeper more personal and prayerful culture of stewardship in every parish and institution of our Catholic diocese is one such worthy and attainable goal. "Now is a very acceptable time." With God's grace and help, our efforts can bring about a rich time of salvation.

Why now? We ought to be very proud of the success of our Annual Appeal this year. We broke the two million dollar mark. Two years ago I wanted to give priority to this important work, and so I created the position of Vice Chancellor for Stewardship and Development. What a worthy first Vice Chancellor we have in Mrs. Paula Moss!

Over the last weeks we have begun to finalize the Comprehensive Strategic Plan for our Catholic Schools. One element seems clear: Our schools will only go forward if all of us decide that they are a priority and are worthy of our generous and broad support. In our School Plan, we do not use the language of "tithing" that has been often used – with some success – in support of many of our schools. Nonetheless – there is absolutely no doubt that the most significant aspect of this plan is stewardship. I was very inspired when I read the proposal of the Southwest Pod and their determination to build and intensify Stewardship. It came with a pledge that every pastor would preach about it – often and with conviction; that parishes would develop 'stewardship teams,' and identify 'stewardship coaches' to reach out to fellow parishioners, teaching them and encouraging them to make and live some new commitments.

We must go forward with this Plan to stabilize, strengthen, and grow our schools; to make sure that the gift we have received in a Catholic school education is paid back 'with interest' for generations to come; that these schools remain the anchors of our neighborhoods, the fertile breeding grounds for every strong Catholic vocation, and to keep the Church robust in the Springtime of a New Evangelization. These commitments are vital if we are to be ready to counter a materialistic and relativistic influence which demeans the life and dignity of the human person, and would displace the primacy of marriage and family. I am convinced that we can make some progress in these holy goals if our spirituality is one in which we know everything we have is a gift. What we have, we have been given, is not exclusively our own, but a sacred trust – like those ten talents in the Gospel, to be invested to make more – like a pearl of great and intangible value to be sacrificed for and shared with those who will come after us.

What we Plan to accomplish for the schools is only one part – very important, but only a part – of the vocation we have to stewardship. It is part of our call as human persons destined to be

here on this earth only for a time – but in heaven for eternity.

So – will you help, my dear friends, to make this a special and sacred moment for stewardship in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph? Share with us your expertise, your experience in making this work; your time, talent, and treasure. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit is ready to help us. I am convinced that **now is the time**.

I commend you and our efforts to our patrons, Mary and St. Joseph. They are the very ones into whose hands, heart, and home the Eternal Father gave His Son. With the same love and total commitment, I know they will guard and guide our efforts.

Thanks again and God bless you for all you are doing.