

July 29, 2010
Vol. 1, Issue 5

In this issue:

(podcast) A Good Steward Shares
God's Gifts in Love and Justice

Rethinking Stewardship: What Do I
Own, and What Owns Me?

(podcast) Freeing the Imprisoned
Donor: Life-Giving Forms
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Rethinking Stewardship: What Do I Own, and What Owns Me?

By Dan Conway

Introduction

I began thinking about stewardship in the early 1990s when the Roman Catholic Church in the United States first began to take stewardship seriously. I had the great privilege of learning about stewardship from Seattle Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy, now deceased, who at that time was chairman of the U.S. Catholic bishops' ad hoc committee on stewardship and the principal architect of *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* (SDR), the pastoral letter published by the bishops in 1992. This pastoral letter marks the official introduction of the word "stewardship" into the lexicon of Roman Catholicism—at least in the United States.

The core of Archbishop Murphy's teaching about stewardship can be found in a talk he gave in Indianapolis in November 1993 to representatives from the five Roman Catholic dioceses of Indiana. This talk, which the archbishop called "Reflections on the Pastoral Letter," was preserved on videotape by the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, and it has been used in a wide variety of pastoral and educational settings ever since. In addition, the archbishop's final reflections on stewardship were published posthumously in the fall of 1997 in a chapter entitled, "Giving from the Heart" (GH) in *The Practice of Stewardship in Religious Fundraising*, Volume 17 of "New Directions in Philanthropic Fundraising," a professional journal published by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University and by Jossey-Bass Publishers.

During the seven years I was blessed to have known him, I heard Archbishop Murphy give his stewardship talk (or some variation of it) at least 15 times—in parish halls, hotel conference rooms, retreat houses and seminaries from Baltimore to Chicago to Orlando to Indianapolis to Los Angeles. I have now watched the archbishop's videotaped talk at least 50 times—on wide-screen projection equipment in state-of-the-art auditoriums and on 13-inch monitors with tinny audio in cavernous old church

gymnasiums. The message is always powerful. The audience reaction is always the same. Archbishop Murphy's passion for stewardship is contagious!

As a result of this immersion into the teaching of Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy, I have come to the conclusion that the meaning of stewardship can be summarized in one two-part question: *What do I own, and what owns me?* The archbishop posed this question to me the first day I met him, and he kept on asking it for the next seven years until he was taken from us (too soon by our reckoning) on June 26, 1997. When we "rethink stewardship," I believe we need to use this two-part question as a guiding light.

What do I own, and what owns me? I believe this question is the key to the understanding and practice of stewardship *as a way of life*. Archbishop Murphy was keenly aware that, in the final analysis, he owned (or controlled) nothing and was, instead, owned (or possessed) wholly and completely by a good and gracious God. This basic insight permeates all his teaching, and I believe it is the heart of the stewardship message that he sought to convey in his talks, written reflections and, above all, in the work of the U.S. bishops' committee on stewardship.

At the time that I first came to know Archbishop Murphy—and was privileged to teach with him and travel with him throughout the United States—his most powerful illustration of the stewardship message was his personal experience of major surgery in Chicago in the 1970s.

As I was wheeled into the surgical room, it suddenly dawned on me: You know, when you're in that surgical room it doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter one darn bit what you own. What matters at that moment in time is a competent surgical team and a good and gracious God.(1)

To surrender control (or the illusion of control) and trust in the generous God who has given us everything we have and all that we are is the sum and substance of

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Donor: Life-Giving Forms
of Mission Advancement



www.omearaferguson.com

Rethinking Stewardship: What Do I Own, and What Owns Me?

(page 2 of 7)

Archbishop Murphy's experience of stewardship as *a lifestyle that reflects who we are and what we believe*.

At the end of his life, when he was dying from leukemia, Archbishop Murphy's witness to stewardship became much more intense—as he began to recognize life itself as the supreme gift of a good and gracious God. But it was the same message: Life is a gift to be cherished, shared and given back to the Lord with increase. In the end, we will be held accountable not for who we are (our status, prestige or accomplishments) and not for what we possess (houses, cars, bank balances or stock portfolios). Instead, we will be asked to render an account of our taking and giving. We will be asked:

Have you shared yourself (and your possessions) generously with others—because it's the right thing to do and because you really wanted to? Have you nurtured and developed all God's gifts and returned them with increase? Can you honestly say that you have lived a lifestyle of sharing and, so, have built a holy place within your life, your parishes, your diocese, your church?

Thomas J. Murphy did not formulate a theology of stewardship. As a bishop, he articulated a pastoral vision of stewardship as a way of life, and he communicated that vision in many ways. Surely the most significant and enduring way that Archbishop Murphy shared his vision of stewardship with others was through his leadership role in the development and publication of the U.S. Catholic bishops' 1992 pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*.

The archbishop said many times that the stewardship pastoral could be summarized in one sentence from St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians: "For this is the will of God: your sanctification" (1Thess 4:3). For Archbishop Murphy, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* was designed to be a spiritual reflection on the call to live a holy life in today's world. As such, the pastoral is

a powerful expression of the stewardship message that the archbishop and his brother bishops on the ad hoc committee wanted to convey to the Catholic people of the United States, described by Archbishop Murphy in 1993 as *citizens of a wealthy, powerful nation facing many questions about its identity and role in the waning years of a troubled century*.

Archbishop Murphy took delight in the fact that this pastoral letter doesn't look like a church document. It's too easy to read and understand! The archbishop was also intensely proud of the fact that *the stewardship pastoral, if you look at it carefully, only mentions finances twice in its entire 64 pages!*

Stewardship: A Disciple's Response is a pastoral (and, in many ways, poetic) expression of the vision that was at the core of Archbishop Murphy's stewardship message. It is not systematic theology, biblical study or even catechetical instruction. The stewardship pastoral is a spiritual reflection on the way mature disciples are called to follow Jesus Christ without counting the cost. It's a reflection on the journey to holiness that is at the heart of Christian life.

Individuals or groups who look to the pastoral letter to provide practical guidelines on church fund raising or finances are bound to be disappointed. According to Archbishop Murphy, the pastoral letter is not what many people expected because stewardship as we look at it and reflect on it goes beyond the mere sharing of financial gifts. ... It asks us to do something that is far more difficult, and that is to share ourselves.

Archbishop Murphy taught me that stewardship means letting go of my independence, my ego, my need for control and my desire to "be someone." He showed me that true stewardship means *that I depend on a good and gracious God for who I am and what is mine—because they are all*

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Rethinking Stewardship: What Do I Own, and What Owns Me?

(page 3 of 7)

gifts to me. He illustrated his powerful stewardship message with funny stories, personal examples and whatever media he had access to (videotapes, paintings, poetry, even Peanuts cartoons).

One of the archbishop's favorite quotes was from an artist in the Pacific Northwest who painted nativity scenes in contemporary settings. Regarding the artist's depiction of the birth of Jesus as a modern-day infant born to poverty and homelessness, shivering in his mother's arms, the archbishop quotes the artist, saying, "We are invited to hold a shivering God within our hands, and that shivering God, in turn, holds us."

Thomas J. Murphy was given a rare gift. He could inspire others with his passion for stewardship ... as something far more radical than fund raising ... *as one of the chief characteristics of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ ... as a call to faith and conversion ... as a source of grace and deepening spirituality.* The archbishop was a good steward of this precious gift, and the pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, is his legacy!

Archbishop Murphy did not consider *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* to be the last word on stewardship. In fact, shortly before he was hospitalized with leukemia in 1996, the archbishop asked me to help him solicit funding for what he called a *National Pastoral Plan* for stewardship. Because of his subsequent illness and untimely death, I never got the chance to find out what Archbishop Murphy had in mind for this national pastoral plan. All I know for sure is that he regarded the pastoral letter as the beginning of a stewardship journey—not the end.

A source of grace and deepening spirituality

Grace is the constant outpouring of God's unconditional love. It is the generous reaching-out-to-others that is an integral part of God's essential nature as the creator and sustainer of all life.

Stewardship is a source of grace because it reminds us that God never stops giving and that everything we have (and all that we are) comes to us as God's free gift.

The pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, describes a Christian steward as "one who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, and returns them with increase to the Lord" (SDR, p. 9). Because God never stops giving, a Christian steward is constantly being invited (and challenged) to receive, cherish, share and return-with-increase the fruits of God's abundant generosity. This is why stewardship is a lifelong responsibility. As long as God keeps giving, we are called to be open and responsive to his gifts (his grace).

Stewardship is a source of deepening spirituality because it challenges us to let go of any false notions that we are somehow in control of our lives, our skills, and our talents, or our material possessions. We are not the authors of our own existence. We are not the owners of our spiritual and material gifts. We are stewards (caretakers or custodians) of what belongs exclusively and entirely to God.

God has given us the gift of life. Our response should be to praise God for this great treasure and to demonstrate our gratitude by taking care of (and sharing) this wonderful gift. We have received the gift of intelligence. We are responsible for developing our minds and growing in wisdom and understanding. We have been given the skills and abilities that allow us to earn a living, care for those we love, and contribute to the common good by our work and by our service to others in the church and in our community. These gifts of time and talent make it possible for us to acquire the material possessions that we need and enjoy. All God's gifts are good. They are meant to be used responsibly and shared generously with others.

Stewardship is a source of grace when it

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Rethinking Stewardship: What Do I Own, and What Owns Me?

(page 4 of 7)

helps us develop what Archbishop Murphy called a *lifestyle of sharing*. When we respond to God's goodness by growing in gratitude, responsibility, and generosity, we can experience the difference that stewardship makes in our daily lives. As the archbishop says, stewardship invites us to reflect on what is most basic and fundamental in our lives—and to respond from the heart.

Stewardship is not a program. It is a way of life. It requires nourishment and practice. A Christian steward is one who makes a conscious decision to remain open to God's grace and to respond generously (from the heart) to whatever opportunities and challenges may come.

In his final reflections on stewardship, Archbishop Murphy acknowledged that even leukemia can be seen as a gift from God. He recognized the workings of a good and gracious God in the dedication and skill of the health care professionals who treated him, in the outpouring of love and support he received from family, friends, and people throughout the Church of Western Washington State (especially the school children who donated blood in his name). He even saw God's hand in the anxiety and fear that forced him to reaffirm his basic values, basic beliefs, and basic convictions.

Last year, just after Thanksgiving, I was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia and related kidney disorders. I underwent a long hospitalization, and during this period it did not matter who I was or what I owned. All that mattered then was the skill of my healthcare professionals and the providence of a good and gracious God! Now that I am out of the hospital and feeling well (in spite of going to the doctor and the hospital for transfusions of blood and platelets on a regular basis) I have a whole new awareness of what stewardship means. (GH, p. 28)

Stewardship helps us recognize that both

the ordinary experiences of daily living and the most profound moments of our life and death are gifts from God to be cherished and shared with others. Since God never stops giving, our opportunities to respond from the heart are truly endless. That's why Archbishop Murphy believed, with all his heart, that stewardship is a way of life—and a lifelong source of grace and deepening spirituality.

Practical implications

There is an inherent danger in describing stewardship as a source of grace and spirituality. We may find ourselves so wrapped up in the spirituality of stewardship that we neglect its practical implications. After all, stewardship is a practical virtue like hospitality. You can't just think good stewardship. You have to put it into action!

The impetus for the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on stewardship was the financial crisis facing the Catholic Church in the United States in the late 1980s (two decades after the close of the Second Vatican Council). Dramatic changes in the church and in society had placed new demands on parishes, schools, and other Catholic institutions, and for reasons that are still not completely clear, funding for the church's work failed to keep pace with the increasing costs. In response to this crisis, Archbishop Murphy raised the issue at an administrative board meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now known as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops or the USCCB). The result of this intervention was an ad hoc committee, chaired by the archbishop, charged with studying the issue and proposing solutions.

Archbishop Murphy never lost sight of the fact that resources (human and financial) are essential to the church's ministry and that they do not ordinarily *fall from heaven like the manna that fed the Jewish people in the desert*. At the same time, the archbishop was absolutely convinced that the root cause of the church's failure to generate new or

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Rethinking Stewardship: What Do I Own, and What Owns Me?

(page 5 of 7)

increased resources was a spiritual crisis (a crisis of faith and conversion) not a financial crisis. He illustrated this conviction by calling attention to people's amazing generosity in response to emergency situations or natural disasters. *What is amazing, my friends, is that we respond to the emergency situation, and we feel good about it. But long after the emergency ends, the hunger is still there; the homelessness is still there; the flooding is still there.*

This insight into the sporadic nature of Catholics' generosity led the archbishop and his fellow bishops on the ad hoc committee to formulate their task in a way that was different from what some people expected. The bishops on the ad hoc committee might have chosen to ask an eminently practical question, such as: How can we raise more money to meet the growing needs of our dioceses, parishes, schools, social service agencies, and missionary work? As the archbishop was fond of saying, the committee might have accomplished its task relatively quickly and successfully by posing this question and then calling attention to the proven principles and techniques of professional fund raising.

Instead, the bishops posed for themselves a different kind of question. They asked: How do we respond to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ in a sustained, workable way? It was still a practical question (they were looking for a "workable way"), but the committee sought a solution that was deeper and more long-lasting than an immediate response to the church's urgent financial needs.

Archbishop Murphy believed that the committee's decision to ask this more fundamental question was a graced moment in his life and in the life of the church. It meant that the committee would reject the *quick fix* and pursue a task that he considered *far more radical, far more fundamental*.

The ad hoc committee's decision to take

what some called the high road of spirituality (rather than the low road of finance or fund raising) was not appreciated by everyone—including some members of the hierarchy and some lay leaders who helped underwrite the committee's work. Even after the pastoral letter was approved by the body of bishops and distributed to parishes and dioceses throughout the United States, some questioned the letter's exclusive focus on the spiritual and pastoral dimensions of stewardship rather than the church's continuing financial problems.

Archbishop Murphy passionately defended the committee's decision. Whereas some suggested that it was necessary to deal with immediate financial problems first, and then to address the spirituality of stewardship, the archbishop argued that if you don't start with spirituality, you'll never get there. *There is no quick fix!* If you start with money (or put too much emphasis on the church's need for resources), the archbishop used to say, all you get is a short-lived financial response—like an increased offertory program in a parish that produces a temporary spike in giving but no fundamental change in the way parishioners live their daily lives or participate personally in the mission and ministry of the church.

I agree with the bishops' decision to focus their pastoral letter on the spirituality of stewardship. Bishops are pastors, not professional fund raisers; their focus should be on the broader and deeper pastoral issues that concern the Christian community. But I also believe that the spiritual principles that are so beautifully expressed in *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* can only achieve their radical, fundamental objectives if they are put into practice *in a sustained, workable way* that includes addressing the church's very real need for increased human and financial resources.

Perhaps this built-in tension (between the pastoral letter's emphasis on the spirituality of stewardship and the church's urgent and increasing need for resources) is what

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Rethinking Stewardship: What Do I Own, and What Owns Me?

(page 6 of 7)

Archbishop Murphy hoped to address in the “national pastoral plan” that he proposed shortly before his death. In fact, the archbishop was a very successful fund raiser (and the author of a popular article on the theology of fund raising) who was keenly aware of the need to integrate principles of Christian stewardship with the practice of professional fund raising.

One thing is certain. Archbishop Murphy would never have supported a plan that placed fundraising before stewardship. He would have enthusiastically supported efforts to develop new human and financial resources, but he would have insisted that priority be given to *something far more radical, far more fundamental*: the opportunities and challenges of teaching *stewardship as a way of life!*

Mature discipleship

Stewardship: A Disciple's Response offers three basic principles or convictions that describe Christian stewardship as a way of life. The first conviction is that stewardship is intimately connected to mature Christian discipleship. Stewardship is not incidental to Christianity. It is essentially linked to the decision to follow Jesus Christ as his disciple.

This is the vocation of every baptized person: to follow Jesus Christ without counting the cost and to discover the joy that comes when we have given ourselves completely to the love of God and the service of our sisters and brothers in Christ. As Archbishop Murphy frequently said, *each and every person is called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is not an option! It is not for a select few.*

The pastoral letter on stewardship says that *mature disciples make a conscious, firm decision—carried out in action—to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter what the cost to themselves.* Stewardship is not what we do in the first fervor of conversion to Christ. (St. Francis's giving away all his

material possessions—and his father's things as well!) Stewardship is what happens later—in the mature years of Christian life. It is the latter-day Franciscans struggling to live their vow of poverty with buildings to maintain and elderly friars to care for. It is ordinary families with mortgages, car payments, and school tuition seeking the right balance between a contemporary secular lifestyle and a way of life that is characterized by simplicity and generous sharing.

Stewardship responds to these fundamental questions: What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in an affluent, consumer-oriented society? How are we supposed to live an authentic Christian life in a culture that encourages attitudes and behaviors that are incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

As Archbishop Murphy would say, *It is not easy to be a disciple of Jesus today. It is not easy to be faithful to the Gospel ... to live out in your life or mine what it means to walk with the Lord Jesus.*

Stewardship helps us live out in practice the firm, conscious decision we have made to follow Christ. It guides our choices and frees us from the tyranny of “isms” (materialism, consumerism, secularism). Stewardship shows us how to live and work; how to buy and sell; how to spend and save; how to accumulate and share all the materials things that are necessary and enjoyable in life—without becoming obsessed or burdened by them. Stewardship frees us to live good, responsible lives. It helps us be faithful to the Gospel in our daily living and be generous in sharing all our gifts out of gratitude to God for his goodness to us.

How does a mature disciple of Christ live?

The pastoral letter on stewardship gives us a descriptive answer: *A Christian steward is one who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible*

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Rethinking Stewardship: What Do I Own, and What Owns Me?

(page 7 of 7)

and accountable manner, shares them generously with others out of justice and love, and returns them to the Lord with increase. A mature disciple of Jesus Christ lives gratefully—offering thanks to God in many simple but genuine ways. A mature disciple is also a responsible person who reflects in daily living a profound awareness that we are stewards (not owners) of all God's gifts and must, therefore, take special care of them. A mature disciple is generous—not in a condescending way but out of a firm conviction that God's gifts are to be shared freely with all our brothers and sisters in the family of God. Finally, as the parables of Jesus illustrate so poignantly, a mature disciple of Christ takes the gifts and talents God has given and makes them grow so that what is returned to the Lord on the last day is greater than what was received at the beginning.

Archbishop Murphy relates the pastoral letter's first conviction to the universal call to holiness—a call that he says at times involves difficulties and challenges. At its heart, stewardship is countercultural. It is a way of life that frequently contradicts values that are communicated day-in and day-out in advertising and the entertainment media. Where the culture urges us to accumulate and spend, stewardship calls us to live simply and share what we have with others. Where the culture encourages us to be aggressively competitive in our work (and even in our play), stewardship invites us to strike a balance between competition and collaboration—and between “winning at any cost” and “letting go” in order to make time for family and community life. Where the

culture celebrates doing things (as Frank Sinatra sang) “my way,” stewardship challenges us to discover the Lord's way and to make it our own.

What God wants is for all of you to be holy.

Archbishop Murphy's view of holiness, as seen in his stewardship message, is not some kind of excessive piety. It is wholeness, balance, gratitude, and generous sharing—all rooted in the basic commitment to follow Jesus Christ, and to live as he lived, no matter where he leads us and no matter what it costs.

The call to stewardship is a call to be a holy people. It is a call to take the risk of walking with Jesus.

Rethinking stewardship

Archbishop Murphy rethought stewardship constantly. He refused to accept the simplistic categories or jargon phrases that are still commonplace—nearly 18 years after the publication of *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* and 13 years after Archbishop Murphy's untimely death. If stewardship really is about the call to holiness and the effort to live our Christian faith as grateful, responsible and generous people, then it demands that we re-examine ourselves and our motives on a regular (daily?) basis.

What do I own, and what owns me? This simple, but very powerful, two-part question is what sets in motion a genuine rethinking of stewardship. How we answer determines who we are and how we choose to live.

(1) All quotes, which are given in italics, are taken from Archbishop Murphy's videotaped remarks, “Reflections on the Pastoral Letter,” November, 1993, Indianapolis, Ind.