

March 1, 2011
Vol. 2, Issue 2

In this issue:

Parish Transformation:
A Tool for Financial Health
and Parish Renewal

Giving – The Incarnation of One's
Self Donation to Christ: the
Authentic Disposition of the Giver

(GSN) Mission Advancement is a
Critical Element for Success in
Catholic Schools

(podcast) A Good Steward
Receives God's Gifts Gratefully



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Giving – The Incarnation of One's Self Donation to Christ: the Authentic Disposition of the Giver

By *Patrick O'Meara*

Fundraising is one of the real challenges faced by pastors and parishioners alike especially during times of economic turmoil. There is always a reluctance to speak about (and equally on the part of parishioners to hear about) fundraising. And yet, on one level we all know that parishes do not run themselves and it takes financial resources to carry out the various ministries and projects of the parish and of course pay the light bill.

At a deeper level, the attitude of giving should reflect the deeper work of the Holy Spirit in each of us; it is a work which builds on the very nature of who we are as human beings. In fact, our very being is made for giving. Pope Benedict writes, "The human being is made for Gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendental dimension..." (*Caritas in Veritate*, 34).

The act of giving illustrates how we transcend the limits of our human nature and focus on something or someone completely other and outside of ourselves. We transcend our own self-interest to truly give to another. Giving, then, as understood within the Church, is constitutive of self donation; it is, in the highest form, the incarnation of an individual's self donation to Christ.

How, then do we apply this deeper philosophical understanding of giving within the context of fundraising and stewardship? First, we need to understand that when we ask for a donation to support a work of the Church we are asking an individual to engage in an eminently personal act. This is an act where the individual expresses themselves, and, to the degree that they do give without seeking reward, they exercise this transcendence. As such we must acknowledge that this ought to be a free act. To denigrate this freedom diminishes the act and the person.

In Mission Advancement it is easy to use coercion to facilitate gifts, and such coercion takes many forms: guilt, building a false sense of obligation to a community, exerting pressure, creating a false community from which they fear exclusion, and others. Regardless of the method, coercion destroys that which it seeks, namely the mission of the Church to build the Kingdom of God and is equally destructive of the individual's self donation to Christ. St. Augustine reminds us that "the movement of the soul is voluntary;" therefore the Church's proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ is an invitation not an imposition. This is why the Church only proposes and never imposes.

As we seek to engage in Mission Advancement, we must remind ourselves that anything that obstructs the voluntary movement of the soul to Christ is contrary to the mission, even if it brings short term monetary benefit. We see sometimes a paternalism, as John Paul the Great called it, that is inappropriate within the Church where the donor is not freely choosing to participate in the mission they themselves are a part of, but, instead, they are told to give to something which others, who "know better," have put together. By not inviting them into the process of building the project or campaign, their role is reduced to merely that of sheep that only follow, in an unthinking fashion, the leadership of the campaign.

John Paul the Great wrote about the danger of paternalism in every form as it diminishes the person, as a free acting agent. He even wrote about this danger in our relationship with God. "Man can put this question (of the meaning of suffering) to God with all the emotion of his heart and with his mind full of dismay and anxiety, and God expects the question and listens to it..." (*Salvifici Dolores*, 13). God's response could be a paternalistic one — that He is omnipotent and does not need to justify himself to us; however, in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*,

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Giving – The Incarnation of One's Self Donation to Christ: the Authentic Disposition of the Giver (page 2 of 2)

John Paul the Great continues this reflection by saying "... God who besides being omnipotence is Wisdom and-to repeat once again-Love, desires to justify himself to mankind. He is not the Absolute that remains outside the world, indifferent to human suffering. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us" (p. 94).

Paradoxically, God seeks to justify himself to us because He is, in his very nature, self-giving love. This beautiful statement is such that it draws us to greater heights in our work and inspires us to present compellingly the work of the Church and more precisely, Christ's work within us to inspire and justify the gifts we have made of ourselves to Christ. This is how we will win the world to Christ, and it is the means by which the logic of gift is revealed and understood.

In fundraising, we find that there is a spectrum of motivation for why people give. At one end, the donor gives to support the good work of others. This donor is not engaged in the work itself nor participates in the ownership or direction of the project to which he or she is giving. Rather, this donor is a mere external observer who is inspired by the work of others and wants to support them with monetary gifts. While imperfect, this gift is meritorious and not coercive because it is motivated by the Good which it recognizes.

On the other end of the spectrum, the donor gives as an expression of their total self donation to Christ. This is a beautiful

incarnation of a soul's gift to God. It is, as St. Therese of the Little Child Jesus, would say the gift of the Betrothed. She writes, "I have no other desires except to love Jesus unto folly." This is the total self donation which Jesus tells about in the story of the man who having found the "pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:46). It is the gift of the person who owns the mission as a steward and does everything to see that it is brought about. This is where the gift of the individual or family that gives beyond their proportionate share is in fact logical. It is the incarnation of their total self donation to Christ.

In summary, the task of fundraising must begin with an authentic disposition of giving which invites the donor to give as a response to their ongoing gift to Christ. To do so in the most complete, and efficacious manner, we must seek to bring others into direct relationship with Jesus Christ. Not so that they may love Him first, but because He already has and does love them first and seeks to transform them in the power of the Holy Spirit. They then may give themselves freely to Christ, and we may in fact see that incarnated in a monetary gift. If so, we have beheld the widow's mite, no matter the size of the gift.

N.B. Thank you to Dr. John Crosby for the wonderful essay on "Medical Ethics and Personalism" that yielded a good part of this essay.