

STEWARDSHIP: A DISCIPLE'S RESPONSE

A PASTORAL LETTER ON STEWARDSHIP

Written by the U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1992

Chapter I, The Call

As our concept of stewardship continues to evolve after twelve years of marriage, we are grateful for the people who have challenged us from the beginning to embrace fully Christ's teachings. They weren't always telling us the things we wanted to hear, but we feel blessed that we were able to work through the initial frustrations of committing the best portion of our time, talent, and treasure to the Church. It's difficult to separate ourselves from the demands and possessions of the world, but there's a tremendous amount of peace that comes from every decision we make for Christ and his will for us. We can't overstate the powerful impact the lifestyle has had on our marriage and three children.

-Tom and LaNell Lilly, Owensboro, Kentucky

THE DISCIPLE'S VOCATION

The Christian vocation is essentially a call to be a disciple of Jesus. Stewardship is part of that. Even more to the point, however, Christians are called to be good stewards of the personal vocations they receive. Each of us must discern, accept, and live out joyfully and generously the commitments, responsibilities, and roles to which God calls him or her. The account of the calling of the first disciples, near the beginning of John's Gospel, sheds light on these matters.

John the Baptist is standing with two of his disciples Andrew and, according to tradition, the future evangelist John-when Jesus passes by. "Behold," John the Baptist exclaims, "the Lamb of God!" Wondering at these words, his companions follow Christ.

"What are you looking for?" Jesus asks them. "Rabbi," they say, "Where are you staying?" "Come and you will see." They spend the day with him, enthralled by his words and by the power of his personality.

Deeply moved by this experience, Andrew seeks out his brother Simon and brings him to Jesus. The Lord greets him: "You will be called Kephas"-Rock. The next day, encountering Philip, Jesus tells him: "Follow me." Philip finds his friend Nathanael and, challenging his skepticism, introduces him to the Lord. Soon Nathanael too is convinced: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

This fast-paced narrative at the beginning of John's Gospel (see Jn 1:35-50) teaches a number of lessons. For our purposes, two stand out.

One is the personal nature of a call from Jesus Christ. He does not summon disciples as a faceless crowd but as unique individuals. "How do you know me?" Nathanael asks. "Before Philip called you," Jesus answers, "I saw you under the fig tree." He knows people's personal histories, their strengths and weaknesses, their destinies; he has a purpose in mind for each one.

This purpose is individual vocation. "Only in the unfolding of the history of our lives and its events," says Pope John Paul II, "is the eternal plan of God revealed to each of us" (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 58). Every human life, every personal vocation, is unique.

And yet the vocations of all Christians do have elements in common. One of these is the call to be a disciple. In fact, we might say that to be disciples-to follow Christ and try to live his life as our own-is the common vocation of Christians; discipleship in this sense *is* Christian life.

The other lesson that John's narrative makes clear is that people do not hear the Lord's call in isolation from one another. Other disciples help mediate their vocations to them, and they in turn are meant to mediate the Lord's call to others. Vocations are communicated, discerned, accepted, and lived out within a community of faith which is a community of disciples (d. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 21); its members try to help one another hear the Lord's voice and respond.

RESPONDING TO THE CALL

Jesus not only calls people to him but also forms them and sends them out in his service (cf. Mt 10:5 ff.; Mk 6: 7 ff.; Lk 9: 1ff.). Being sent on a mission is a consequence of being a disciple. Whoever wants to follow Christ will have much work to do on his behalf-announcing the Good News and serving others as Jesus did.

Jesus' call is urgent. He does not tell people to follow him at some time in the future but here and now-at *this* moment, in *these* circumstances. There can be no delay. "Go and proclaim the kingdom of God. . . . No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:60, 62).

But a person can say no to Christ. Consider the wealthy and good young man who approaches Jesus asking how to lead an even better life. Sell your goods, Jesus tells him; give to the poor, and follow me. "When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions" (Mt 19:22).

Attachment to possessions is always more or less a problem, both for individuals and for the community of faith. In *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Doubleday/ Image Books, 1959), written years after she became a Catholic, Dorothy Day recalls the "scandal" of encountering a worldly Church-or, more properly, the worldliness of some Catholics: "businesslike priests . . . collective wealth. . . lack of sense of responsibility for the poor." She concludes: "There was plenty of charity but too little justice" (140).

THE CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ leads naturally to the practice of stewardship. These linked realities, discipleship and stewardship, then make up the fabric of a Christian life in which each day is lived in an intimate, personal relationship with the Lord.

This Christ-centered way of living has its beginning in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. As Vatican II remarks, all Christians are "bound to show forth, by the example of their lives and by the witness of their speech," that new life of faith which begins in Baptism and is strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation (*Ad Gentes*, no. 11). Faith joins individuals and the community of Jesus' followers in intimacy with their Lord and leads them to live as his disciples. Union with Christ gives rise to a sense of solidarity and common cause between the disciples and the Lord and also among the disciples themselves.

Refracted through the prisms of countless individual vocations, this way of life embodies and expresses the one mission of Christ: to do God's will, to proclaim the Good News of salvation, to heal the afflicted, to care for one's sisters and brothers, to give life-life to the full-as Jesus did.

Following Jesus is the work of a lifetime. At every step forward, one is challenged to go further in accepting and loving God's will. Being a disciple is not just something else to do, alongside many other things suitable for Christians; it is a total way of life and requires continuing conversion.

Stewardship plays an important role in the lives of people who seek to follow Christ. In particular, as we have said, Christians must be stewards of their personal vocations, for it is these that show how, according to the circumstances of their individual lives, God wants them to cherish and serve a broad range of interests and concerns: life and health, along with their own intellectual and spiritual well-being and that of others; material goods and resources; the natural environment; the cultural heritage of humankind-indeed, the whole rich panoply of human goods, both those already realized and those whose realization depends upon the present generation or upon generations yet to come. Catholics have a duty, too, to be stewards of their Church: that community of disciples, that Body of Christ, of which they, individually and together, are the members, and in which "if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy" (1 Cor 12:26).

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

The way of discipleship is privileged beyond any other. Jesus says: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). But discipleship is not an easy way. "If you wish to come after me," Jesus also says, "you must deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow me. For if you wish to save your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake you will save it" (Lk 9:23-24).

The Lord's way is not a way of comfortable living or of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, scornfully calls "cheap grace." This is not real grace but an illusion. It is what happens when people approach the following of Christ as a way to pleasant experiences and feeling good. Bonhoeffer contrasts this with "costly" grace. It is costly because it calls us to follow, and grace because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it requires a disciple for Jesus' sake to put aside the craving for domination, possession, and control, and grace because it confers true liberation and eternal life. It is costly, finally, because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.

But all this is very general. To understand and practice this way of life, people need models to imitate. These exist in abundance in the holy women and men who have gone before us in the faith; while our supreme source of guidance is found in the person and teaching of Jesus. Let us reflect on what he tells us about stewardship.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Mr. and Mrs. Lilly speak about "giving" the best portion of their time, talent, and treasure to the Church. What might be your "best portion"?
2. In what sense is stewardship more radical than the sharing of time, talent, and money?
3. If you believe that you are "called," what human, personal experience has reinforced your faith in the call?
4. What are some of the reasons why you might hesitate to respond to the Lord's call?
5. Do you feel that to be a faithful steward you will have to do it alone, or can you count on moral support from other sources? Which ones?
6. If you were to be an ideal Christian steward-with the help of God's grace, of course-what would it cost you in terms of personal sacrifice and hardship?
7. What does the word of God say to you about our vocation to become disciples and stewards of the mysteries of God? Share your reflections with others.

The word of the LORD came to me thus:
Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you.
"Ah, Lord God!" I said,
"I know not how to speak; I am too young."

But the LORD answered me,
Say not, "I am too young."
To whomever I send you, you shall go;
whatever I command you, you shall speak.
Have no fear before them,
because I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD. Jer 1:4-8)

For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God [that is] with me. Therefore, whether it be I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (1 Cor 15:9-11)

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one with whom I am pleased,
Upon whom I have put my spirit;
he shall bring forth justice to the nations,
Not crying out, not shouting,
not making his voice heard in the street.
A bruised reed he shall not break,
and a smoldering wick he shall not quench.
(Is 42: 1-3)

8. Comment on the following passages:

In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God, and who obey the voice of the Father, worshiping God and Father in spirit and in truth. These souls follow the poor Christ, the humble and cross-bearing Christ, in order to be made worthy of being partakers in His glory. Every person should walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of a living faith which arouses hope and works through charity. (Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 41)

Without a vocation, man's existence would be meaningless. We have been created to bear the responsibility God has entrusted us with. Though different, each man should fulfill his specific vocation and shoulder his individual responsibility. (Anwar el-Sadat)

Like "duty," "law," "religion," the word "vocation" has a dull ring to it, but in terms of what it means, it is really not dull at all. *Vocare*, to call, of course, and man's vocation is a man's calling. It is the work that he is called to in this world, the thing that he is summoned to spend his life doing. We can speak of a man's choosing his vocation, but perhaps it is at least as accurate to speak of a vocation's choosing the man, of a call's being given and a man's hearing it, or not hearing it. And maybe that is the place to start: the business of listening and hearing. A man's life is full of all sorts of voices calling him in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside and some of them are voices from outside. The more alive and alert we are, the more clamorous our lives are. Which do we listen to? What kind of voice do we listen for? (Frederick Buechner)

Chapter II Jesus' Way

Our parents are an inspiration to us as we look back on their lives of giving themselves for each other and for others. Had it not been for their lives of stewardship and giving, we would not perhaps have the faith we have today; and we want to pass that faith and love on to our children, grandchildren, and others. And then our thoughts are turned to the ultimate sacrifice that Christ made for us. He did so, not because he had to, but because of his great love for us. And to think, all he asks in return is for us to love him and others! But it would mean little to tell someone we love them if we did not try to show that love in a concrete way.

-Paul and Bettie Eck, Wichita, Kansas

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Jesus is the supreme teacher of Christian stewardship, as he is of every other aspect of Christian life; and in Jesus' teaching and life self-emptying is fundamental. Now, it might seem that self-emptying has little to do with stewardship, but in Jesus' case that is not so. His self-emptying is not sterile self-denial for its own sake; rather, in setting aside self, he is filled with the Father's will, and he is fulfilled in just this way: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work" (Jn 4:34).

Jesus' mission is to restore to good order the created household of God which sin has disrupted. He not only perfectly accomplishes this task, but also, in calling disciples, empowers them to collaborate with him in the work of redemption for themselves and on behalf of others.

In describing the resulting way of life, Jesus does not waste time proposing lofty but unrealistic ideals; he tells his followers how they are expected to live. The Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount prescribe the life-style of a Christian disciple (cf. Mt 5:3-7:27). Although it does not suit worldly tastes, "the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God" (1 Cor 3: 19). One does well to live in this way. "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. . . . Everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand" (Mt 7:24, 26).

THE IMAGE OF THE STEWARD

Jesus sometimes describes a disciple's life in terms of stewardship (cf. Mt 25: 14- 30; Lk 12:42-48), not because being a steward is the whole of it but because this role sheds a certain light on it. An *oikollomos* or steward is one to whom the owner of a household turns over responsibility for caring for the property, managing affairs, making resources yield as much as possible, and sharing the resources with others. The position involves trust and accountability.

A parable near the end of Matthew's gospel (cf. Mt 25:14-30) gives insight into Jesus' thinking about stewards and stewardship. It is the story of "a man who was going on a journey," and who left his wealth in silver pieces to be tended by three servants.

Two of them respond wisely by investing the money and making a handsome profit. Upon returning, the master commends them warmly and rewards them richly. But the third behaves foolishly, with anxious pettiness, squirreling away the master's wealth and earning nothing; he is rebuked and punished.

The silver pieces of this story stand for a great deal besides money. All temporal and spiritual goods are created by and come from God. That is true of everything human beings have: spiritual gifts like faith, hope, and love; talents of body and brain; cherished relationships with family and friends; material goods: the achievements of human genius and skill; the world itself. One day God will require an accounting of the use each person has made of the particular portion of these goods entrusted to him or her.

Each will be measured by the standard of his or her individual vocation. Each has received a different "sum" - a unique mix of talents, opportunities, challenges, weaknesses and strengths, potential modes of service and response - on which the Master expects a return. He will judge individuals according to what they have done with what they were given.

St. Ignatius of Loyola begins his *Spiritual Exercises* with a classic statement of the "first principle and foundation" permeating this I way of life. "Human beings," he writes, "were created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for them to help them in attaining the end for which they are created. Hence they are to make use of these things in as far as they help them in the attainment of their end, and they must rid themselves of them in as far as they provide a hindrance to them.... Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created." St. Ignatius, fervently committed to the apostolate as he was, understood that the right use of things includes and requires that they be used to serve others.

What does all this say to busy people immersed in practical affairs? Is it advice only for those whose vocations lead them to withdraw from the world? Not as Jesus sees it: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides" (Mt 6:33).

THE STEWARD'S REWARD

People trying to live as stewards reasonably wonder what reward they will receive. This is not selfishness but an expression of Christian hope. Peter raises the question when he says to Jesus, "We have given up everything and followed you" (Mk 10:28).

Christ's response is more than Peter or any other disciple could reasonably hope or bargain for: "There is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come" (Mk 10:29-30).

That is to say: Giving up means receiving more, including more responsibility as a steward; among the consequences of living this way will be persecution; and even though discipleship and stewardship set the necessary terms of Christian life in this world, they have their ultimate reward in another life.

Start, though, with the here and now. To be a Christian disciple is a rewarding way of life, a practice of stewardship as a part of it is itself a source of deep joy. Those who live this way are happy people who have found the meaning and purpose of living.

For a long time religious believers - to say nothing of those who do not believe - have struggled with the question of what value to assign human activity. One solution is to consider it a means to an end: do good here and now for the sake of a reward in heaven. Another solution passes over the question of an afterlife: do good here and now for the sake of making this a better world.

Vatican Council II points to a third solution. It recognizes that human activity is valuable both for what it accomplishes here and now and also for its relationship to the hereafter. But, more important, it stresses not only the discontinuity between here and now and hereafter, but also the astonishing fact of continuity.

God's kingdom already is present in history, imperfect but real (cf. Mt 10:7; *Lumen Gentium*. 48; *Gaudium et Spes*, 39). To be sure, it will come to fulfillment by God's power, on his terms, in his own good time. And yet, by their worthy deeds in this life, people also make a limited but real human contribution to building up the kingdom. They do so with an eye to present happiness and also to the perfect fulfillment which the kingdom - and themselves as part of it will enjoy in the life to come. The Council, therefore, teaches that the purpose of the human vocation to "earthly service" of one's fellow human beings is precisely to "make ready the material of the celestial realm" (*Gaudium et Spes*. 38).

In Christ, God has entered fully into human life and history. For one who is Christ's disciple there is no dichotomy, and surely no contradiction, between building the kingdom and serving human purposes as a steward does. These are aspects of one and the same reality - the reality called the Christian life.

God's kingdom is not an earthly kingdom, subject to decline and decay; it is the everlasting kingdom of the life to come. But that "life to come" is in continuity with this present life through the human goods worthy human purposes, which people foster now. And after people have done their best, God will perfect human goods and bring about the final fulfillment of human persons. "The throne of God and of the Lamb, be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will look upon his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Night will no more, nor will they need light from lamp sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever and ever" (Rv 22:3-5).

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the qualities in the life of Jesus that provide for us a standard by which to live? Make a list of these characteristics and evaluate your own life and the life of your community.
2. If you were preaching a sermon on stewardship, which one of Jesus' parables about stewardship would you emphasize the most?
3. What are the ways by which Jesus set an example of being a perfect steward?
4. What can a good steward realistically expect from God both in this life and in the life to come?
5. What should you do best in God's kingdom on earth to prepare yourself for God's kingdom in heaven?
6. What does the word of God say to you regarding the invitation and challenges in walking the way of Jesus?

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who remain in me and I in them will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing (Jn 15:5).

An argument arose among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. Jesus realized the intention of their hearts and took a child and placed it by his side and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest" (Lk 9:46-48).

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be (Jn 14:1-3).

7. Comment on the following passages:

Being-with-Jesus refers to a manner of thinking, of acting, of loving, of relating to others, of viewing the world. It is a way of talking about our willingness to follow Jesus, to be drawn by his example, to learn from him, and to have our loyalties corrected and shaped by his (William Reiser).

The young creature in the stall of Bethlehem was a human being with human brain and heart and soul. And it was God. Its life was to manifest the will of the Father; to proclaim the sacred tidings, to stir mankind with the power of God, to establish the Covenant, and shoulder the sin of the world, expiating it with love and leading mankind through the destruction of sacrifice and the victory of the Resurrection into the new existence of grace. In this accomplishment alone lay Jesus' self-perfection: fulfillment of mission and personal fulfillment were one (Romano Guardini).

Christians, on pilgrimage toward the heavenly city, should seek and savor the things which are above. This duty in no way decreases, but rather increases, the weight of their obligation to work with all men in constructing a more human world. In fact, the mystery of the Christian faith furnishes them with excellent incentives and helps toward discharging this duty more energetically and especially toward uncovering the full meaning of this activity, a meaning which gives human culture its eminent place in the integral vocation of man (Gaudium et Spes, no. 57).

Chapter III Living as a Steward

I have learned to share because I want to, not because I need to. There are no controls, no strings attached, and no guarantee when we give unconditionally. That doesn't mean that in retrospect I haven't questioned my decisions; it simply means that I've tried to look at it as a growth experience, always keeping in mind the life of Jesus Christ. I personally see stewardship as a nurturing process. It is, in a sense, an invitation to reassess our priorities. It is ongoing and often painful, but most of all it brings a personal sense of happiness and peace of mind as I continue my journey through life.

-Jim Hogan, Green Bay, Wisconsin

CREATION AND STEWARDSHIP

Although it would be a mistake to think that stewardship by itself includes the whole of Christian life, in probing the Christian meaning of stewardship one confronts an astonishing fact: God wishes human beings to be his collaborators in the work of creation, redemption, and sanctification; and such collaboration involves stewardship in its most profound sense. We exercise such stewardship, furthermore, not merely by our own power but by the power of the Spirit of truth, whom Jesus promises to his followers (cf. Jn 14: 16-17), and whom we see at work at the first Pentecost inspiring the apostles to commence that proclamation of the good news which has continued to this day (cf. Acts 2: 1-4).

The great story told in Scripture, the story of God's love for humankind, begins with God at work as Creator, maker of all that is: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth." (Gn 1: 1). Among God's creatures are human persons: "The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gn 2:7). God not only creates human beings, however, but bestows on them the divine image and likeness (cf. Gn 1:26). As part of this resemblance to God, people are called to cooperate with the Creator in continuing the divine work (cf. Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 25).

Stewardship of creation is one expression of this. The divine mandate to our first parents makes that clear. "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth" (Gn 1 :28). Subduing and exercising dominion do not mean abusing the earth. Rather, as the second creation story explains, God settled humankind upon earth to be its steward "to cultivate and care for it" (Gn 2: 15).

This human activity of cultivating and caring has a generic name: work. It is not a punishment for or a consequence of sin. True, sin does painfully skew the experience of work: "By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat" (Gn 3: 19). But, even so, God's mandate to humankind to collaborate with him in the task of creating - the command to work - comes *before* the Fall. Work is a fundamental aspect of the human vocation. It is necessary for human happiness and fulfillment. It is intrinsic to responsible stewardship of the world.

So, as Vatican II observes, far from imagining that the products of human effort are "in opposition to God's power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator," Christians see human achievements as "a sign of God's greatness and the flowering of his own mysterious design" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 34). While it is lived out by individual women and men in countless ways corresponding to their personal vocations, human cooperation with God's work of creation in general takes several forms.

COLLABORATORS IN CREATION

One of these is a profound reverence for the great gift of life, their own lives and the lives of others, along with readiness to spend them selves in serving all that preserves and enhances life.

This reverence and readiness begin with opening one's eyes to how precious a gift life really is - and that is not easy, in view of our tendency to take the gift for granted. "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? - every, every minute?" demands Emily in *Our Town*. And the Stage Manager replies, "No. The saints and poets, maybe - they do some" (Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* [New York: Harper and Row, 1958], p. 100). Yet it is necessary to make the effort. For Vatican II speaks of the "surpassing ministry of safeguarding life" and declares that "from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51).

Partly too, stewardship of the world is expressed by jubilant appreciation of nature, whose God-given beauty not even exploitation and abuse have destroyed.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness
deep down things
And though the last lights off the black
West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink
eastward springs
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and
with ah! bright wings.

(Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* [New York, Oxford University Press, 1950], p. 70)
Beyond simply appreciating natural beauty, there is the active stewardship of ecological concern. Ecological stewardship means cultivating a heightened sense of human interdependence and solidarity. It therefore calls for renewed efforts to address what Pope John Paul II calls "the structural forms of poverty" existing in this country and on the international level (*Message for the World Day of Peace*, January 1, 1990). And it underlines the need to reduce military spending and do away with war and weapons of war.

Especially this form of stewardship requires that many people adopt simpler life-styles. This is true not only of affluent persons and societies, but also of those who may not be affluent as that term is commonly understood yet do enjoy access to superfluous material goods and comforts. Within the Church, for example, it is important to avoid even the appearance of consumerism and luxury, and this obligation begins with us bishops. As Pope John Paul II says, "simplicity, moderation, and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few" (*ibid.*).

At the same time, life as a Christian steward also requires continued involvement in the human vocation to cultivate material creation. This productivity embraces art, scholarship, science, and technology, as well as business and trade, physical labor, skilled work of all kinds, and serving others. So-called ordinary work offers at least as many opportunities as do supposedly more glamorous occupations. A woman who works at a supermarket checkout counter writes: "I feel that my job consists of a lot more than ringing up orders, taking people's money, and bagging their groceries. By doing my job well I know I have a chance to do God's work too. Because of this, I try to make each of my customers feel special. While I'm serving them, they become the most important people in my life" (Maxine F. Dennis, in *Of Human Hands* [Minneapolis and Chicago: Augsburg Fortress/ACTA Publications, 1991], p. 49).

REDEMPTION AND STEWARDSHIP

Everyone has some natural responsibility for a portion of the world and an obligation in caring for it to acknowledge God's dominion. But there are also those who might be called stewards by grace. Baptism makes Christians stewards of this kind, able to act explicitly on God's behalf in cultivating and serving the portion of the world entrusted to their care. We find the perfect model of such stewardship in the Lord. "For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:19-20); and finally it will be he who "hands over the kingdom to his God and Father" (1 Cor 15:24).

Although Jesus is the unique priest and mediator, his disciples share in his priestly work. Baptism makes them "a royal priesthood" (1 Pt 2:9) called to offer up the world and all that is in it-especially themselves-to the Lord of all. In exercising this office, they most fully realize the meaning of our Christian stewardship. Part of what is involved here for Catholics is a stewardship of time, which should include setting aside periods for family prayer, for the reading of Scripture, for visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and for attendance at Mass during the week whenever this is possible.

Participation in Christ's redemptive activity extends even, though certainly not only, to the use people make of experiences that otherwise might seem the least promising: deprivation, loss, pain. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake," St. Paul says, "and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Col 1:24). Here also one looks to Jesus to lead the way. For one's estimate of suffering, as Pope John Paul II points out, is transformed by discovering its "salvific meaning" when united with the suffering of Christ (*Salvifici Doloris*, 27).

COOPERATION IN REDEMPTION

Penance also belongs to this aspect of Christian life. Today as in the past, the Church commends what Pope Paul VI called the "traditional triad" of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (*Paenitemini*, February 17, 1966), while also encouraging Catholics to adopt penitential practices of their own choice that suit their particular circumstances.

Through penance voluntarily accepted one gradually becomes liberated from those obstacles to Christian discipleship which a secularized culture exalting individual gratification places in one's way. These obstacles include not just the quest for pleasure but avarice, a craving for the illusion of absolute dominion and control, valuing creatures without reference to their Creator, excessive individualism, and ultimately the fear of death unrelieved by hope for eternal life.

These are consequences of sin - sin which threatens the way of life of Christian stewardship and the identity of Christians as disciples of the Lord. "Let us master this great and simple truth," Cardinal Newman once said, "that all rich materials and productions of this world, being God's property, are intended for God's service; and sin only, nothing but sin, turns them to a different purpose" ("Offerings for the Sanctuary" in *Parochial and Plain Sermons* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987], 1368).

Sin causes people to turn in on themselves; to become grasping and exploitative toward possessions and other people; to grow accustomed to conducting relationships not by the standards of generous stewardship but by the calculus of self-interest: "What's in it for me?" Constantly, Christians must beg God for the grace of conversion: the grace to know who they are, to whom they belong, how they are to live - the grace to repent and change and grow, the grace to become good disciples and stewards.

But if they do accept God's grace and, repenting, struggle to change, God will respond like the father of the Prodigal Son. "Filled with compassion" at seeing his repentant child approaching after a long and painful separation, this loving parent "ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him" even before the boy could stammer out the words of sorrow he had rehearsed (Lk 15:20). God's love is always there. The Spirit of wisdom and courage helps people seek pardon and be mindful, in the face of all their forgetting, that the most important work of their lives is to be Jesus' disciples.

Thus, the stewardship of disciples is not reducible only to one task or another. It involves embracing, cultivating, enjoying, sharing - and sometimes also giving up the goods of human life. Christians live this way in the confidence that comes from faith: for they know that the human goods they cherish and cultivate will be perfected - and they themselves will be fulfilled - in that kingdom, already present, which Christ will bring to perfection and one day hand over to the Father.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. If you were to undertake stewardship as a way of Christian life, what major problems and pain would you anticipate?
2. In your lifetime, how have you experienced co-creation with God?
3. How do you relate Christian stewardship to ecology, to your personal care for the environment?
4. How do you react to the idea of "being our brother's keeper," of being involved in efforts to curtail consumerism so that God's good things will benefit not only some but all people?
5. Do you see the theological connection between stewardship and "priestly mediation"?
6. What does the word of God say to you regarding the life of stewardship?
 - i. You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lamp stand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father. (Mt 5:13-16).
 - ii. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. (1 Cor 12:4-6).
 - iii. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another. (Jn 15: 16-17).
7. Comment on the following passages:

Whence it is, that if Christians are also joined in mind and heart with the most Holy Redeemer, when they apply themselves to temporal affairs, their work in a way is a continuation of the labor of Jesus Christ Himself, drawing from it strength and redemptive power: "He who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit." Human labor of this kind is so exalted and ennobled that it leads men engaged in it to spiritual perfection and can likewise contribute to the diffusion and propagation of the fruits of the Redemption to others

(Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 259).

In the sense of a "job," work is a way of making money and making a living. It supports a self defined by economic success, security, and all that money can buy. In the sense of a "career," work traces one's progress through life by achievement and advancement in an occupation. It yields a self defined by a broader sort of success, which takes in social standing and prestige, and by a sense of expanding power and competency that renders work itself a source of self-esteem. In the strongest sense of a "calling," work constitutes a practical idea of activity and character that makes a person", work morally inseparable from his or her life. It subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practice and sound judgment whose activity has meaning and value in itself not just in the output or profit that results from it. But the calling not only links a person to his or her fellow workers, a calling links a person to the larger community, a whole in which the calling of each is a contribution to the good of all (Robert Bellah).

Unfortunately, certain types of Christian piety intensify this problem of putting so much emphasis on the life of heaven that human activity on this earth is devalued. Teilhard [de Chardin] thought that about 90 percent of the practicing Christians of his time looked upon their work as "spiritual encumbrance" which took them away from a close relationship to God. He sensed the great conflict in the hearts of many believers who live double live-because they cannot reconcile their faith in God with their care

for the world. They are not able to find real organic connections between their worship on Sunday and their work during the week. In Teilhard's view the traditional solution of sanctifying one's daily efforts through prayer and good intention is helpful but incomplete, because it still considers daily work as insignificant in itself and detrimental to the spiritual life (James Bacik).

Chapter IV Stewards of the Church

When I began to provide dental treatment for persons with AIDS, I knew HIV positive people desperately needed this service, but I did not know how much I needed them. Time and again, reaching out to serve and heal, I have found myself served and healed. Their courage, compassion, wisdom, and faith have changed my life. I have faced my own mortality, and I rejoice in the daily gift of life. My love for people has taken on new dimensions. I hug and kiss my wife and family more than ever and see them as beautiful gifts from God. My ministry as a deacon has become dynamic, and I regard my profession as a vital part of it.

-Dr. Anthony M. Giambalvo, Rockville Centre, New York

COMMUNITY AND STEWARDSHIP

The New Covenant in and through Christ - the reconciliation he effects between humankind and God - forms a community: the new People of God, the Body of Christ, the Church. The unity of this people is itself a precious good, to be cherished, preserved, and built up by lives of love. The epistle to the Ephesians exhorts Christians to "live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all" (Eph 4: 1-6).

Because its individual members do collectively make up the Body of Christ, that body's health and well-being are the responsibility of the members - the personal responsibility of each one of us. We all are stewards of the Church. As "to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit" (1 Cor 12:7), so stewardship in an ecclesial setting means cherishing and fostering the gifts of all, while using one's own gifts to serve the community of faith. The rich tradition of tithing set forth in the Old Testament is an expression of this. (See, for example, Dt 14:22; Lv 27:30.) Those who set their hearts upon spiritual gifts must "seek to have an abundance for building up the church" (1 Cor 14: 12).

But how is the Church built up? In a sense there are as many answers to that question as there are individual members with individual vocations. But the overarching answer for all is this: through personal participation in and support of the Church's mission of proclaiming and teaching, serving and sanctifying.

This participation takes different forms according to people's different gifts and offices, but there is a fundamental obligation arising from the sacrament of baptism (cf. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 15): that people place their gifts, their resources - their selves - at God's service in and through the Church. Here also Jesus is the model. Even though his perfect 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. "Consider this," Paul says, addressing not only the Christians of Corinth but all of us. "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully...God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:6-7).

EVANGELIZATION AND STEWARDSHIP

In various ways, then, stewardship of the Church leads people to share in the work of evangelization or proclaiming the good news, in the work of catechesis or transmitting and strengthening the faith, and in works of justice and mercy on behalf of persons in need. Stewardship requires support for the Church's institutions and programs for these purposes. But, according to their opportunities and circumstances, members of the Church also should engage in such activities personally and on their own initiative.

Parents, for instance, have work of great importance to do in the domestic church, the home. Within the family, they must teach their children the truths of the faith and pray with them; share Christian values with them in the face of pressures to conform to the hostile values of a secularized society; and initiate them into the practice of stewardship itself, in all its dimensions, contrary to today's widespread consumerism and individualism. This may require adjusting the family's own patterns of consumption and its life-style, including the use of television and other media which sometimes preach values in conflict with the mind of Christ. Above all, it requires that parents themselves be models of stewardship, especially by their selfless service to one another, to their children, and to church and community needs.

Parishes, too, must be, or become, true communities of faith within which this Christian way of life is learned and practiced. Sound business practice is a fundamental of good stewardship, and stewardship as it relates to church finances must include the most stringent ethical, legal, and fiscal standards. That requires several things: pastors and parish staff must be open, consultative, collegial, and accountable in the conduct of affairs. And parishioners must accept responsibility for their parishes and contribute generously both money and personal service - to their programs and projects. The success or failure of parish programs, the vitality of parish life or its absence, the ability or inability of a parish to render needed services to its members and the community depend upon all.

We, therefore, urge the Catholics of every parish in our land to ponder the words of St. Paul: "Now as you excel in every respect, in faith, discourse, knowledge, all earnestness, and in the love we have for you, may you excel in this gracious act also" (2 Cor 8:7). Only by living as generous stewards of these local Christian communities, their parishes, can the Catholics of the United States hope to make them the vital sources of faith-filled Christian dynamism they are meant to be.

At the same time, stewardship in and for the parish should not be narrowly parochial. For the diocese is not merely an administrative structure but instead joins communities called parishes into a "local church" and unites its people in faith, worship, and service. The same spirit of personal responsibility in which a Catholic approaches his or her parish should extend to the diocese and be expressed in essentially the same ways: generous material support and self-giving. As in the case of the parish, too, lay Catholics ought to have an active role in the oversight of the stewardship of pastoral leaders and administrators at the diocesan level. At the present time, it seems clear that many Catholics need to develop a better understanding of the financial needs of the Church at the diocesan level. Indeed, the spirit and practice of stewardship should extend to other local churches and to the Universal Church - to the Christian community and to one's sisters and brothers in Christ everywhere - and be expressed in deeds of service and mutual support. For some, this will mean direct personal participation in evangelization and mission work, for others generous giving to the collections established for these purposes and other worthy programs.

Every member of the Church is called to evangelize, and the practice of authentic Christian stewardship inevitably leads to evangelization. As stewards of the mysteries of God (cf. 1 Cor 4:1), people desire to tell others about them and about the light they shed on human life, to share the gifts and graces they have received from God, especially knowledge of Christ Jesus, "who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30). Human beings, says Pope Paul VI, "have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ. It is in these that the whole human family can find in the most comprehensive form and beyond all their expectations everything for which they have been groping" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53).

SOLIDARITY AND STEWARDSHIP

While the unity arising from the covenant assumes and requires human solidarity, it also goes beyond it, producing spiritual fruit insofar as it is founded on union with the Lord. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus says. "Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit" (Jn 15:5). As Simone Weil remarks, "A single piece of bread given to a hungry man is enough to save a soul if it is given in the right way."

In this world, however, solidarity encounters many obstacles on both the individual and social levels. It is essential that Jesus' disciples do what can be done to remove them.

The most basic and pervasive obstacle is sheer selfish lack of love, a lack which people must acknowledge and seek to correct when they find it in their own hearts and lives. For the absence of charity from the lives of disciples of Jesus in itself is self-defeating and hypocritical. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 Jn 4:20).

Extreme disparities in wealth and power also block unity and communion. Such disparities exist today between person and person, social class and social class, nation and nation. They are contrary to that virtue of solidarity, grounded in charity, which Pope John Paul II commends as the basis of a world order embodying "a new model of the unity of the human race" whose "supreme model" is the intimate life of the Trinity itself (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 40). Familiarity with the Church's growing body of social doctrine is necessary in order to grasp and respond to the practical requirements of discipleship and stewardship in light of the complex realities of today's national and international socioeconomic life.

Social justice, which the pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* calls a kind of contributive justice, is a particular aspect of the virtue of solidarity. Encompassing the duty of "all who are able to create the goods, services, and other nonmaterial or spiritual values necessary for the welfare of the whole community," it gives moral as well as economic content to the concept of productivity. Thus productivity "cannot be measured solely by its output of goods and services." Rather, "patterns of productivity must be measured in light of their impact on the fulfillment of basic needs, employment levels, patterns of discrimination, environmental impact, and sense of community" (*Economic Justice for All*, 71).

Finally, and most poignantly, solidarity is obstructed by the persistence of religious conflicts and divisions, including those that sunder even followers of Christ. Christians remain tragically far from realizing Jesus' priestly prayer "that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you" (Jn 17:21).

As all this suggests, our individual lives as disciples and stewards must be seen in relation to God's larger purposes. From the outset of his covenanting, God had it in mind to make many one. He promised Abram: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you" (Gn 12:23). In Jesus, the kingdom of God is inaugurated - a kingdom open to all. Those who enter into Jesus' New Covenant find themselves growing in a union of minds and hearts with others who also have responded to God's call. They find their hearts and minds expanding to embrace all men and women, especially those in need, in a communion of mercy and love.

EUCCHARISTIC STEWARDSHIP

The Eucharist is the great sign and agent of this expansive communion of charity. "Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor 10: 17). Here people enjoy a unique union with Christ and, in him, with one another. Here his love - indeed, his very self - flows into his disciples and, through them and their practice of stewardship, to the entire

human race. Here Jesus renews his covenant-forming act of perfect fidelity to God, while also making it possible for us to cooperate. In the Eucharist, Christians reaffirm their participation in the New Covenant; they give thanks to God for blessings received; and they strengthen their bonds of commitment to one another as members of the covenant community Jesus forms.

And what do Christians bring to the Eucharistic celebration and join there with Jesus' offering? Their lives as Christian disciples; their personal vocations and the stewardship they have exercised regarding them; their individual contributions to the great work of restoring all things in Christ. Disciples give thanks to God for gifts received and strive to share them with others. That is why, as Vatican II says of the Eucharist, "if this celebration is to be sincere and thorough, it must lead to various works of charity and mutual help, as well as to missionary activity and to different forms of Christian witness" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6).

More than that, the Eucharist is the sign and agent of that heavenly communion in which we shall together share, enjoying the fruits of stewardship "freed of stain, burnished and transfigured" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 39). It is not only the promise but the commencement of the heavenly banquet where human lives are perfectly fulfilled.

We have Jesus' word for it: "Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51). The glory and the boast of Christian stewards lie in mirroring, however poorly, the stewardship of Jesus Christ, who gave and still gives all he has and is, in order to be faithful to God's will and carry through to completion his redemptive stewardship of human beings and their world.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you, like Dr. Giambalvo, had the experience of being "served and healed" by those you set out to serve and heal?
2. What are the implications of God's calling us into a love relationship (covenant) and of being a people uniquely his own? What does this say about dignity, equality, unity?
3. How would you go about connecting the Eucharist with your practice of stewardship?
4. Within the institutional Church, of which you are a member, what, in order of priority, are your stewardship responsibilities;
5. Is there more to "stewardship within the Church" than donations of "time, talent, and treasure"?
6. How will "Eucharistic stewardship" develop your convictions about global solidarity - "the world is God's village on earth"?
7. What does the word of God say to you about covenant, community, solidarity - about being Eucharistic stewards?

[Jesus] asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" "Seven," they replied. He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then, taking the seven loaves he gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to his disciples to distribute, and they distributed them to the crowd. They also had a few fish. He said the blessing over them and ordered them distributed also. They ate and were satisfied. They picked up the fragments left over - seven baskets (Mk 8:5-8).

According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire [itself] will test the quality of each one's work (1 Cor 3:10-13).

For I will take you away from among the nations, gather you from all the foreign lands, and bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees. You shall live in the land I gave your fathers; you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ez 36:24-28).

8. Comment on the following passages:

A community is a group of persons who share a history and whose common set of interpretations about that history provide the basis for common actions. These interpretations may be quite diverse and controversial even within the community, but are sufficient to provide the individual members with the sense that they are more alike than unlike (Stanley Hauerwas)

[A correct understanding of the common good] embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection. (Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*) God's kingdom therefore is no fixed, existing order, but a living, nearing thing. Long remote, it now advances, little by little, and has come so close as to demand acceptance. Kingdom of God means a state in which God is king and consequently rules. (Romano Guardini)

Chapter V The Christian Steward

It was sixteen years ago, but it seems like only yesterday. I was suddenly confronted with serious surgery, which I never thought would happen to me. It always happened to others. The memory is still there, and I recall vividly the days before the surgery. I really received the grace to ask myself, "What do I own, and what owns me?" When you are wheeled into a surgery room, it really doesn't matter who you are or what you possess. What counts is the confidence in a competent surgical staff and a good and gracious God. I know that my whole understanding and appreciation of the gifts and resources I possess took on new meaning. It is amazing how a divine economy of life and health provides a unique perspective of what really matters.

-Most Reverend Thomas J. Murphy, Archbishop of Seattle

While the New Testament does not provide a rounded portrait of the Christian steward all in one place, elements of such a portrait are present throughout its pages.

In the gospel, Jesus speaks of the "faithful and prudent steward" as one whom a householder sets over other members of the household in order to "distribute the food allowance at the proper time" (Lk 12:42; cf. Mt 24:25). Evidently, good stewards understand that they are to share with others what they have received, that this must be done in a timely way, and that God will hold them accountable for how well or badly they do it. For if a steward wastes the owner's goods and mistreats the other household members, "that servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful" (Lk 12:46).

In the lives of disciples, however, something else must come before the practice of stewardship. They need a flash of insight - a certain way of *seeing* - by which they view the world and their relationship to it in a fresh, new light. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," Gerard Manley Hopkins exclaims; more than anything else, it may be this glimpse of the divine grandeur in all that is that sets people on the path of Christian stewardship.

Not only in material creation do people discern God present and active, but also, and especially, in the human heart.

"Do not be deceived all good giving and every perfect gift is from above" (Jas 1:16-17), and this is true above all where spiritual gifts are concerned. Various as they are, "one and the same Spirit produces all of these" (1 Cor 12: 11) - including the gift of discernment itself, which leads men and women to say: "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God" (1 Cor 2: 12). So it is that people have the power to live as stewards, striving to realize the ideal set forth by Paul: "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31).

Christian stewards are conscientious and faithful. After all, the first requirement of a steward is to be "found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:2). In the present case, moreover, stewardship is a uniquely solemn trust. If Christians understand it and strive to live it to the full, they grasp the fact that they are no less than "God's co-workers" (1 Cor 3:9), with their own particular share in his creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work. In this light, stewards are fully conscious of their accountability. They neither live nor die as their own masters; rather, "if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom 14:8).

Christian stewards are generous out of love as well as duty. They dare not fail in charity and what it entails, and the New Testament is filled with warnings to those who might be tempted to substitute some counterfeit for authentic love. For example: "If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him?" (1 Jn 3:17). Or this: "Come now, you rich, weep and wail over you impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire. You have stored up treasure for the last days" (Jas 5:1-3).

What, then, are Christians to do? Of course people's lives as stewards take countless forms, according to their unique vocations and circumstances. Still, the fundamental pattern every case is simple and changeless: "Serve one another through love bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 5:13, 6:2). This includes being stewards of the Church, for, as we are quite specifically told, "the Church of the living God" is "the household of God" (1 Tim 3:15) and it is essential to practice stewardship there.

The life of a Christian steward, lived in imitation of the life of Christ, is challenging, even difficult in many ways; but both here and hereafter it is charged with intense joy. Like Paul, the good steward is able to say, "I am filled with encouragement, I am overflowing with joy all the more because of all our affliction" (2 Cor 7:4). Women and men who seek to live in this way learn that "all things work for good for those who love God" (Rom 8:28). It is part of their personal experience that God is "rich in mercy [and] we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them" (Eph 2:4,10). They readily cry out from the heart: "Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil 4:4). They look forward in hope to hearing the Master's words addressed to those who have lived as disciples faithful in their practice of stewardship should: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt 25:34).

After Jesus, it is the Blessed Virgin Mary who by her example most perfectly teaches the meaning of discipleship and stewardship in their fullest sense. All of their essential elements are found in her life: she was called and gifted by God; she responded generously, creatively, and prudently; she understood her divinely assigned role as "handmaid" in terms of service and fidelity (see Lk 1:26-56).

As Mother of God, her stewardship consisted of her maternal service and devotion to Jesus, from infancy to adulthood, up to the agonizing hours of Jesus' death (Jn 19:25). As Mother of the Church, her stewardship is clearly articulated in the closing chapter of the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium* (cf. 52-69). Pope John Paul II observes: "Mary is one of the first who 'believed,' and precisely with her faith as Spouse and Mother she wishes to act upon all those who entrust themselves to her as children" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 46).

In light of all this, it only remains for all of us to ask ourselves this question: Do we also wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ? The Spirit is ready to show us the way - a way of which stewardship is a part.

Genesis, telling the story of creation, says God looked upon what had been made and found it good; and seeing the world's goodness, God entrusted it to human beings. "The Lord God planted a garden" and placed there human persons "to cultivate and care for it" (Gn 2:8,15). Now, as then and always, it is a central part of the human vocation that we be good stewards of what we have received this garden, this divine human workshop, this world and all that is in it - setting minds and hearts and hands to the task of creating and redeeming in cooperation with our God, Creator and Lord of all.

For more information on Stewardship and how St. Thomas More is a parish committed to the Stewardship Way of Life, contact LeAnn Powers, chair, STM Stewardship Commission at leannpowerstx@yahoo.com.