

“WHO IS THE GOOD *and* FAITHFUL STEWARD?”

Living Stewardship in Word, Sacrament and Service

DEAR SISTERS AND BROTHERS IN THE LORD:

To be Ambassadors for Christ, who live Stewardship in Word, Sacrament and Service.

This is the mission statement of the Diocese of Bismarck. As a local church, we are a gathering of Christ's disciples in this particular place and time. In communion with our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, and Catholics in every corner of the globe, we are called to proclaim the kingdom of God and to be the seeds and beginning of that kingdom¹ here in western North Dakota. As Ambassadors for Christ, we are invited, and challenged, to *live Stewardship in Word, Sacrament and Service.*



As we reflect on this mission statement and its importance for our parishes, our diocese, and for each of us, several questions come to mind about living stewardship:

- Who is a Christian steward? What does it mean to live stewardship?
- What does it mean to be a stewardship parish? How can the concept of stewardship help us to be vibrant faith communities committed to Word, Sacrament and Service?
- What does it mean to be a stewardship diocese? How does living stewardship help us to carry out our distinctive mission as Ambassadors for Christ here in the Diocese of Bismarck?

Please join me in reflecting prayerfully on each of these questions as we approach the 100th anniversary of the Diocese of Bismarck, which we will observe from December 31, 2009, to December 30, 2010. This will help us be better prepared to carry out our mission to be Ambassadors for Christ who live Stewardship in Word, Sacrament and Service.

WHO IS A CHRISTIAN STEWARD? WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE STEWARDSHIP?

In our pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, the bishops of the United States offer the following definition: *A Christian steward is one who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them generously in justice and love with others, and returns them with increase to the Lord.*² A Christian steward is a disciple of Jesus Christ who incorporates four essential virtues into his or her daily living: gratitude, responsibility, generosity and the willingness to give back with increase.

Stewardship begins with discipleship. First, we must freely accept the Lord's call to follow him without counting the cost. In order to respond wholeheartedly to Jesus' invitation, we must let go of our dependence on the things of this world. We must cast off self-centeredness and fear, and we must place our trust wholly and completely in the Lord. According to the American bishops' pastoral letter:

*Stewardship is an expression of Christian discipleship with the power to change how we understand and live out our lives. Disciples who practice stewardship recognize God as the origin of life, the giver of freedom, the source of all they have and are and will be. They are deeply aware of the truth that "The Lord's are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it" (Ps 24:1). They know themselves to be recipients and caretakers of God's many gifts. They are grateful for what they have received and eager to cultivate their gifts out of love for God and one another.*³

It is not easy to follow Jesus, to be his disciple. Letting go is difficult for all of us. We are taught to be self-reliant. To look out for #1 (myself). To be rugged individualists who make our own way in the world

without depending on others. And yet, the Lord tells us something radically different. “Go, sell what you have; give to the poor ... and come, follow me.”⁴ Jesus asks us to be dependent on him alone, to trust in the providence of God, and to share freely with others—especially the poor and needy among us.

Discipleship requires us to make a choice: to surrender ourselves through the power of God’s grace, and to follow in the Lord’s footsteps. Once we have made this choice – to let go absolutely and follow Jesus’ way, stewardship is not an option. As the bishops’ pastoral tells us, stewardship is a disciple’s response. It is a way of giving up everything that we have and are and will be to walk with the Lord.⁵

To be Ambassadors for Christ, disciples who invite others to follow him, we must be grateful, responsible and generous stewards of all God’s gifts. We must learn to invest everything we have, and all that we are, in living as he taught us. We must grow God’s gifts and return them to the Lord with increase.

Most of us think of money when we hear the word stewardship. That’s because too often stewardship is only spoken about when it’s time to renew our financial commitment to the church.



This is a serious misunderstanding of the concept of stewardship. As important as church support is for sustaining the ministries of our parishes, diocese and the Universal

Church, a true understanding of stewardship calls us to a much broader and deeper awareness of the ways in which we have been called and gifted as Christian disciples, Ambassadors for Christ, who develop and share God’s abundant blessings out of a profound sense of justice and charity.

Stewardship is a form of spirituality because it challenges us to develop and use the gifts and talents God has given us and then to “give them back with increase” by making a generous, grateful response to whatever the Lord asks of us. The spirituality of stewardship is profound. But it is also practical. It involves the choices we make every day: how we spend our time, what we do with the skills and talents God has given us, how we care for the environment, and what we do with our money. Stewardship is a way of saying “yes” to God through the day-to-day actions of our daily lives. It is a way of living the Gospel in “the real world.”

Living stewardship means being grateful for what God has given us. This is not as easy as it sounds. Many of us today are preoccupied with what we don’t have. In hard times it’s easy to give in to the temptation to be bitter or resentful about life’s many hardships. But even when times are good, we too often spend the majority of our time, effort and money striving for more and more—material things, status or prestige, the latest technology or fashions—instead of being satisfied, and thankful, for what we have.

Living stewardship means being responsible and accountable for our development and use of all God’s gifts.

Take an inventory of all your blessings—both spiritual and material. Then ask yourself, “How am I using God’s gifts? Am I growing them or letting them get stagnant? Am I sharing them with others or do I pretty much focus on myself?” We know that each of us will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment. Living stewardship means being responsible and accountable now in anticipation of the Lord’s ultimate question: What did you do with all the gifts and talents I gave you?

Living stewardship means sharing with others—out of justice and love. It means being generous, not stingy, with our time, our talent and our financial resources. To be generous, we must be people who are confident in God’s providence. We must truly believe that “it is in giving that we receive.”⁶ And we must be willing to trust that we will truly be rewarded for giving away things that we fear we may need someday. When we share our blessings with others, we discover the marvelous truth that God’s grace is given to us in abundance. It cannot be used up, no matter how difficult our situation or how serious our hardships.



Finally, living stewardship means growing God’s gifts. It means developing our talents (intellectual, physical and social). It means working to make our world a better place—beginning in our homes, our neighborhoods, our parish communities and extending outward to all of western North Dakota, our nation and our world. The parables of Jesus make it clear that the good and faithful steward is one who takes the owner’s property and invests it for growth. What is

true of financial gifts is equally true of all our gifts. As stewards, we are called to develop our minds and hearts, to hone our skills and use them productively, and to be mature people who are constantly growing in our understanding and practice of Christian life.

As Ambassadors for Christ, we are called to live stewardship. We learn about living stewardship, first and foremost, from our parents and families. What they teach us about stewardship (even if they never use the word) is to be thankful, to take responsibility, to share with others, and to develop our gifts. May God bless all the parents and families in the Diocese of Bismarck as they undertake this most challenging responsibility—to teach principles of Christian stewardship and live it in their daily lives!

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO
BE A STEWARDSHIP PARISH?
HOW CAN THE CONCEPT
OF STEWARDSHIP HELP US
TO BE VIBRANT FAITH
COMMUNITIES COMMITTED
TO WORD, SACRAMENT
AND SERVICE?

Our mission statement calls us to live stewardship in Word, Sacrament and Service. Our parishes are faith communities that make it possible for us to encounter the Lord Jesus Christ in and through the proclamation of God's word, the celebration of the sacraments and service to those who are in need.

A stewardship parish is a faith community where the word of God is taken seriously.

Through effective proclamation in the liturgy, faith-filled catechesis (including parochial school and adult religious education), community prayer and devotions, and genuine faith-sharing (evangelization), God's word comes alive in our parishes. It speaks to our hearts—challenging us to change (conversion) and to let Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, become the meaning and purpose of our lives. A stewardship parish takes seriously its responsibility to be a faithful steward of the word of God.

A stewardship parish is a sacramental community. Its gratitude is expressed first and foremost in the Eucharist, the great prayer of thanksgiving, in which the Lord Jesus offers himself to the Father and shares with us the gift of his body and blood. In communion with the Lord and with one another, each parish in our diocese receives gratefully the gifts of the Holy Spirit which flow from the sacraments of the church—baptism, holy Communion, confirmation, reconciliation, marriage, holy orders and the sacrament of the sick. The parish community, in turn, is called to cherish and share these divine gifts with others—both within and outside parish boundaries. By celebrating the sacraments well, with reverence and with a special sincerity that is reserved to the things of God, each parish expresses the true source of its vitality. Regardless of its size, its cultural or ethnic makeup, its affluence or poverty, the parish that embraces fully its responsibility as a steward of the sacramental life of the church, is alive in Christ.

A stewardship parish dedicates itself wholeheartedly to Christian service.

Sharing with others—both within and beyond parish boundaries—is a hallmark of Christian stewardship. Signs of this commitment to service should be evident from the moment a new parishioner or visitor enters the parish church. Hospitality and a genuine concern for the welfare of all should permeate the atmosphere. Opportunities to participate in the life of the parish and its service to others should be extended to all parishioners on a regular basis. Parishioners should be encouraged frequently to share their gifts of time, talent and treasure with people in need, close to home and far away. A community that only focuses its time, attention and resources on its own needs is not a Christian community, and it is not a good steward of the gifts and blessings which the Lord bestows

on his church. A stewardship parish develops all its gifts (material and spiritual) and shares them generously with others.



Every parish in the Diocese of Bismarck is called to be a stewardship parish because every parish has been gifted by God with opportunities to proclaim the word of God, to celebrate the sacraments, and to serve those who

are in need. May the Lord continue to strengthen our parishes with his grace so that they may continue to accept his call to be faithful stewards of the church's divine mission—Ambassadors for Christ who live stewardship in Word, Sacrament and Service.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO
BE A STEWARDSHIP DIOCESE?
HOW DOES LIVING
STEWARDSHIP HELP US TO
CARRY OUT OUR DISTINCTIVE
MISSION AS AMBASSADORS
FOR CHRIST HERE IN THE
DIOCESE OF BISMARCK?

A diocese is a particular, or local, church. That means it is a community of Christians who live in a certain territory and who are united under the pastoral care of a bishop. We are the church in western North Dakota, the Diocese of Bismarck. As bishop of this particular church, it is my responsibility to unite us—with one another and with all of the other local churches that are part of the Universal Church. Together, as one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, we are united under the pastoral care of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, and as a diocese we participate in the universal mission of the church which is to proclaim the kingdom of God and to be the seeds and beginning of that kingdom here on earth.⁷ Our mission as a diocese is no different from the mission of every other diocese, but it takes on the unique character and history of western North Dakota with all of our challenges and opportunities.

Our diocesan mission statement commits us to being a stewardship diocese. Specifically, we accept the call to stewardship as a way of life—with particular emphasis on our stewardship responsibility for the word of God, for the sacraments of the church, and for service to all who are in need here in western North Dakota and around the world.

As I thought about this pastoral letter, I struggled with the concept of a “stewardship diocese.” While I strongly believe that our diocese is invited, and challenged, to make stewardship a way of life, I was not sure how to describe clearly and simply what this means for us. Individual Christians live stewardship through the four characteristics of gratitude, responsibility, generosity and the willingness to give back with increase. Parishes express their stewardship responsibilities through proclamation of God's word, through reverent and sincere celebration of the sacraments, and through a profound commitment to Christian service. But how does a diocese live stewardship? Put another way, how does living stewardship help us to carry out our distinctive mission to be Ambassadors for Christ in Word, Sacrament and Service?

The diocese exists to encourage and support individual Christians, and parish communities, in their stewardship journeys. **A stewardship diocese, therefore, is one that encourages, supports and enables its clergy, religious and lay members in their understanding and practice of stewardship.** We do this by providing stewardship education resources where possible and appropriate, but we also promote stewardship by making important connections between church teaching and practice and the lived experience of our people. For example, through our Pro-Life Office we strive to help parents understand and accept their responsibility to cherish, nurture, develop and share God's gift of children. And we emphasize that all human life comes from God as a gift to be revered and defended from the moment of conception to natural death. This is a fundamental Christian belief, but it is also a very practical stewardship responsibility—to be guardians, or stewards, of the precious gift of human life.



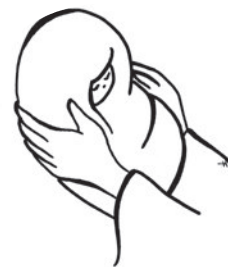
THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IS OUR MODEL

The more I think about this, the more convinced I am that the concept of “living stewardship” is a key to understanding what it means to be Ambassadors for Christ here in western North Dakota. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we will all be asked to render an account of our “ambassadorship,” our ability to represent him in our words and our actions. **A stewardship diocese, therefore, is one that witnesses to the importance of transparency and accountability—in its decision-making, in its development and use of resources, and in all its financial affairs.** To be transparent means to let the light of truth shine on us, to admit our mistakes, and to work harder than ever to be faithful stewards of our God-given mission.

A stewardship diocese should be generous with its human, physical and financial resources. We should share with one another—and with other dioceses in need throughout the world. Our God’s Share Appeal, special collections and other forms of sharing our time, talent and treasure, should be undertaken with a grateful heart, not grudgingly, in gratitude to God for the many ways he has blessed our diocese. In addition to sharing our material resources (time, talent and treasure), as a stewardship diocese, we should be generous in prayerfulness. We should remember in prayer those individuals, families and communities who are struggling during hard times—economically, politically or because of natural disasters.

If we truly are a stewardship diocese, our commitment to generous sharing should be an expression of our gratitude to God for all the many ways that he continues to bless the church in western North Dakota. May the Lord give us the courage and strength we need to trust in his goodness and to serve him faithfully as stewards of this particular church, the Diocese of Bismarck.

As we prepare for the 100th anniversary of the Diocese of Bismarck we should look to the Mother of our Lord for inspiration and assistance in our stewardship journey. Mary was the first Christian steward. She is the one who nurtured the word of God in her womb; the one who, with St. Joseph, guided Jesus’ development as a child and an adolescent; and the one who “let go” and shared her divine Son with all of humanity. Mary was also the first Ambassador for Christ. All that she said and did pointed to him as the one who alone saves us from selfishness and sin. Mary shows us the way to Christ. She encourages and supports us in our efforts to live Stewardship in Word, Sacrament and Service. May her prayers and intercession guide all our efforts to live stewardship as individuals and families, as parish communities and as a diocese.



Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to reflect on the mission of our diocese and the challenges and joys of living stewardship. May God continue to bless our people, our parishes and our diocese, as we strive to be Ambassadors for Christ here in western North Dakota.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ *Paul A. Zipfel*

Most Reverend Paul A. Zipfel
Bishop of Bismarck

Living Stewardship in Word, Sacrament and Service

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Describe in your own words the mission of the Diocese of Bismarck? What are some of the unique challenges and opportunities we face here in western North Dakota?
2. How do you define stewardship? What's the relationship between discipleship and stewardship? How can stewardship make a difference in your life and in the life of your family?
3. Have you ever drawn up a Gratitude Inventory—a list of the blessings in your life? Who are the people in your life (past and present) that you should thank for your individual gifts and blessings?
4. Is God on your list? How do you express your thanks to him?
5. What does it mean to be a stewardship parish? How can principles of Christian stewardship help keep our parishes vital?
6. What does it mean to be a steward of God's word?
7. Why is celebrating the sacraments well a stewardship responsibility?
8. How does living stewardship involve us in Christian service?
9. How does a stewardship diocese encourage the understanding and practice of Christian stewardship?
10. Why is transparency and accountability so important for us today?
11. How can our diocese best serve the needs of western North Dakota and beyond?
12. What do we mean when we say that stewardship is “a practical form of spirituality”? Why do we honor the Blessed Virgin Mary as the first Christian steward?