

THE THEOLOGY OF STEWARDSHIP

A Summary of the United States Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Stewardship

In 1992, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*. The bishops defined a Christian steward as one who:

- Receives God's gifts gratefully
- Cherishes and tends God's gifts responsibly
- Shares God's gifts in love and justice
- Returns God's gifts with increase.

Stewards acknowledge that God is Creator and Owner of all and shares of their gifts out of love for God and one another.

DISCIPLES AS STEWARDS:

As members of the Body of Christ, Jesus calls us to be disciples. This has astonishing implications.

- Mature disciples make a conscious decision to follow Jesus, no matter what the cost.
- Christian disciples experience conversion, life-shaping changes of mind and heart, and commit their very selves to God.
- Christian stewards respond in a particular way to the call to be a disciple. Stewardship has the power to shape and mold our understanding of our lives and the way in which we live.

Christian stewards recognize God as the Origin of Life, the Giver of Freedom, and Source of All. We are grateful for the gifts we have received and are eager to use them to show our love for God and for one another. We look to the life and teachings of Jesus, the model steward, for guidance in living as Christian stewards.

STEWARDS OF CREATION:

The Bible contains a profound message about the stewardship of material creation: God created the world, but entrusts it to human beings. Caring for and cultivating the world involves the following:

- joyful appreciation for the God-given beauty and wonder of nature;
- protection and preservation of the environment;
- respect for human life- shielding life from threat and assault, doing everything that can be done to enhance this gift and make life flourish;
- and development of this world through noble human effort- physical labor, the trades and professions, the arts and sciences—our work.

STEWARDS OF VOCATION:

Each of us has a human vocation—our human role in carrying out God's divine plan. Our challenge is to understand our role in this plan, and respond generously to this call.

Work is fulfilling a human vocation. The Second Vatican Council points out that, through work, we build up not only our world but the kingdom of God, already present among us. Work is a partnership with God- our share in a divine human collaboration in creation. It occupies a central place in our lives as Christian stewards.

STEWARDS OF THE CHURCH:

Stewards of God's gifts are not passive beneficiaries, but collaborators with God. We are obliged to be stewards of the Church, collaborators and cooperators in continuing the redemptive work of Jesus—the Church's essential mission. This mission, proclaiming and teaching, serving and sanctifying, is our task. It is the personal responsibility of each of us.

All members of the Church have their roles to play in carrying out its mission:

- Parents, who nurture their children in the light of faith;
- Parishioners, who work in concrete ways to make their parishes true communities of faith and vibrant sources of service to the larger community;
- All Catholics who give generous support—time, money, prayers and personal service according to their circumstances—to parish and diocesan programs and to the universal Church.

OBSTACLES TO STEWARDSHIP

People who want to live as Christian disciples and Christian stewards face several obstacles. In the United States and other nations, a dominant secular culture often contradicts religious convictions about the meaning of life. This culture encourages us to focus on our pleasures and ourselves. At times, we can find it far too easy to ignore spiritual realities and deny religion a role in shaping human and social values.

As Catholics who have entered into the mainstream of American society and experienced its advantages, many have also been adversely influenced by this secular culture. The struggle against selfishness and greed is almost constant; for many, it is harder today to accept the challenge of being a Christian steward.

It is essential, therefore, that we make a special effort to understand the true meaning of stewardship and live accordingly.

A STEWARD'S WAY

The life of a Christian steward models the life of Jesus. It is challenging and even difficult, in many respects, yet intense joy comes to those who take the risk to live as Christian stewards. Women and men who seek to live as stewards learn that "all things work for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28).