

First Fruits

The Stewardship Newsletter of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

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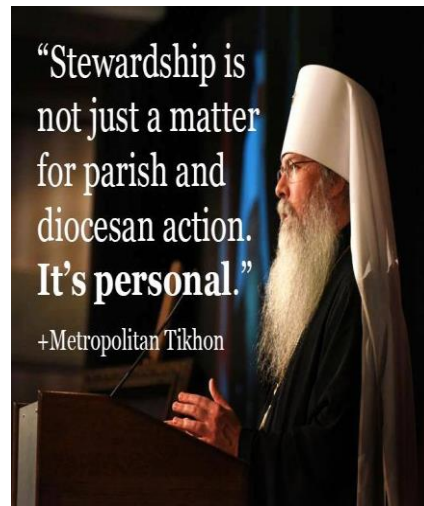
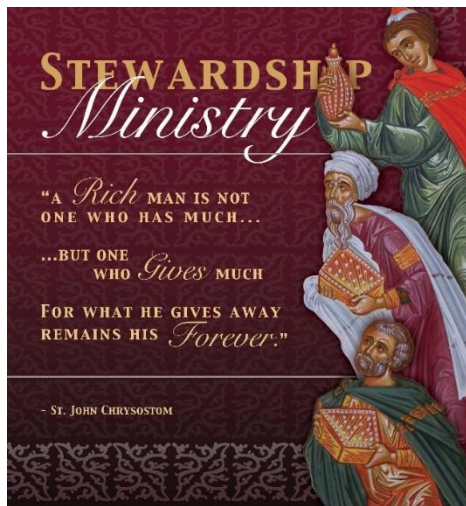
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Orthodox Christian Stewardship is a Christ-centered lifestyle, which acknowledges accountability, reverence, and responsibility before God. Orthodox Christian Stewardship is a call to all of the faithful to share willingly and cheerfully the gifts that God has bestowed on them including sharing these gifts for God's work in His Church.

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Come and See how we are all called to be Stewards of The Church!

- Stewardship is our active commitment to use all our time, talent and treasure for the benefit of humankind in grateful acknowledgment of Christ's redeeming love.
- Stewardship is caring for the needs of others.
- Stewardship is offering one's self to God as He offered Himself to us.
- Stewardship is what a person does after saying "I Believe . . .", as proof of that belief.
- Stewardship is learning how to be a responsible and concerned caretaker of Christ's Church; it is learning how to enjoy Church life and be happy in Church work, for in Her dwells the fullness of the Spirit of God.

Make glad, O righteous! Greatly rejoice, O heavens! O mountains, dance for joy! Christ is born, and like the cherubim the Virgin makes a throne, carrying at her bosom the Word made flesh! Shepherds glorify the new-born Child! Magi offer the Master gifts! Angels sing praises, saying: "O Lord, beyond all understanding, glory to Thee!"
– Nativity Matins –

As we prepare to celebrate this Great Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, we greet all of you with these words of praise from the Festal Matins on the Eve of the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord. The beautiful liturgical hymns we sing in celebration of the Nativity of Our Savior resound with a single theme: **joy**. They proclaim the joy all creation shares as its Creator takes on the human flesh. They invite us to rejoice with the angelic hosts in praising the Word made flesh, dwelling amongst us. And they challenge us to look beyond the cares and concerns of this world in anticipation of the new life the Savior offers us – a life that, while beyond all understanding, is already revealed to us and experienced by us in the life of His Body, the Church.

Indeed, the Birth of Our Savior is filled with great mystery. The Virgin gives birth, yet she remains a virgin. God takes on our human nature, yet He remains that which He is from all eternity. The King of All reigns from a cave, rather than a sumptuous palace. The manger becomes His throne; simple shepherds, His court. The angels serve as His messengers; the powerful of the world, His enemies. The Messiah comes unto His own; despite centuries of anticipation, they fail to recognize Him as the Living Word the written word joyously reveals.

The choir of angels joyously proclaim this great mystery by proclaiming "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will among men" (Luke 2:14). Today we draw near and adore the One who is our Peace.

Entering into the Feast of our Lord's Nativity, let us be generous in extending the joyous news of eternal life to all people. Celebrating God's descent to earth and our ascent to heaven, let us also remain vigilant. For through watchfulness the gift of the incarnation - the gift of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection - will never cease to be embraced as life-giving and life-transfiguring.

So, let us join together as a Diocesan Family, as brothers and sisters in Christ in making a commitment to bring Christ to the World! Let us come to together and proclaim the joyous message of our Lord's Glorious Nativity by proclaiming the words of praise: "Christ is Born! Glorify Him!"

In the spirit of this Holy and Joyous Nativity Season, let us take a moment to reflect upon what God has given us, and to discern how we might be able to return to God a portion of the blessings we have received.

As we celebrate The Nativity of Our Lord, as God gives us the greatest gift of His Beloved Son, let us ask ourselves: what is Orthodox Christian Stewardship? What does it mean for me personally? What does it mean for us as a Church? As a Diocese? A simple answer to these questions can be found in what the Church teaches us about being a Steward and what Christian Stewardship is all about. It is about giving of ourselves to Christ and His Church through our time, talents, and treasures. Being a Steward is something that we all need to take seriously. Being a steward of the Gospel of Our Lord is being a faithful servant to Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, being faithful to His Church, to His Commandments, to His Teachings, and to one another. We all need to put forth the effort and not just a few of us. We all need to come together and be those good and faithful stewards God is calling us to be. We pray that all of us will take this responsibility that has been entrusted to us seriously.

Remember, our life is not about us - it is about Our Lord! It is about His Gospel! It is about His Church! It is about our salvation in the Heavenly Kingdom. This can happen and it will happen as long as we focus on Christ!

Christian Stewardship is understood to be a spiritual exercise whereby we, God's Children, express our love and faithfulness in tangible ways through the giving of our time, talents and treasures for the building up of the Body of Christ as best expressed in our Parish life and our Diocesan Life. For truly as Christ has taught, all things belong to God, and He has gifted them to us during our time on earth, and as Christians we are called to share these gifts with those around us. In order to fulfill the responsibility of giving back to God a portion of what He has given us, we must remind ourselves that:

"We, though many, are One Body in Christ, and each of us a member of one another."

{ROMANS 12:5}

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### **A FEW WORDS ON STEWARDSHIP: SPIRITUAL GIVING**

Recently, someone asked, "When do I stop giving?" My answer is, "NEVER!" I am quite aware that many people feel uncomfortable when they hear an appeal to give. But let's be honest and forthright, and face the problem of giving.

Christianity is based on GIVING. God gave His Only-Begotten Son so that all who believe in Him might be saved. Now He asks US to GIVE. What are we asked to give? Our whole being! Why? Because GIVING is LOVE in action, and the essence of Christian life is LOVE – LOVE for God and LOVE for our fellow brothers and sisters.

If I were to choose two words that pretty well tell what Christianity is all about, they would be GIVE and FORGIVE. Even FORGIVE is a form of giving – it is giving someone something that is not due to them but is something they are indebted for. Remember The Lord's Prayer in its literal translation: "Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors." Giving and forgiving are Christian love in action.

So when we are asked to give, or better INVITED to give, think of the appeal as an OPPORTUNITY to express our love for God our Heavenly Father. Yet, at the same time, we must be very humble and recognize that whatever we give, be it time, talents, or treasure, can never measure up to what each one of us owes to God. After all, He gave us life on earth and He offers us Heaven if we accept Him as our Heavenly Father and behave according to His command as His loving children. How grateful we ought to be! All He is asking for is a measure of what He has freely and lovingly given to us. This is why in the Divine Liturgy, on behalf the faithful, the priest offers up the Holy Gifts and says: "THINE OWN OF THINE OWN WE OFFER UNTO THEE ON BEHALF OF ALL AND FOR ALL!" Nothing belongs to us. What we have belongs to God and has God as its source. We can only offer it back to Him as a token of thanksgiving and love.

In summary, let us be glad when we are asked or invited to give. And if we are not asked, let us look ourselves for the opportunity to give, and do it in love. For GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER.