

First Fruits

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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!

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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ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP OF TIME, TALENT & TREASURE

We as Orthodox Christians realize everything we have is given to us by God. We serve God to show love and gratitude for the gifts He has given us.

Life is the first and greatest gift of all and carries with it great responsibilities for using our time, talent and treasures as expressions of our love, commitment and thankfulness to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us offer to God the very best of our lives that we may continue to grow in Christ and support the ministries of His holy Church.

As we consider offering our *First Fruits of Stewardship*, please remember:

- ✘ God has blessed us with individual gifts and talents that He wishes us to use to glorify Him.
- ✘ We enhance our own lives by exercising the privilege to offer our gifts and talents to Christ's vineyard. Therefore, ***it's important to review and renew our gifts and talents at least once each year.***
- ✘ As faithful Orthodox Christians, we are called by God to share in the ministries of the Church.
- ✘ The Holy Spirit has brought us together in unity as members of the body of Christ. Personally and collectively we must offer God our full cooperation and hard work to nurture our talents as faithful stewards to His glory.

Orthodox Spirituality is taught and exemplified through the lives of the Fathers, Mothers and Saints of all ages. There we find the living and concrete examples of what Spirituality is. Orthodox Spirituality suggests that we...

- Seek the honor of God
- Take up your cross and follow Jesus
- Look at everything from God's point of view and not public opinion
- Make decisions based on the Heavenly and not the earthly
- Practice living, praying and worshipping as a member of the Body of Christ

God's desire is that we live our lives with a focus on Christ, the Saints, our Orthodox faith and use our daily earthly existence to grow and strengthen our spirituality

Giving to glorify God

"We thank you, our God, and praise your glorious Name ... for all things come from you and we have only given back what is yours already." (I Chronicles 29:13-14)

Giving wholeheartedly

"And He (Jesus) looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and He saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites. So He said, "Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had." (Luke 21:1-4)

Giving cheerfully

"Let everyone give as his heart tells him, neither grudgingly, nor under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (II Corinthians 9:7)

Giving freely

"He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." (II Corinthians 9:6)

Giving regularly

"On the first day of every week, each of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income."(I Corinthians 16:2)

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\* **“CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP”** is nothing less than God’s call for us as His people to assist in managing the affairs of this earth with Him. We are called to be “friends of the bridegroom” and “co-workers with the Lord.” Our Stewardship consists of making responsible decisions about our time, health, talents, relationships, property, and all that makes up our lives.

\* **“FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP”** means the responsible making of decisions about the money we have, in the light of our high calling to do God’s will in our lives. Financial Stewardship requires that we return part of our money to God in support of the work of His Church, and then that we manage the rest wisely.

\* **“FIRST PORTION GIVING”** means just that: to consciously return a first part of our income to God, in a systematic way, in support of the work of His church as an act of gratitude, and then to consciously make wise decisions in regard to how we should manage the remainder of our income.

\* **“PERCENTAGE GIVING”** means to determine what part of our total income we will give as our “First Portion Gift” to God in support of the work of His church, as an act of gratitude and thanks for all He has done and continues to do for us and for the life of the world.