



ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

OFFICE OF THE RECTOR

10701 South Military Trail ~ Boynton Beach, Florida 33436-4899

Tel: 561.732.4424 ~ Fax: 561.737.2205

RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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“Stewardship”

Several of you over the past months have expressed your own fears about asking for money as priests and have asked me to help you understand fundraising with regards to our ministry. First of all, I am a big believer in Divine Providence, and that if God wants to do something it will fall into place. This means first and foremost that we must be men of prayer and vision. Prayerfully ponder God's plan for your parish, school, hospital, mission, or seminary (just in case you are ever blessed to be the rector one day). Dream with God and then seek the counsel of those around you with whom you work, with your bishop, and with close friends. Sometimes we just need to ask others, am I crazy? But then once we believe in the mission of our parish or school, we move forward with prudent confidence that if it is God's will, the path will be made smooth.

I would like to begin with a few simple examples of God providing for our needs. In September of 2012 I asked the Board of Trustees permission to “complete the chapel” with the addition of a Crucifix. The idea of a crucifix had been hotly debated for fifty years and they agreed that it was time to move forward. At the point of asking permission, I had no idea of how it would be paid for, but trusting that if it was God's will, then the funding would be found! At the end of the meeting, a member of the board came up to me and said that their family would fund the entire crucifix, no matter what the cost (now that is a good price!). The completion of our sanctuary with this image of Christ crucified has greatly enhanced the prayer lives of many - I had a sense that the funding would come if the permission was granted (one day I will have to tell you more about how we found the artist!).

Now, that doesn't mean that we won't get nervous when we have to ask for funding or projects, but with a deep sense of trust in God's providence and in the mission entrusted to us, what could seem impossible on our own is not only possible but more can be done than we could even have dreamed. We could have never imagined four years ago that through the generosity of our Bishops and the faithful of the seven dioceses of Florida that our campus would be renovated and new dorms completed - and how grateful we are!

One more providential story to give glory to God and remind us that it is not we who are the great fundraisers of the seminary, but God! We were trying to figure out how to update Bishop Lessard's house in order to prepare it to become a convent, *obviously* an unbudgeted item for the year. Trusting that if God wanted the Sisters to be here next year, He would provide; so we prepared to move forward. Not long after, Msgr. Mike Muhr called to tell me that an elderly woman in his parish had been saving money for the seminary and putting it in a “cake box,” which he would deliver to the seminary on an upcoming visit. I thought about how beautiful the faith and thoughtfulness of the people of God is and especially this simple gift of the “widow's

mite.” Well, what I expected would be maybe \$1000 stuffed into the cake box turned out to be \$65,000! What we needed to fix up Bishop’s house!

I share these stories to emphasize that the real hero of our fundraising efforts is the Holy Spirit, who as Mother Teresa of Calcutta would attest, is the one who provides for our needs. Her stories by the way, are unbelievable as God’s Providence would literally provide for even the smallest of details - we can learn a great deal about trust from our soon-to-be-saint. Throughout my almost twenty years of priesthood, I have seen over and over the words of Psalm 127 ring true: “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor.”

Providence is the reality in which we live. God is in charge and we simply strive to be faithful. It is *His* Church, *His* parish, *His* seminary, *His* mission, and so the pressure is really on *Him*! It’s up to us to pray for whatever institution we are serving and try to be good stewards of what is entrusted to us. Then we need to trust. I promise you that if you preach the Gospel well, strive to live your priesthood with integrity, and are transparent about finances, the Lord will provide because the people will trust you and stand behind the mission.

Stewardship, then, is not about fundraising, but about making missionaries. We invite the faithful to be cooperators with the mission of our parish, school, seminary, etc. We invite people to give with a generous heart and not under compulsion “for the Lord loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7), and if people cannot give cheerfully, then it is better not to give. The bigger picture of fostering stewardship in our parishes is that it is about so much more than money, but about the gift of self to God in gratitude for all He has done for us. Thus it is about our whole selves and the three T’s: Time, Talent, and Treasure. We only really make progress in our parishes when the faithful engage on all levels. In fact, I get more excited when a wealthy person wants to get involved in a ministry than when they open up their wallets. My dear Dad used to remind me that we need to provide opportunities to help people be generous - this is actually a way of helping them on their spiritual journey. As Henri Nouwen wrote about inviting people into the mission: “We have a vision that is amazing and exciting. We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources that God has given you – your energy, your prayers, and your money – in this work to which God has called us.” Stewardship is based on the biblical principle that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1). Thus it is the management of the whole created order lived in grateful recognition that God, who is the source of all our blessings, has entrusted to us that responsibility. Much more could be said about creating “stewardship parishes” but that is a bigger topic for another time.

It is also important to note that we cannot ask for money unless we are in relationship with people which means an investment of our time. It also means that our primary concern is the salvation of their souls. That is why I am so grateful for our periodical, *Seeds of Hope*, which literally creates relationship with our readers and enriches and encourages their faith. It is also important for us to ask ourselves if we only give preference to the wealthy (as opposed to our call to have a preferential option for the poor!). One way that I found in the parish to do this was to accept dinner invitations once a week from different parish families. And so every Saturday night I would dine with old or young, rich or poor, devout or lukewarm and get to know the different demographics of the parish. I highly encourage this practice and personally found it very enriching.

The parish priest needs to get to know the people and be present at events, after all why would we expect others to show up at our parish events if we don't even find them meaningful? Be personal with people at events and make them feel welcome - the pastor/priest is the host. You certainly see me do this at events when I try to walk around to every table and greet our visitors - be always mentally prepared to eat last (or not at all!). The personal touch always makes a difference: make phone calls to thank people for donations or involvement in the parish - I still do this, as do the volunteers in the development office. In addition, writing personal notes and signing correspondence goes a long way for people - on average, I sign around 40 letters a day; these little things add up and foster relationships. Another simple personal witness that we can offer is the example of our own generosity. I am a firm believer that we must lead by example and this applies in a particular way to our own good stewardship. We should be among the first to contribute when there is a project in the parish, when we are taking up a collection for the diocese, and when it comes to the weekly tithe to the parish, we are parishioners too in need of offering support to our spiritual family. Fr. Proulx spoke of this beautifully two weeks ago in relation to fostering simplicity of life - the more generous we are with others, the less we have to spend on ourselves! One simple suggestion – when you arrive at a new assignment, the first thing that you should do is to simply and without ostentation ask the parish secretary for a parish registration form.

As I have said in a previous Rector's Conference: "We are simple beggars who have very little ourselves but even still must lead by example. The pastor is to be the first to make his pledge to the parish or diocesan campaign. I have done this over and over and it makes a profound impact on the faithful when they see us making our own sacrificial gift; it is a sign that we will not ask them to do what we ourselves are not prepared to do. I would recommend a very small little book by Fr. Henri Nouwen entitled *A Spirituality of Fundraising* (given to me by Fr. Stephen Parkes). This easy read gave me great courage at a time when I needed it in the parish. Asking for money and support is definitely a part of our life – be not afraid, it is for Christ and His people that we make such asks. You will not need to do it often; in fact, I hope you only have to really do it once a year on stewardship Sunday. If the people see you as a good steward and a credible witness to what you preach, they will be generous quite naturally and God will provide" ([15 January 2015](#)). On the flip side, because it doesn't always come or come easily, if and when the doors do not open and the resources we need are not present, then we find the will of the Father in the "no" and embrace the given moment.

As you prepare to speak of stewardship in the parish, it is good to acknowledge that a tithe is a deliberately prayed upon percentage of one's income. It may be a different percentage for people at different times in their lives, but let's take 10% as a biblical starting point. Encourage them that 5% should go to the sustenance of their parish, 1% to sustain the ministries of the diocese, and 4% to charities of their choice including helping needy family members and friends.

Five Biblical Elements and Principles of Giving: (Richard Stoll Armstrong)

1. Motivation – Grateful obligation
2. Manner – Recognized Priority
3. Measure – Increasing Proportion
4. Mood – Joyful Sacrifice
5. Method – Disciplined Practice

[I will share a PowerPoint presentation from a talk I gave at the International Catholic Stewardship Council (ICSC) in 2011 which unpacks these principles]

If as parish priests we strive to preach well, make ourselves available to the faithful, offer many wonderful ministries and services (particularly outreach to the poor), and the people know that we are good stewards of what they give to support the parish, then we really only need to ask for money/preach stewardship once a year.

I once heard fund raising called “friend raising” and I think that has helped change my whole mentality towards this challenge. We are inviting people into deeper friendship with Jesus Christ and His Church through our own human instrumentality. You may be saying to yourself, but that is the rector’s personality to do these things, yes and no. Certainly I am extroverted in nature, but I what I am inviting each of us to do is very simple: welcome guests, make a few calls every week, sign letters, and be generous - this is not rocket science. In addition, our presence at events in general, and specifically at every Sunday Mass, has a huge impact - the people will know that you are there to serve them and in return they will want to support the mission. Now to be honest, as seminarians we used to mock our rector and pastors for doing many of these same things which seemed exaggerated at the time (not that anyone would do this here!), but I saw the fruitfulness and the spiritual success it has brought about and have come to believe in these simple stewardship practices.

I also want to encourage you to hire staff that is able to help you with public relations and stewardship as I have been blessed to have both in my prior parish and here at the seminary. These professionals help to put together letters, programs, phone lists, etc. to ensure success. Remember what we are not raising money for ourselves, but rather for the mission. At my very first event back here at SVDP, Daniella organized a gathering of our Rector’s Guild over the summer as a “meet and greet” and I asked that it be organized in the context of a morning of reflection. In this way I wanted to establish the reality that we are always more concerned with the spiritual well being of our benefactors. I asked them that day to simply say at least one “Hail Mary” for our mission at SVDP on a daily basis and that I knew that the Lord had great and exciting plans for our seminary. I believe that this simple prayer and entrustment has had a profound effect on our institution. Many people who were at this event still come to me and remind me that they are continuing their daily Hail Mary for us - we need their spiritual support just as much, if not more than any material support! Think of the thousands of people who pray every day for our seminary and for you individually as a seminarian - this is humbling and should fill us with gratitude. We do not pay our tuition, or pay room and board, or health insurance, etc. Let us be ever grateful for all that the people of God do for us to support us. The least we can do is to lay down our lives for love for them.

When seeking assistance through the generosity of others, gratitude is the key. Take nothing for granted. Gratitude keeps us humble and reminds us that we are not entitled to people’s money, or their time and talent for that matter. Our people are working very hard and sacrificing to provide for the needs of our Church (for us!), thus we must above all express gratitude regularly and without any sense of personal claim. This is one reason I express my gratitude so often to you! I do not take the generous gift of yourself for granted as you desire to give back to the Giver Himself.

I know many of you have fears about fundraising or asking for money in any way. I want you to be at peace and know that it is the Church of Jesus Christ, and at the end of the day, it is his problem. Remember, it is not *about* us or ultimately *for* us. We need to speak and preach with

conviction, and then trust in the Holy Spirit and our Lady to provide for what is needed. Be not afraid!

I want to close with a quote that I ran across recently and it made me chuckle, because to believe in God's Providence and to move forward with faith, I believe that this citation of Mark Twain rings true: "To succeed in life, you need two things: ignorance and confidence." We might change that phrase to "innocence and confidence" – the innocence and confidence of a child who trusts that all will be provided for them.

Finally, remember that everything we do is for the glory of God and is thanks to Him, so let us finish by praying together the Glory Be and by singing with deep gratitude for all the Lord has done for us! (#637, "Now Thank We All Our God").