

## STEWARDSHIP

As Orthodox Christians historically our parishes existed on what has come to be known as the 'dues' system. This came into being through many of the faithful paying union dues at their jobs, and so this concept was carried over into the local parish as a means to support it. Over time the word stewardship came to be substituted for dues, but in reality this was nothing more than the old dues system renamed and repackaged. I say this because very few of our parishes are festival free. We pay a set amount to be a member, help where we can, and count on fundraising for the rest. This is not biblical. This is not according to God's plan.

As Orthodox Christians we need to look to Sacred Scripture if we want to see how our local church is to be supported. In Genesis chapter 14 and Deuteronomy chapter 14 the Lord says to give a tenth of our earnings, a tenth of our increase, to the church. This is what is known as the tithe. In the book of Proverbs chapter 3 it is to be the "first fruits" that we give. This means that before anything else we give to the local parish every month. Our stewardship is to be the first monthly line item in our budget along with our mortgage, utilities, and all the other bills we have. The tithe is also in the New Testament as well. In Matthew 23 and Luke 11 Jesus says, "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone." This means Jesus expects us to tithe, and do just works of mercy for those in need. Jesus even goes so far as to say our tithe is a direct reflection of our love for God.

To be clear a tithe is always the first 10% off one's pay given to the local parish. This is commanded by God in the Old Testament, and commanded by Christ in the New Testament. Now that we know where the tithe comes from, and what the tithe is, I want to share with us what stewardship should look like in keeping with the spirit of tithing. The spirit of tithing is about percentage based giving from our income. It's not an arbitrary number like our current platform is. It's eucharistic based because we are saying thank you to the Lord in proportion for all the good things He has done for us. The word eucharist literally means thanksgiving. In thanksgiving we receive God's blessings, and in thanksgiving we give His blessings back to His church and others proportionally.

Why does the Lord ask us to give a percentage of our income to the local church? In short we give to the Lord because of all the blessings we have received from Him. God asks us to give a percentage of income to Him for our benefit. It is to teach us how to

keep God first in our lives and how to be unselfish people. Unselfish people make better parishioners, husbands, wives, friends, relatives, employees, employers, and Christians. The joy we receive in giving transforms us as human beings. Research into the brain has revealed that gratitude is a social emotion; it is an experience of a deeper sense of connection and trust that transforms us. In giving thanks, we shift our perspective; we free ourselves from fear and stress, and open our hearts to opportunity, potential, and happiness.

Gratitude is what we feel, thanksgiving as financial giving is what we are to do in response for God's blessings in our lives. Giving liberates the soul of the giver. We never walk away feeling bad. Whether through a tithe, percentage giving, charitable contribution, or gift to a friend in need, giving away portions of our money always feels good. Not only does it feel good, but it generates goodness, and brings contentment. Remember, no one has ever become poor through giving.

For far too long our parishes have not been fully supported by us. We will use the festival, schools, and other means of fundraising to accomplish the work the Lord asks us to do ourselves. These fundraisers aren't wrong, but they should go into a capital improvement campaign and not be used to balance the yearly budget. None of us would ever dream of holding a monthly bbq in our homes to pay the bills. It would be seen by our neighbors as misguided. Why? Because we are to prudently manage the finances of our own homes. It is time we financially manage Our Lady's Parish on God's terms, and according to His expectations. It is the right thing to do. It is what our Metropolitan wants us to do.

Last year we had around 375 stewards, and around another 75 non-pledged families. The median income in Montgomery County for a family is \$56,500.00. If we multiply the median income by total stewards we come to a combined total income of \$21,187,500 for the parish. If we multiply the combined total income by 3% our total stewardship would be \$635,625.00 a year. This is where we need to be. This is realistic. This is mere, basic, and fundamental Christian stewardship and giving.

If we did this as a community we wouldn't have to fundraise for every single repair and need in the church. People wouldn't incessantly be coming around asking for contributions. The Festival, Difi, and other fundraisers could then be used for the HVAC, the new parking lot we need, and to keep up on properly maintaining the infrastructure that has been passed on to us. There is a ton of work that needs to be done. All we need to do is take an honest look around.

Moving forward the Stewardship Committee is going to ask that 3% of our earnings be given to the Church this year. Overtime we want to move this number up to 5%, but never above that. One could always give the traditional tithe or 10% as mandated by God, and while we would always graciously accept this, stopping at 5% allows a family to offer the additional 5% to the parish in areas of time and talent.

One verse in every six in the first three Gospels relates, either directly or indirectly, to money. Sixteen of our Lord's 44 parables deal with the use or misuse of money. In the end I'm of the conviction that no parish ever has a money problem, only a faithfulness to Sacred Scripture problem. Can we faithfully do what our Lord asks us to do in the support and stewardship of His holy house? I truly believe we can. God will make a way if we act in faith according to His Word.

Lastly, we make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give. Part of God's plan for salvation is in giving. He gave us life, He gave up His life for us, and He asks us to give back a percentage in eucharistic thanksgiving for all that He does for us. What is amazing about God's teaching is that He only commands a small percentage back. He doesn't ask for it all back, even though it all belongs to Him. Behold the graciousness and generosity of God, who wants people to be able to have life, and live it to the full. Not, however, at the expense of forgetting to whom it all belongs. When we give according to His plan, we are participating in His plan for salvation. We are building up His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

In Christ,

Fr. Joseph