

Introduction

Three convictions in particular underlie what we say in this pastoral letter.

1. Mature disciples make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves.
2. Beginning in conversion, change of mind and heart, this commitment is expressed not in a single action, nor even in a number of actions over a period of time, but in an entire way of life. It means committing one's very self to the Lord.
3. Stewardship is an expression of discipleship, with the power to change how we understand and live out our lives. Disciples who practice stewardship recognize God as the origin of life, the giver of freedom, the source of all they have and are and will be. They are deeply aware of the truth that "The Lord's are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it" (Ps 24:1). They know themselves to be recipients and caretakers of God's many gifts. They are grateful for what they have received

and eager to cultivate their gifts out of love for God and one another.

THE CHALLENGE

In some ways it may be harder to be a Christian steward today than at times in the past.

Although religious faith is a strong force in the lives of many Americans, our country's dominant secular culture often contradicts the values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is a culture in which destructive "isms"—materialism, relativism, hedonism, individualism, consumerism—exercise seductive, powerful influences. There is a strong tendency to privatize faith, to push it to the margins of society, confining it to people's hearts or, at best, their homes, while excluding it from the marketplace of ideas where social policy is formed and men and women acquire their view of life and its meaning.

THE CHOICE

Christians
are part of this culture,
influenced by it
in many ways.

In recent decades
many Catholics in particular
have entered into
the mainstream of American society.
That has been
a remarkable achievement.
Often, though,
this process also has widened
the “split” between faith and life
which Vatican II saw as one of
“the more serious errors
of our age” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43).
Thus American Catholicism itself
has taken on
some of the less attractive values
of the secular culture.

For example,
although religious people often speak about
community,
individualism infects the religious experience
of many persons.
Parishes,
dioceses,
and church institutions
appear impersonal and alienating
in the eyes of many.
Evangelization
is not the priority it should be.
How to use people’s gifts and charisms,
how to empower the laity,
how to recognize the role of women,
how to affirm racial, cultural, and ethnic minorities,
how to overcome poverty and oppression—

these and countless other issues
remain vexing questions,
as well as
opportunities.

Also,
while many Catholics are generous
in giving of themselves
and their resources
to the Church,
others do not respond
to the needs
in proportion
to what they possess.
The result now is a lack of resources
which seriously hampers
the Church’s ability
to carry out its mission
and obstructs
people’s growth as disciples.

This pastoral letter recognizes the importance
of church support,
including the sharing of time, talent, and treasure.
But it situates
church support
in its broader context—
what it means to be
a disciple
of Jesus Christ.

This also
is the context
of stewardship.
Generous sharing of resources,
including money,
is central to its practice,
and church support
is a necessary part of this.
Essentially,

it means
helping the Church's mission
with money, time, and personal resources of all kinds.
This sharing is not an option for Catholics
who understand
what membership in the Church involves.
It is a serious duty.
It is a consequence
of the faith
which Catholics profess
and celebrate.



This pastoral letter initiates
a long-term, continuing process
encouraging people
to examine and interiorize
stewardship's implications.
At the start of this process
it is important to lay out
a comprehensive view of stewardship
—a vision of a sharing, generous, accountable way of life
rooted in Christian discipleship—
which people can take to heart
and apply to the circumstances
of their lives.
Concentrating on one specific obligation of stewardship,
even one as important as church support,
could make it harder
—even impossible—
for people to grasp the vision.
It could imply
that when the bishops
get serious about stewardship,
what they really mean is
simply giving money.

THE VISION

Jesus' invitation
to follow him
is addressed to people
of every time and condition.
Here and now
it is addressed to us—
Catholic citizens
of a wealthy, powerful nation
facing many questions
about its identity and role
in the waning years
of a troubled century,
members of a community of faith
blessed with many human
and material resources
yet often uncertain
about how to sustain
and use them.

As bishops, we wish
to present a vision
that suits
the needs and problems
of the Church in our country today
and speaks to those
who practice Christian stewardship
in their particular circumstances.

What we say here
is directed to ourselves
as much as to you
who read these words.
As bishops,
we recognize our obligation
to be models of stewardship
in all aspects of our lives.
We must be stewards
in our prayer and worship,
in how we fulfill
our pastoral duties,
in our custody of the Church's
doctrine, spiritual resources, personnel, and funds,
in our lifestyle and use of time,
and even in such matters
as the attention we give to
personal health and recreation.

As we ask you to respond
to the challenge of stewardship,
we pray that we also
will be open to the grace to respond.
We pray that the Holy Spirit, whose gracious action
conforms us to Jesus Christ and to the Church,
will enlighten us all and help us to renew our commitment
as the Lord's disciples and as stewards of his bountiful gifts.

THE PLAN OF THE PASTORAL LETTER

The pastoral letter proceeds according to the following plan.

I. The Call

Stewardship is part of discipleship. But Christian discipleship begins with vocation, the call to follow Jesus and imitate his way of life. The letter therefore begins with vocation. Then it presents a very general overview of stewardship, considered in the context of discipleship, noting that people first of all are stewards of the personal vocations they receive from God. Discipleship and the practice of stewardship constitute a way of life that is both privileged and challenging.



II. Jesus' Way

Next, the pastoral letter focuses more closely on the idea of stewardship, relying on the teaching and life of Jesus to probe its meaning. It considers the implications for disciples of Jesus engaged in stewardship. One of these is that all are called to evangelize, to share the Good News with others. And what is the reward to which good stewards can look forward? The answer is perfect fulfillment in God's Kingdom—a kingdom already present, real but imperfect, in this world, which Jesus' disciples help bring to its full reality by the practice of stewardship.

III. Living as a Steward

Having reflected in general terms upon Christian life considered from the point of view of discipleship and stewardship, the letter turns to the content of this way of life. It considers the content of life in relation to two human activities that are fundamental to the Christian vocation. The first is collaborating with God in the work of creation. The second is cooperating with God in the work of redemption. Both lie at the very heart of Christian stewardship in its deepest meaning.

IV. Stewards of the Church

The pastoral letter next considers the community of faith, the People of God, which is formed by the New Covenant in and through Christ. Each member of the Church shares in responsibility for its mission; each is called to practice stewardship of the Church. Christians also are called to look outward and to place themselves at the service of the entire human community, especially those who are most in need. The Eucharist is both the sign and the agent of this expansive communion of charity.

V. The Christian Steward

The letter closes with a brief portrait or profile of the Christian steward, drawn from the New Testament. In a special way, the Blessed Virgin is the model of Christian discipleship and of the practice of Christian stewardship as it is understood here. Do we also wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ and to live in this way?

Who is a Christian disciple? One who responds to Christ's call, follows Jesus, and shapes his or her life in imitation of Christ's. Who is a Christian steward? One who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them in justice and love with others, and returns them with increase to the Lord.

Genesis tells us that God placed the first human beings in a garden to practice stewardship there—"to cultivate and care for it" (Gn 2:15). The world remains a kind of garden (or workshop, as some would prefer to say) entrusted to the care of men and women for God's glory and the service of humankind. In its simplest yet deepest sense, this is the Christian stewardship of which the pastoral letter speaks.