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Preparing a Lay Witness

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INTRODUCTION

In discussing the stewardship lay witness, we can only begin to scratch the surface of a subject as deep and wide as God's gift of life and our own personal experiences of that life. All individuals are called to present themselves before the Lord and listen to the unfolding of God's story from within.

The purpose of this article is to give you the tools to organize and present an effective *Time, Talent or Treasure* lay witness. By doing so, my prayer is that others will be encouraged by your story and respond by sharing their gifts more abundantly.

LAY WITNESS PROCESS

To begin, consider this thought: "God has blessed my life." Every individual has a story to share. Repeat the words to yourself, "God has blessed my life," and start to prepare your witness using the following six points.

Pray

Often, we allow our minds and outside activities to influence much of our daily routine. The suggestion for discerning about, preparing, and giving a lay witness is to spend time in prayer. While to some this may seem obvious, others may think the effective witness relies on their expertise and presentation style. You are encouraged to: Pray when asked. Pray after saying "yes." Pray while preparing. Pray while waiting. Pray while walking up to the podium. Pray when finished. Recently, in the last few minutes before I began a major presentation, I was extremely nervous. A good friend asked if

we could take a minute together and pray. This "prayer minute" allowed me to begin the talk with confidence in God's blessings.

Introduce Yourself

Your lay witness will include much about who you are through the stories you share. However, at the beginning, you should briefly share your name, family members, and parish affiliation. A personal example is: "Good morning! I am Bob Pfundstein and I have been married to my wife, Susan, for 13 years. We are blessed to be expecting our sixth child. I would give you their names and ages but then I might have to quiz you later. We have been members of the parish for just over two years. I would like to express our gratitude to Father for allowing us the opportunity to share our stewardship story with you." This short "ice-breaking" introduction allows you to "see" those to whom you are speaking and helps take away some of the nervousness.

Define Stewardship

Stewardship is our grateful response to an ever-loving God who has given us all that we have. Begin to define stewardship in your own words as it pertains to your life and to your personal story. This portion of your talk should include appropriate quotes from the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral letter, "*Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*," or other good stewardship resources. The definition you share needs to be what you believe as well as how you try to live the stewardship message in your day-to-day activities. I often share: "Stewardship has more to do with the vitality of the parish community than with

the hours we volunteer or the dollars we place in the collection basket. Stewardship is about how we live our faith not just about how we spend our time or money.”

Include Scripture

Read the Scriptures for the day you are speaking and refer to them if possible. While it is not your role to give a homily, it should be a joy to share a quote from the Scripture readings which connects with your stewardship message. The Scriptures are filled with stewardship messages. The challenge is to find an appropriate quote and share it within the context of your talk. Remember, if you don't see one in the readings of the day, use your favorite stewardship Scripture verse. It makes a difference to many people to hear the connection between the Bible and stewardship. One of my favorite verses is: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (Matt 6:19-21). Where is your treasure? Where is your heart?

Share Your Story

What is the stewardship message that we are being called to share? The message for a lay witness begins with the recognition of our lives being a constant stewardship story. Repeat the words to yourself, “God has blessed my life.” Whether we come from a large, medium, or small parish or family, or we are clergy, religious, or lay persons, the same basic concepts apply. The message can be simple or complex, and so can the messenger. It boils down to people of faith at all levels sharing their gifts and their giftedness in the way they live their lives and speak about their faith relationship with Christ.

As a lay witness, you provide three important benefits to the parish. First, other parishioners physically see and hear from someone

“just like me.” Second, they hear about how spiritual conversion leads to living stewardship. Third, the pastor is not perceived as being the only message bearer.

When preparing your stewardship story, answer some questions about your stewardship experience, whether newly begun or longstanding. A few possible questions are:

- What was my first remembered experience of stewardship?
- What was my initial reaction to the concept?
- Why did I accept stewardship as a way of life?
- Has stewardship made a difference in my life?
- How have I shared my time, talent, and treasure?
- What have some of the benefits of stewardship been in my life?
- Who likes to talk about money? (*Treasure witness*)
- Is there any way we can give people good news about money? (*Treasure witness*)

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I have often used personal stories to make my stewardship witness come alive for others. Sometimes, I share about major decisions, such

as: “I am a civil engineer with a degree from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Twelve years ago, after much prayer and discernment, my wife and I decided that I was being called to work for the Church. I abandoned a

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fast-tracked, lucrative engineering career to become a parish Director of Evangelization. That position was followed by my becoming a parish business manager, and then Diocesan Director of Parish Stewardship in 1997.”

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Invite

Encourage and challenge fellow parishioners to participate in the parish as partners, growing in faith, and responding in gratitude. As a lay witness, we have little or no control over who attends Mass that week other than personally inviting people we know. What we can do as we prepare our witness talk is pray for those

who need to hear the stewardship message. As an invitation, I have said: “As a family, we have faced financial challenges, health challenges, and many other challenges that most of you can relate to your own experiences. As this parish community grows in its stewardship efforts, I encourage you to share your stewardship stories with one another.”

IN CONCLUSION

As you present your witness, remember that the most effective witness follows from being prayerful, sincere, enthusiastic, friendly, and, probably, nervous. Simply put your best foot forward and give the witness with which God has blessed you. Using the format and ideas presented, prepare your personal lay witness. Even if you are not asked to present your witness in a public setting, you will be able to use appropriate portions of your witness any time you have the chance. Share your witness with a friend at lunch, a business associate at dinner, your foursome on the golf course, a backyard neighbor, the parents of your children’s friends, or any place that God affords you an opportunity. As your life continues, as a good steward occasionally dust off your written witness, read it, and revise it based on the realities of life and your deepening faith. The final evaluation rests with God as you hear the words of the Gospel, “Well done, my good and faithful servant... Come, share your master’s joy” (Matt 25:21).



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Tips for a Stewardship Lay Witness Talk

Prepare an outline:

- I. **Pray**- Pray when asked... Pray after saying yes... Pray while preparing... Pray while waiting... Pray while walking up to podium... Pray when finished...
- II. **Introduction** - Briefly share your name, family members, and parish affiliation. Express gratitude to the pastor and the community for the opportunity.
- III. **Define Stewardship** - Stewardship is response we have in being grateful to an ever-loving God who has given us all that we have.
- IV. **Include Scripture** - Read the scriptures for the day you are speaking and refer to them if possible.
- V. **Share Your Story** - Answer some questions about your stewardship experience, whether newly begun or longstanding. Some of the possible questions follow:
 - What was my first remembered experience of stewardship?
 - What was my initial reaction to the concept?
 - Why did I accept stewardship as a way of life?
 - Has stewardship made a difference in my life?
 - How have I shared my time, talent, and treasure?
 - What have some of the benefits of stewardship been in my life?
 - Who likes to talk about money? (*Treasure witness*)
 - Is there any way we can give people good news about money? (*Treasure witness*)
- VI. **Invitation** - Encourage and challenge fellow parishioners to participate in the parish as partners, growing in faith and responding in gratitude.

Prepare the Presentation:

1. **Pray** - Pray for guidance, clear thoughts, and good ideas.
2. **Gather Materials** - Write down thoughts and personal stories of family life and faith experiences relating to the topics in your outline.
3. **Write the Talk** - Compile the materials and put the talk on paper word for word, in your own style, with your own stories. No one else can give your witness talk as no two individuals are the same. Use the DO'S and DONT'S pointers on the following page to help prepare.
4. **Read the Talk** - Be sure to read your talk out loud. This can be done in stages, first to the mirror, second to your spouse or a close friend, third to the pastor or a stewardship committee member. This is where your verbal witness first comes alive. Be open and ask for an honest critique at this point.
5. **Use Stewardship Filters** - Ask those who listen to your preliminary talk to use a specific set of filters to know you are meeting the expectations. A good list of filters includes Scripture, the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral on Stewardship, "real-life" experience, faith experience, appropriate stories, and humor.
6. **Practice, Practice, Practice** - Take each opportunity to verbalize your talk. Make changes to keep the talk within a 6 - 8 minute timeframe. Try to give the talk in the church with the sound system turned on.
7. **Present Your Witness Talk** - Being prayerful, sincere, enthusiastic, friendly, and probably nervous, put your best foot forward and give the witness with which God has blessed you.
 - Be grateful for the opportunity
 - Dress appropriately
 - Speak to each individual
 - Share your message
 - Graciously respond to feedback

DO:

- Try to work in one or two points from this year's theme, "***Practice Makes Perfect,***" into your talk: 1. It's Scriptural, 2. The parish mission will be enhanced, 3. We are disciples given the command to love by Jesus;
- Talk about the personal need of each one of us: *the need of the giver to give*. This won't happen unless it is planned;
- Emphasize the peace or joy that comes to those who give God the first share of their time, abilities and income;
- Say, "Many of you know from your own experience that what I have told you is true." Invite others to share our experience. (This thanks those who are already generous and emphasizes the positive);
- Reflect on the many ways the mission of the Church touches each of us, spiritually, socially and academically through our parish ministries and through our personal lives;
- Present stewardship as a way of life;
- Try to limit your talk to 6-8 minutes.



DON'T:

- Emphasize parish needs. Stewardship is a long-term goal of the parish, not a means to an end;
- Talk amounts: "If we all just... average \$10 per week,... sign up for 1 or 2 ministries,...give our fair share;"
- Use bargaining language: "I gave this much and God did this for me." This assumes a bartering relationship;
- Say, "Stewardship is the only way to go. I just told you why and so you should try it." This excludes other's experience of stewardship in their lives and suggests that only your method works;
- Threaten consequences of failure to give: "We won't be able to heat/air condition the church," ... "We'll have to close the school," ... "We won't be able to serve the poor;"
- Suggest that Stewardship is mandatory;
- Speak longer than 10 minutes.

Why This Approach?

People relate far more readily to God's blessings than to a parish budget or ministry they don't understand. When motivated to give out of gratitude, they begin to give the gift God really wants: *themselves*. In doing so they experience joy. In saying that we should not talk about the parish's needs, we are not suggesting that these are unimportant. Nor are we suggesting that people should be left in the dark about how their contributions of time, talent, and treasure are being used. We need more accountability rather than less.

Many parishes find it beneficial to draw up the budget and establish ministry participation only after people have signed their commitment sheets. Generally, the most accepted planning method involves a process of consultation wherein the Pastoral Council, the Finance Council and the Staff present to the Pastor their recommendations for the best use of the time, talent and treasure pledged and contributed by the parishioners. This partnership embraces the stewardship model of using the gifts offered by the community rather than begging the community to meet needs beyond their means.

Emphasizing parish needs encourages minimal giving. Emphasizing the personal need of the giver to give, and motivating people to do so out of gratitude, maximizes both giving and its spiritual benefits: *deepened faith and Christian joy*.

Talking dollar amounts, hours needed, averages, or fair share is seldom fair. People's circumstances differ widely. One person's sacrificial gift of Income might be another's "tip." A second person's sacrificial gift of Time and Talent might be another's livelihood. Using this approach focuses on parish needs and neglects the most important reason for giving - *gratitude*.