

Thoughts and Ponderings - No.2 (Part – I)

Stewardship: As we have been gifted so should we gift. In this spirit, it seems to me, the question that we must ask is: how can we organize ourselves, the Catholics of this archdiocese, so that our time, talents and treasure are used more effectively to serve the mission of the Church, the living of the faith, and to do so in a way that is realistic for this day and age? In pursuit of an answer to this question, I present the following thoughts for you to ponder.

First, when reflecting on my responsibility to be a good steward, I find that a few lines from sacred scripture quickly center my heart, spirit, conscience and thoughts, and perhaps they will do the same for you. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12). “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (Luke 17:6). “The Lord requires of you: only to do the right, and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8). “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and on your own intelligence, rely not; in all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6). “The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). Certainly, there are many other passages that could be quoted.

Then, I note that Archbishop Dolan is telling us that we are to do all that we can to move forward and grow in living our faith. We are to seek imaginative and creative ways to find and serve those people who need us most, because we really need them too.

In response to this inspiration, I would like to present some practical items for your consideration, but with no intended order of priority.

1. Good stewardship focuses on the needs of the Church and the ways in which individuals and groups can provide time, talent and treasure to attend to those needs. This focusing distinguishes the needs found at various levels of Church life (e.g., parish, archdiocese, universal). In addition, the focusing is on the common good of the community more than the preferences of individuals. Indeed, good stewardship is more about other persons than about me. So, as a result, whatever I contribute to the Church is to address real needs of the Church rather than my speculation about what the Church could use.
2. Important to good stewardship is the principle of subsidiarity which holds that matters ought to be handled by the smallest or the lowest component of authority. Thus, the

level of church life that experiences a need should be the level of church life that answers that need. Only if that level requires assistance should a higher level respond. Consequently and for example, given the expanded and improved capabilities of the professional staffs of many parishes over the past years, and also given the active involvement of so many dedicated parishioners, perhaps the parishes, clusters and districts should expand their role in determining the pastoral goals for their area and in establishing the programs to attain those goals, while depending on the archdiocesan central offices for advice, direction and consultation (e.g., matters concerning canon law, human resources, liturgy, finance, clergy and lay ministries, communications, social action, etc.).

3. There is a role for authority in good stewardship. In general, this role is to provide a service that assists in attaining appropriate goals, while at the same time keeping in mind the needs of other communities and the common good of all. In other words, those who serve in positions of authority should limit their involvement to occasions when they are needed but, when they are needed, they must act.
4. Given that the needs of the church community can frequently be in flux, good stewardship implies ongoing prayerful pastoral planning along with sound and objective budgeting so that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit can be ascertained and implemented as times and conditions change. Without a doubt, constructive planning should never stop. So, when Archbishop Dolan issues his pastoral plan for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, we must continue looking to and planning for the future.
5. The contribution of the time and talents of the church members constitute the most important components of sound stewardship. Indeed, I cannot help but note that in many parts of the world we have brothers and sisters in faith who are financially very poor but spiritually very rich as their faith communities grow. No doubt, we have much to learn from them. An excellent example would be our archdiocesan sister parish in the Dominican Republic. There, our two priests serve parishioners from approximately twenty towns and villages. Regularly, local faith leaders come to the central parish facility for prayer, training, planning and socializing. Then, they return to their local community to provide ministerial service. All of this with limited financial resources.
6. Moreover, good stewardship implies a strong sense of accountability to almighty God and to the church community. Hence, each of us must hold ourselves accountable and

allow others to do the same towards us, while we also participate in holding others accountable. To do so is an act of love that influences the Church and our faith.

An important discussion point regarding stewardship and accountability is the number of districts into which the archdiocese is organized and how the districts function. At the present time and for more or less forty years, the archdiocese has been organized into sixteen districts and they have served us well, primarily as a means of communication. But nowadays communication by means of district meetings is less a need because of the increased use of emails, cell phones and websites on the internet. Today, our growing need in the archdiocese is for a more coordinated approach to ministry that pools the talents of the clergy and laity alike, especially as fewer priests are available for fulltime active ministry. So, I suggest, that we should rethink our district structure. Perhaps we'll conclude to continue using the present sixteen districts, but let's do so because it is the structure that really serves our needs today and for the future, not because of the history.

Along these lines and in an effort to enrich the coordination of pastoral work, perhaps the structure and functioning of district meetings should change. Currently, at various times throughout the year the priests and parish directors of each district meet by themselves, the deacons of each district meet by themselves, the principals of each district meet by themselves, the religious educators of each district meet by themselves, etc. But maybe an improvement would be if two or three times each year the pastors and parish directors, along with the staffs and representative lay leadership (e.g., the trustees, the parish council chair, etc.) of all the parishes in each district would meet together (meaning just that district) for a comprehensive evaluation of the pastoral work being done in the district and also for setting goals for the pastoral work in the future. This multi-discipline, multi-participant approach to district meetings might enrich the work of the Church.

A final point about stewardship and accountability concerns the role of the deans, those priests appointed by the Archbishop to oversee certain pastoral matters in their district. Maybe the expectation of the dean's parish work should be limited, such as less than half-time working in a parish, and doing so with another priest or parish director. Thus the majority of the dean's time could be spent in active coordination of the pastoral work throughout the district.

7. The assignment of clergy and the employment of lay ecclesial ministers are to respond to the current and foreseen needs of a parish community rather than to the status quo of that community. Moreover, making assignments and hiring employees should be undertaken in a unified manner so that complementary skills and personalities are engaged for the good of the people and the mission of the Church. If at all possible, this search for compatibility should take into account the persons and conditions of the other parishes in the district.

This would apply to the assignment of pastors, administrators, parish directors, associate pastors, help out priests, deacons, and various lay ecclesial ministers, whether these positions are full-time or part-time. Also, assigning ministry teams to an area, such as clergy and laity working together serving the parishes of a cluster, should be considered.

Speaking of the use of deacons, parish directors and other lay ecclesial ministers, a few points need mentioning. First, all parishes need to be informed about these positions and the very real possibility / probability of their use in the parish. Second, ongoing spiritual development and continuing education for these ministers must be a high priority. Finally, a plan needs to be developed for the vocational discernment, education and spiritual formation of additional deacons, parish directors and other lay ecclesial ministers because as priest become fewer more of these ministers will be needed.

Of course, the services of women and men who belong to religious communities should continue to be welcomed both to serve archdiocesan needs and also to establish new initiatives that are in line with the charism and purpose of their religious community.

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Please give prayerful reflection to these comments and then let me know your thoughts. I can be contacted at vicarforplanning@archmil.org.

Thoughts and Ponderings – No. 2 (Part – II) with additional reflections on stewardship and discipleship will be publishes in about one week.

Sincerely in Christ,
Fr. Jim Connell, Vicar for Planning
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