

Accountability and Stewardship in Parishes in the United States

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It is an honor and a privilege to speak with you this morning.

- I am grateful to the organizers of this conference for giving me this opportunity to present my ideas and my hopes for the Church based upon my experience as a *parroco* in several parishes in the United States.
- I am grateful for your participation in this conference, as your presence here in this aula testifies to the importance of the transparent, responsible stewardship of the temporal goods of the Church for the sake of the new evangelization.
- I am grateful for your attention this morning to this *parroco* who is honored to share his experiences of the vineyard, this practitioner who is pleased to share his sincere convictions about the critical importance of transparent, responsible stewardship of the temporal resources of the Church. I am convinced that accountability to the faithful is important for two reasons – and these two reasons will serve as the theses for my presentation this morning:
 - First, when leaders of the Church are responsible stewards of the temporal resources of the Church, those same resources are best able to realize their potential to advance the mission of the Church. To state the matter clearly and simply: When we take care of the goods of the Church they increase, just as did the five talents bestowed by the master upon the capable and prudent steward in the Gospel. This magnanimous increase in the temporal resources of the Church happens not through a miracle, but through responsible stewardship, of which transparency is an essential component. I will say more about this in a few moments.
 - Second, when the members of the Church here on earth, especially the laity, have a clear and accurate understanding of the temporal realities of the Church they love, then they will be much more likely to support the mission of the Church even to the point of sacrificial giving. This is a good thing not only for the “bottom line” of the ledgers kept by every parochial and diocesan CEO (*economio*), it is also a great thing for the laity themselves. For as Blessed Pope

John Paul II was fond of saying – and he quotes from *Gaudium et spes* when he does so, “....man...cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.” (GS 24) When those responsible for the care of the temporal goods of the Church exercise their stewardship with transparency, they make it much more likely that the laity will share of their resources in a manner that imitates the generous self-giving of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

So then, my approach today will be to argue two points:

1. First: When those responsible for the temporal goods of the Church exercise responsible, transparent stewardship, those resources will multiply, thereby being more able to strengthen the mission of the Church.
2. Second: The most important fruit of the practice of responsible, transparent stewardship is the warming of the hearts of the laity to participate more fully in the mission of the Church, thereby adding much needed fuel to the fires of the new evangelization.

I will make these two points by highlighting seven areas of Church life in which the responsible, transparent stewardship of the temporal resources of the Church makes a tremendous difference.

So then: Two important points with evidence from seven areas of the life of the Church.

Finance Council (can. 575)

Three years after being ordained a priest I was appointed as *parroco* of a parish of 500 families. The parish was suffering from many difficulties, including a serious operating deficit. In fact, when I arrived the parish was spending one dollar (\$1 USD) for every 75 cents (\$0.75USD) it was bringing in. This was not good. Even as a young *parroco* I knew that the boat was taking in water and that I needed to take significant corrective actions.

Why was the financial situation of the parish so dismal? Was it because of unemployment, recession or inflation? On the contrary, the economy in the United States in 1992 was thriving. Parishioners did not give not because of a lack of money, but because of a lack of trust. They

did not trust those who were charged with the stewardship of the temporal resources of the parish. The parish was torn with internal strife and division largely because of the lack of stable, accountable leadership in the parish. I was the seventh *parroco* in ten years! The people of God of that parish had lost their patience and had curtailed their financial support of the parish – all because of a lack of trust that came from a lack of transparency.

In accord with canon 575 the parish had a Finance Council. I took the important step of strengthening that Finance Council by adding several lay men and women known for their financial acumen and business savvy. Furthermore, each of these new Finance Council members was known for his honesty, integrity and candor. These new Finance Council members took their roles seriously and made important suggestions for the ordering of the finances of the parish. Because of that, I was able to communicate to parishioners that I was taking seriously the wise counsel of these talented men and women. As a result, within a few months the income of the parish matched its expenses. And a few months later, the income was exceeding its expenses. Is this surprising? It shouldn't be. *Lumen genitum* teaches that "...the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God." (LG 31) As a *parroco* I was simply tapping into the talents, skills and abilities of those parishioners and opened the door for them to influence their fellow parishioners. I demonstrated to the wider parish through the appointment of well-qualified Finance Council members that the temporal affairs of the parish were not being managed in secret, but within the context of the broad participation of the laity. And it worked. The financial affairs of the parish became once again well-ordered, and the parishioners began once again to share generously of the gifts that the Lord had given them. Within fifteen months the parish went from having a 25% operating deficit to having a 25% operating surplus. That was good news. But that was not the best news.

Annual Report

One of the important tasks of the Finance Council was to assist me in communicating to the parishioners the state of the temporal affairs of the parish. In keeping with standard business practices the Finance Council sought my permission to publish an annual account of the income and expenses of the parish. I wholeheartedly approved of this initiative because of several reasons.

- First, because I was proud of the work that the Finance Council had done. I wanted all parishioners to know how hard the Finance Council members had worked to secure the financial stability of the parish.
- Second, I wanted the parishioners to understand better the good things that were going on within their parish. I wanted them in turn, to more readily participate in the life of the parish through the generous sharing of their gifts of time, talent and financial resources.

And so the report was published and many, many parishioners thanked me for being so open and transparent with the administration of the temporal goods of the parish – temporal goods that the parishioners themselves had earned through the sweat of their brows and the work of their hands, temporal goods that came from the parishioners making many, many generous sacrifices.

Today in many parishes and dioceses in the United States the Annual Report is an important way of demonstrating the responsible, transparent stewardship of the temporal goods of the Church. (*Several examples are available as downloadable PDFs at this site: www.OmearaFerguson.com/CASE*) It is considered a “best practice” for dioceses to monitor the finances of each parish, and to subject their financial report to the scrutiny of an independent auditor who reviews the report using generally accepted standards of auditing. With a standard fiscal audit it is thereby possible for the auditor to state that the financial report of the diocese is free of material misstatement. This high standard of transparency greatly increases the credibility of the diocese when it solicits gifts from both leading benefactors and from the broader population of the diocese. Transparent, responsible stewardship opens the door for the broader participation of the laity in the mission of the Church.

Enlisting the Laity in the Ongoing Support of Their Parish

In 1992 the bishops of the United States issued a pastoral letter entitled *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*. That letter has become the best-selling pastoral letter the US bishops have ever written, with a translation in the Spanish language and an edition of the letter published in Australia. The letter articulates a beautiful vision for how every member of the Church is called

to respond to the Lord's goodness in a grateful, responsible and generous manner, thereby making a return to the Lord *with increase*.

The Stewardship pastoral letter invites the laity to put at the service of the Church not only their money but also their gifts of talent and time. Indeed, the Church is well-served and built up by the laity who share of themselves so magnanimously. We have already mentioned the important role played by Finance Council members. We could speak of hundreds of other ways in which the laity advance the mission of the Church by their generous service in the parish and beyond.

A best-practice in many parishes is to enlist the laity in the ongoing support of their parish through the sharing of the gifts of time and talent. The laity are recruited to fill roles of service in the parish according to their particular expertise. In so doing, not only does the Church save the money she would have spent otherwise, but the laity themselves are drawn deeper into the life of the Church in the process. Enlisting the laity in roles of service at the parish is itself an expression of transparency. The Church desires to have the faithful involved in her life and committed to her mission. (Do you know the difference between involvement and commitment? In the *spaghetti alla carbonara* that I love so much, with its creamy sauce of eggs and *pancetta*, the chicken is involved while the pig is committed!) In fact, research shows that parishioners in the United States who are committed and who are engaged in the life of the church give three times as much money to their parish as other parishioners. Why? Because they know the parish church from the inside out. They trust the *parroco* and others in positions of leadership. They see the importance of the work of the parish. And they know that because they are investing themselves in a sacrificial manner that good things are happening.

The hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the homeless are given shelter, the sick are visited, the children are taught, sinners are reconciled, those in mourning are consoled, and upon the altar God is glorified in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. If every Catholic could be drawn into deeper engagement in the life of the Church and be brought to see the tremendous amount of good that the Church brings about day after day, then would every Catholic participate more fully in the life of the Church and thereby grow stronger in holiness. Holiness is the fruit of transparency! For transparent, responsible stewardship opens the door to a more robust participation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church.

For example, because of transparent, responsible stewardship many parishioners were drawn to participate in parish groups and organizations. Some of these groups were strongly focused

on studying the scriptures or the Catechism intensely, or doing hard work for the sake of the less fortunate. On the other hand, some groups were more recreational in nature! In either case, as *parroco* I had the opportunity to speak with parishioners in these smaller groups. These were wonderful teaching moments, moments to talk about the Lord and about the connection between the Catholic faith and one's daily life. In two different parishes I used these small group settings to invite parishioners to begin the practice of Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Not only did those parishioners commit themselves to maintaining a constant, adoring presence before the exposed Blessed Sacrament twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, those same parishioners designed, funded and built the chapels that made the practice of Perpetual Adoration possible. The vigil before the Blessed Sacrament continues to this very day in both parishes, and the graces flow as do the vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Such is the transforming power of transparent, responsible stewardship.

Securing the Capital Funds to Sustain the Mission of the Church

There was once a *parroco* who stood in the ambo before his parishioners one Sunday morning and pointed to the many buckets on the floor of the church, each catching drips from the leaky roof. The *parroco* said, "The roof is leaking, it cannot be repaired, it must be replaced. The cost is \$250,000." The parishioners gasped. Then the *parroco* said, "I have some good news and I have some bad news. The good news is that we have the money." With that the parishioners breathed a sigh of relief. "The bad news is that it's still in your pockets!"

A few kilometers away from here the Synod Fathers are casting a beautiful vision for the New Evangelization. Here in this room we wonder how to supply the temporal resources necessary to implement that vision. The mission of the Church to worship depends upon church buildings with roofs that do not leak. The mission of the Church to educate depends upon school buildings that are safe and conducive to learning. The mission of the Church to evangelize depends upon universities and houses of formation that can equip our young adults with the tools to spread the Word of God. Whatever might be the cost of the New Evangelization I have some good news and I have some bad news! The good news is that we do have the money. The bad news is that it is still in the pockets of the laity!

Yet this "bad news" is not so bad at all. When presented with an opportunity to build up the Church, the laity respond. When given an accurate accounting of the needs of the Church they love, the laity are very generous in making sacrifices to fulfill those needs. When shown

that their participation in the life of the Church can make a difference, the laity are magnanimous in rising to the challenge.

In my own archdiocese in 1997 the needs were great. Maintenance on parish facilities had been deferred and most buildings were in a state of disrepair. Everywhere in the archdiocese there were roofs that needed to be replaced and plumbing, electrical and heating systems that needed to be repaired. In addition to deferred maintenance, there were many parishes in the archdiocese that were growing, and that called for the physical expansion of our church buildings and schools, especially those schools that educate the urban poor. The needs were indeed great, and so our archbishop challenged the parishes in the archdiocese to raise a collective \$40 million. There wasn't a single *parroco* in the archdiocese who thought this was possible. Still, when the laity were asked to respond, they did and they did so magnanimously. By the end of the one year effort to raise the \$40 million, nearly \$100 million had been raised. What is so edifying is that this money was not just from the pockets of a few millionaires. This money came from the earnings and savings of tens of thousands of regular parishioners. They were shown credible evidence of the real needs of the Church. They were convinced that their gifts would be used for noble purposes and that their money would not be squandered. And in less than ten years when asked again, the laity responded with an additional \$100 million in gifts. Transparent, responsible stewardship on the part of the leaders of the Church yielded a response from the laity that far exceeded expectations.

Transparent, Responsible Stewardship in the Midst of Scandal

Since 2002, dioceses in the United States have paid out over \$3 billion (*tre miliardi dollari*) to settle claims arising from the sexual abuse of children and adolescents. The heinous actions of a few priests have bought untold suffering into the lives of thousands of young people and their families, and brought scandal and shame upon the Church. Settling these claims has brought several dioceses in the United States to bankruptcy. Like a bandage being removed slowly, Catholics in the United States have been confronted almost daily with news accounts these horrible scandals and their aftermath.

In the face of such scandal one would reasonably expect donations to the Church to decrease. Yet in the United States this is generally not the case. Yes, there is evidence that some Catholic families have in fact withheld their contributions to the Church. Yes, those parishes and dioceses that found themselves in the center of the storms of scandal did experience a decline in contributions during those moments. Nevertheless, since 2002 contributions to the Church

in the United States have not diminished. In fact, evidence suggests that contributions have risen steadily. Why is this the case? The reason is transparent, responsible stewardship. A survey conducted in 2006 shows that 8 of 10 Catholics state that the amount of trust they have in how the diocese handles finances is either very important or somewhat important to how they contribute. Contributions to the Church have held steady or even increased through these difficult years when the following are true:

- When the offenders have been dealt with through the criminal justice system and canonical processes.
- When clear actions have been taken to ensure a safe environment for children at the parish church, and
- When bishops and priests have accepted responsibility, apologized, and extended pastoral care in a personal way to victims of clerical sexual abuse.

All of the above are examples of transparent, responsible stewardship of the temporal and human resources of the Church. We pray that our Church will never again face such a scandal. The reality of original sin suggests otherwise. Should our Church ever be faced with a similar or even greater crisis, the solution will be to trust the laity. Present the laity with the facts in an honest and humble manner. Allow the laity to participate in the process of reconciliation. Invite the laity to greater roles of responsibility – roles in keeping with both their baptismal dignity and the law of the Church. Embody transparent, responsible stewardship before the laity and they will respond positively and generously precisely because the laity love the Lord and they love His Bride, the Church.

A Hope-Filled Presence Amidst the Cynicism Of Our Day

Nearly two thousand years ago here in this city, St. Lawrence, the holy deacon expressed confidence in the Church when he stood bravely before the forces of the most powerful empire the world had ever known. When asked to present the riches of the Church, St. Lawrence pointed to the poor of the city of Rome and said “Behold, here are all of our riches.” St. Lawrence won the martyr’s crown for being transparent and accountable before the forces of this world. Lest we be discouraged, we remember that *semen est sanguis Christianorum* – the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

We live in a world in which cynicism rules the day. Many who once believed or came from devout families no longer practice their faith. The Church is mocked and ridiculed for being just one failed institution among many. Day after day the voices of opposition to the Church's role in society grow louder. In my country the threats to religious liberty have never been stronger. Powerful forces are at work that seek to silence the voice of the Church in the public square. And throughout the universal church, no century has seen more blood spilled for the Holy Name of Jesus than the one in which all of us were born.

How are we to recapture the Catholic imagination? How are we to build up an authentic Catholic culture? How are we to announce with credibility the joy and hope (*gaudium et spes*) we have for the modern world? How are we to evangelize effectively and be a light to the nations (*lumen gentium*), drawing more and more souls to the Lord and to His Holy Church?

I will not be so bold as to suggest that the complete and total solution to the question of how the Church can evangelize the modern world rests in transparent, responsible stewardship of Her temporal goods. That would indeed be a stretch. Nevertheless, I do maintain that transparent, responsible stewardship of the temporal goods of the Church will do two things:

First, it will cause those good to increase, thereby making it possible for the Church's mission to be strengthened.

Second, it will give the laity greater confidence in standing up for their faith, even against the most powerful forces the world has ever known. "Here are the riches of the Church" the faithful should be able to say to cynics, pointing to the poor that the Church serves, the children She educates, the unborn She protects, the displaced persons She welcomes in the name of Christ. "Here are the riches of the Church," the laity should be able to proclaim, directing others to the timeless truths by which every man, woman and child can find direction and purpose in life, directing others to the never-changing love of Jesus Christ, found yesterday, today and forever in the midst of His Body, the Church.

Please God, may it be so.