

THE SPIRITUALITY OF STEWARDSHIP

When the American bishops published their pastoral letter on stewardship in 1992, the title they chose for this historic document was *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*. How does the title for this document contribute to our understanding of stewardship as a way of life?

Stewardship is a relatively new term in the Catholic vocabulary. The underlying principles (gratitude, accountability, generosity and giving back with increase) are ancient—dating back to themes in the Old and New Testaments and to the earliest Christian writers. But their application to the choices of modern living is new. Until recently, Catholic Christians were asked to approach stewardship as an *obligation*—either to support the work of the Church or as an expression of Christian charity. There was not much emphasis on the personal, spiritual dimension of Christian stewardship as a way of life.

The bishops' pastoral letter sought to change the emphasis from giving out of a sense of obligation to giving as a response to God's love for us. Stewardship is not simply an obligation, the bishops say, but it is also a joyful response to the Lord's invitation: *Go, sell what you have. Give it to the poor and come follow me*. Stewardship is a *response in faith*. It is our "yes" to God's invitation to totally give ourselves to him.

Stewardship is a form of spirituality. It is a way of responding to the invitation/challenge we have received from the Lord to follow him without counting the cost. In fact, *how we respond* to God's call determines whether or not we are good, generous or responsible stewards. The pastoral letter calls attention to the many ways that a disciple of Jesus Christ can respond in faith to this radical, life-changing invitation, but *the way we respond* determines whether or not we are faithful stewards of the gifts and talents we have received from God.

Mary is the first Christian steward and the model for all who wish to follow her son because her response to God's call was an immediate and unreserved "yes." The saints also provide us with powerful examples of how to respond in faith to the Lord's call to be his disciple—without counting the cost. In a very real way, the saints help us to understand the *spirituality* of stewardship. They show us that there are many different ways to respond to God's love and still be faithful, generous stewards of all God's gifts.

For example, Franciscan spirituality is nothing more (or less) than the way St. Francis responded to the Lord's call through simplicity of life and solidarity with all God's creation. The spirituality of St. John Vianney, a humble parish priest, was very different, but it was no less genuine and no less powerful as a witness to Christian discipleship. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta responded to Jesus by serving the poorest of the poor. St. Thomas More responded to the Lord by living a life of integrity and choosing to die for his faith. When we say that stewardship is a way of life, and an expression of Christian spirituality, we mean that it is a way of responding to God's personal call—a way that respects the gifts and talents of each individual and that seeks to discern and do God's will in the specific circumstances of every person's life. As the bishops' pastoral letter tells us, the supreme model of Christian stewardship is Jesus himself. He was the Good Steward—the one who shared himself with others completely and perfectly and who gave himself back to the Father in the fullness of love.

Stewardship is a form of spirituality because it challenges us to develop and use the gifts and talents God has given us and then to "give them back with increase" by making a generous, grateful response to whatever the Lord asks of us. The spirituality of stewardship is profound. But it is also practical. It involves the choices we make every day: how we spend our time, what we do with the skills and talents God has given us, how we care for the environment, what we do with our money. Stewardship is a way of saying "yes" to God through the actions of our daily lives. It is a way of living the Gospel in the real world.

How do I respond to God's invitation to be his disciple? The way we answer this question determines our personal spirituality and the quality of our response to the Lord's call to be a generous and loving steward.