

Parents and Stewards

[Lay Witness](#), September, 2001

by Steve Kellmeyer

Scripture paints an interesting picture of stewards. It is the steward who helps Joseph trick his brothers (Gen 43 and 44), who tests Daniel and his friends concerning their diet (Daniel 1), and who discovers that Judith has cut off the head of Holofernes (Judith 14:13). The stewards of Daniel's kingdom are important enough to list by name (1 Chron 27 and 28). While King Hezekiah's steward, Shebna, is condemned by God (Isaiah 22), the wife of one of Herod's stewards assists Jesus financially in His ministry (Mt 20:8) and yet another steward confirms the fact of Jesus' first miracle (John 2). Jesus often used the figure of the steward in order to demonstrate how the Kingdom of God worked (Mt 20:8, Lk 12:42, Lk 16) and Titus called the bishop "God's steward."

For a bishop, as God's steward... must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it. Tit 1:7-9

When we read through the documents of the Church, we find the word "steward" used explicitly only in reference to the priest, the bishop and Mary. Each is called a steward of the mysteries of grace (cf. 1 Cor 4:1-2, Eph 3:2). However, both Scripture and the liturgy clearly tell us that the Blessed Virgin and consecrated men are not the only stewards within the Church:

As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 4:10-11

This is the essential difference between a volunteer and a steward. A volunteer is someone who comes forward with something they consider their own. I bake my brownies and decide to donate them to you. You give of your time to help me out. When you, I, or anyone else “volunteer,” we say by that very word that what we give we consider to be ours and we freely surrender it to you. A steward doesn’t think like this. Every steward in Scripture cares for and distributes something that belongs to his master. Stewards have bosses. Worse, what the steward distributes belongs to the boss. Stewards are under no illusions about who owns what. Indeed, the steward in Luke 16 is punished precisely because he wasted his master’s goods.

Given this, we quickly see why it is impossible for a Christian to volunteer for anything. Since all Christians understand that all we have and are comes from God, we also realize that we can never be more than a steward of the gifts God gives us. What are these gifts? Apostle, prophet, teacher, worker of miracles, healer, helper or service, administrator, speaker of words of wisdom, knowledge and faith, speaker in various kinds of tongues, discerner of spirits, evangelist, pastor and teacher (Rom 12:6-7, 1 Cor 12:4-9, 28, Eph 4:11). The list is rather long but, while both apostles and pastors figure prominently within it, the kinds of gifts listed are by no means entirely exclusive to consecrated men.

In 1 Cor 12:28, Paul lists the different gifts according to degree. Since we are stewards of God’s gifts, he knows we must ask how our stewardships fit into the scheme of things. The king has many ministers, and some husband more important resources than others. Thus, Paul lists apostles first, for they steward gifts of sacramental grace, the infinite life of very God within us. Prophets are second, because they do not distribute material goods, rather, they spread the eternal Word of God. Teachers are third - ahead of miracle-workers, healers, helpers, administrators, and speakers of tongues - because teachers do not deal in material things, as do

those who follow them on the list. Rather, they husband Truth, explaining and helping Christians live both the Word proclaimed by the prophets and the grace of God distributed through the apostles. In Titus, Paul marks the bishop's stewardship predominantly by his ability to teach. He does this precisely because the gift of grace the bishop stewards through the sacraments must be explained and modeled to those who receive it. Christ is called "Rabbi" and the Church "Magister" because both words describe what they do: they teach.

Thus, "catechesis," a word which means "to echo down," is the pre-eminent form of stewardship available to laypeople. When we catechize, when we echo the Faith down to those around us, we transmit to our audience the entire deposit of Faith without addition, subtraction, or modification. What we are given to transmit is not ours - He comes from God. He has no beginning, He has no end. The catechist gives not silver or gold, but Christ Himself.

May [God] bless the fathers of these children. With their wives they will be the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith. May they be also the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do, in Christ Jesus our Lord. *The Rite of Baptism for Children*

The Church has many catechists. The Pope can be, under certain conditions, an infallible catechist, as are the ecumenical councils. As Scripture tells us, the bishop serves as catechist to his flock. Priests, who share in the authority of the bishop, catechize their parishes. They, in turn, allow lay people to share in this authority through positions like the director of religious education or director of faith formation. These men and women associate to themselves volunteers at the parish level who commit to learning how to echo the Faith to various groups of people. However, among all of these catechists, one group holds a special place.

"The family's catechetical activity has a special character, which is in a sense irreplaceable... family catechesis therefore precedes, accompanies, and enriches all other forms of catechesis. Furthermore, in places where... invasive secularism

makes real religious growth practically impossible, ‘the church of the home’ remains the one place where children and young people can receive an authentic catechesis. ***Thus there cannot be too great an effort on the part of Christian parents to prepare for this ministry of being their own children’s catechists*** and to carry it out with tireless zeal.” *Catechesis in Our Time*, #68 (emphasis added)

The most important service ministry any parent holds in the Catholic Church is the ministry of catechizing his own children. Indeed, were it not for the sacrament of marriage, the Church would not be able to call her own educational role a ministry.

“For Christian parents the mission to educate... has a new specific source in the sacrament of marriage, which consecrates them for the strictly Christian education of their children... the sacrament of marriage gives to the educational role the dignity and vocation of being really and truly a ‘ministry’ of the Church... Saint Thomas has no hesitation in comparing it with the ministry of priests... By virtue of their ministry of educating, [they]... become fully parents, in that they are begetters not only of bodily life but also of the life that through the Spirit’s renewal flows from the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.”

The Family in the Modern World, #38-39

It has often been said that the future of the Church depends upon the children, but this actually misquotes the Pope. The Pope has said, “As the *family* goes, so goes the nation” and “as the *family* goes, so goes the Church.” He speaks not of children, but of the family, which is the domestic Church. That is, he means the future of the nation and the Church depends upon parents and children each appropriately living out their roles within the domestic Church. If we, as parents, are to truly live out stewardship within the Church, we must honor the gifts God gives us. Insofar as He blesses us with children, He also blesses us with the ability to echo the Faith to our children, that is, to be our children’s catechists. Each parent truly carries within himself the ability to teach his children everything they need to know about the Faith in order to live an excellent Catholic life for the rest of their lives.

Now, having the ability and being able to successfully use the ability are two different things. A ten- month old child has the ability to run a fifty-yard dash: all the muscles and nerves

necessary to accomplish the feat are in place and operational. However, the child needs time and practice to coordinate those muscle movements, time and practice to learn how to use and deliver the power already present in his legs. As he works to use this power, he will fall, crawl, and cry. The same is true for any parent who wants to be truly worthy of the name. Very few of us have either the knowledge of the Faith or the understanding in how to deliver that knowledge necessary to answer every question either a six-year old or a sixteen-year old can raise. Furthermore, everyone needs to realize that it is absolutely impossible to deliver an adult understanding of the Faith to someone who is not an adult. Ultimately, parents are called to steward the Faith, to hand out all and only that which is needed at the moment to their children until such time as the children can handle truly adult answers in every aspect of Catholic understanding. Only then, only when the children have been given adult answers in every aspect of the Catholic Faith, only then have Catholic parents truly and fully used the gifts God gave them.

Stewardship is a word often used and poorly understood. A Catholic parent, can perform no better or higher service than to truly be the primary catechist for his children. In order to accomplish this, we must ourselves know the Catholic Faith at an adult level and be prepared to pass it on, answering every question our children raise in such a way that they not only get their answer, but want to learn more because of the answer. If we learn to do only this, we will have accomplished everything that God intended us to do as Catholic parents. Every Catholic parent is a priest in the domestic church which is the family. Our congregation is our children. We have the same rights and obligations towards our own children as the bishop has towards his flock.

“The family is the primary but not the only and exclusive educating community... the State and the Church have the obligation to give families all possible aid to

enable them to perform their educational role properly.” *The Family in the Modern World*, #40

Parents are properly the primary catechists of their children. The parish has an obligation to help every Catholic parent obtain the tools necessary for each of us to be the primary catechist of our own children. The Church and the State exist to help parents be the primary catechists of our children in the ways of Faith. It is important for us, as parents, to realize that neither the Church nor the State exist in order to be the primary teachers of the Faith to children. Rather, they are supposed to give us parents the tools we need to accomplish the task.

If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it! If I do so willingly, I have a recompense, but if unwillingly, then I have been entrusted with a stewardship.
1 Cor 9:16-17

If we, as parents, can build up our families as God asks us to, the Church will be healed and the hand-wringing over stewardship will be at an end.

Steve Kellmeyer is a graduate of Franciscan University, Steubenville, OH and the father of two children. He writes frequently for Catholic magazines. His first book, Bible Basics, published through Basilica Press, provides the Scriptural support for nearly six dozen teachings of the Catholic Church.