

Pastoral Planning and the Concept of Stewardship

Presentation by Bishop Peter Ingham
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First of all, let me congratulate you on your Pastoral Plan 2010-2014 and for the four years of consultation that has given birth to it.

You have been engaged in pastoral planning since the 1980s. Our Diocese of Wollongong only began our pastoral planning process last year and we hope to launch our plan in February 2011. Consultations in every parish led us to identify 11 major issues, which our first assembly of 350 people last June honed down to six goals – then separate focus groups worked on each goal to arrive at actions to meet the identified goal. We had a second assembly in September, with close on 300 people, where we ratified and modified the proposed actions which then went to the Council of Priests.

Now these are being tested by all the diocesan councils and committees to highlight and chart our course of action and progress over the next five years. Already it has brought the Diocese closer together – people gain a more realistic awareness that the Church is bigger than their own parish, they start to see the issues that are of concern to all of us who love the Church and are prepared to take some responsibility for the Church we love. Of course, if we always do what we always did, we will always get what we always got!

Now I see you are talking about a Diocesan Stewardship Planning Framework:

- Stewardship Policy
- Stewardship Plan for the next four years
- Stewardship Plan support documents

I understand my job tonight is to take you deeper into this idea of being a steward.

Our Diocese has been instrumental in introducing stewardship into the Catholic Church in this country. My business manager at the time, Mr Tony Abela, went to a Financial Administration Conference in the USA in 2004 and by a providential error ended up at a conference he didn't initially plan to attend. Tony came home on fire with this idea of stewardship based on a Pastoral Letter by the USA Bishops first published in 1992 (*re-issued 2002, 10th Anniversary Edition*).

The Pastoral Letter is called "Stewardship: A Disciple's Response". A response that we can make as disciples of Jesus is to be God's steward.

This US Bishops' sub-committee was charged with doing something about increasing revenue. Protestants were keen on stewardship, but it has been a bit foreign to Catholics and the focus was on fundraising.

The Bishops on the committee say they actually underwent a profound conversion of heart, the more they delved into the idea of stewardship. They discovered it is so much more than just a planned giving exercise – to link stewardship only with money-raising really cheapened the currency.

Also in 1992, the US Bishops, through another committee, published another Pastoral Letter called “Go and Make Disciples” about evangelisation, spreading the Gospel. This was aimed at enhancing the average Catholic’s understanding of the Mission of Christ – a mission that has a Church – that mission includes both Evangelisation and Stewardship.

I am sure many of you are aware of a famous Papal Document of Paul VI in 1975 which came out of a synod on evangelisation “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” – announcing the Good News of Salvation in which Paul VI said, “the essential mission of the Church” is to tell, to spread the Good News of Jesus as Lord and Saviour. I’ve heard it said that Paul VI called on a Polish Cardinal to help him – Karol Józef Wojtyła – the future Pope John Paul II.

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI uses that often-quoted line about teachers of the Faith being much more credible when we are also witnesses to what we are teaching. They walk the walk as well as talk the talk!

Evangelising in our context

The Church has to fulfil her evangelizing mission in an increasingly secularized world. The sense of God and of his loving Providence has diminished for many people and even for whole sections of society. Practical indifference to religious truths and values clouds the face of divine love.

Therefore (as John Paul II said in Australia in 1986), “Among the priorities of a renewed endeavour of evangelization there has to be a return to the sense of the sacred, to an awareness of the centrality of God in the whole of human existence.”

cf Ecclesia in Oceania, 18

St Mary of the Cross MacKillop said, “Do all in your power to promote God’s glory.” So we could well ask ourselves:

- Do I witness to the gift of my faith by the way I live and behave that could approximate “the personal style of Jesus Christ” (John Paul II) especially by remaining open above all to those furthest away from me because they feel marginalised or excluded?
- Am I evangelised enough myself so as to experience the presence and power of the gift of the Spirit of Christ, so that I can truly grasp the Gospel as good news for people today, and help others to walk Christ’s way, to tell Christ’s truth and to live Christ’s life?
- The message of the Gospel will be all the more persuasive if I, as a “bearer of the mystery” do not squander the gifts I have received!
- Does the call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ evoke an awareness of the Gospel’s claim on every dimension of my life, not just on this or that dimension only?

- Do I realise that stewardship implicates me as God’s co-worker (1 Cor 3:9) in the work of evangelising (strengthening and transmitting my faith) and because of that, reaching out in justice and compassion to those in need?
- Do I see it as my gift and task to be grateful, responsible, generous and willing to pass on to others what I have received with increase, for the sake of Christ crucified?

“Conversion is the change in our lives that comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit. All who accept the Gospel undergo change as we continually put on the mind of Christ by rejecting sin and becoming more faithful disciples in his Church. Unless we undergo conversion, we have not truly accepted the Gospel.” (*Go and Make Disciples Para 12*)

“Beginning in conversion, change of mind and heart, this commitment to be a disciple of Christ is expressed not in a single action, nor even in a number of actions over a period of time, but in an entire way of life. It means committing one’s very self to the Lord.” (*Stewardship - a Disciple’s Response Para 2*)

The US Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Stewardship describes and fosters the gospel spirituality of sharing – sharing our time, our talent and our treasure – as a way of life as a disciple of Jesus. This helps create a more vibrant parish.

Eucharist

Of course, the disciple’s way of life must have its centre and source of strength, where else, but in the Eucharist – the great sign and the great cause agent of this expansive communion of love – our consoling personal union with Jesus Christ. In and through Christ, we are united with one another.

Constant centring on the Eucharist is about our transformation, our ongoing conversation, our becoming better disciples and stewards.

St Augustine taught that when we receive the Body of Christ, the Eucharist, we become what we receive, the Body of Christ, the Church, for the transformation of the world. There is an old saying “what you eat today, walks and talks tomorrow”; so when we eat and drink Christ today, we are more inclined to walk Christ’s walk and talk Christ’s talk.

“Grant that we, who are nourished by his Body and Blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit and become one body, one spirit in Christ.” (*Eucharistic Prayer III*)

“Lord may this sacrifice which has made our peace with you, advance the peace and salvation of the all the world.” (*ibid*)

- Don’t let my familiarity with the Eucharistic Liturgy dull my awareness of this great act of thanksgiving to the Father for the gift of the Son, through the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Do I see the Eucharist as my grace-filled response to the Lord’s gift of his life in the Paschal Mystery of his dying, rising and sending his Holy Spirit?

- Do I see that my gift and task is constantly to respond from my grateful heart by trying to live what I believe and celebrate and so be empowered to enrich the lives of those with whom I come into contact?

Stewardship

I am talking to you about a helpful way of being a Catholic Christian – by being God’s steward. Some parishes have already taken up stewardship, others are about to. I welcome and endorse this.

Being a steward is simply seeing ourselves as “fellow workers with God.” (1 Cor 3:9) Responding to the call of Jesus, as a committed disciple, started with the Apostles. Being a disciple of Jesus has always been integral to the Church’s teaching and practice ever since.

To be a steward is to ‘manage’ what belongs to someone else. That is the first meaning of the word in the dictionary: “one who manages another’s property, finances, or other affairs.” And that is the profoundly suggestive biblical meaning as well. Everything I administer as a Christian really belongs to someone. The frightening facet of this idea is that the ‘someone else’ is not prime minister or pope; that ‘someone else’ is God.

That is all too obvious in the area of the Spirit, of the supernatural. When I preach, as priest and bishop, I do indeed use my words, but it is *God’s Word* I proclaim. When I pour life into a fresh-born child, it is *God’s life* I minister. When I murmur “I absolve you” it is *God’s forgiveness* I communicate. It is to *His* supper that I invite the faithful.

You and I don’t own the grace of God but it filters through our fragile fingers – it never becomes *my* grace. It is always and everywhere the grace of God.

So realising you and I have been gifted by God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) we are created, redeemed, forgiven, graced – loved by God more than we could ever imagine! St Peter said “Each one of you has received a special grace, so like good stewards responsible for all these different graces of God, put yourself at the service of others.” (1 Peter 4:10)

Being a steward is being aware of God’s abundant gifts and of our trust in that abundance. “All that exists comes from God, all is by God and for God, and to God be glory forever.” (Rom 11:36)

Stewardship, when embraced, will change our wiring:

Life is a gift, pure gift from God. None of us did anything to be born. We have to live the lives we have been given but that does not detract from the fact that life is a gift. *Health* is a gift from God. We have to take care of it; we have to treasure it but it is a gift from God. *Education* is a gift. A gift of pure opportunity. Most of us have been blessed with several special teachers in our life. They changed who we are. They led us to insights that would have otherwise eluded us. They are a gift from God. *Family* is a gift. Just as I did nothing to be born, I did nothing to deserve the parents God gave me.

My being a priest is a gift from God. God planted his call in my heart and then he gave me parents and teachers, priests and nuns to make sure I opened the gift of my vocation.

The best gifts are the ones we don't realise we have but others help us see.

Learn How to Receive

In Colossians (2:7) Paul says "Be thankful." St Mary of the Cross Mackillop said, "See and be grateful".

- Do I detect in myself a daily attitude of gratitude to God in whom I live and move and have my being? (Acts 17:28)
- How can I learn to colour everything in my life with a fundamental orientation or disposition of thankfulness, so that I praise God from a grateful heart? Everything is gift: I am so dependent.
- How do I cultivate a grateful attitude for the gift of God's creation and for the gift of other persons and not just take them for granted?
- Does my gratitude allow me to see the challenges of life from the perspective of God's gift constantly being offered, even, and especially, amid pain and suffering, grief and anxiety?

Instead of blaming God for what's happened, pray - "Lord, what can I learn from this positive or negative situation." Rabbi Brasch said, "God sometimes puts us on our back to make us look up!" St Mary of the Cross MacKillop advises, "Never lose courage under your sufferings."

The Mantra of Stewardship

As Christian stewards we **receive** God's gifts gratefully, **cultivate** them responsibly, **share** them lovingly in justice with others, and **return** them with increase to the Lord. (Cf USCCB Pastoral Letter "Stewardship – a Disciple's Response)

Two Aspects of Being God's Steward

Trusting in God and trusting in God's ability to provide out of his abundance is only the start. The other equally important aspect of being blessed out of God's abundance is, to say with the psalmist, "What return shall I make to the Lord for all his goodness to me?" (*Psalm 116:12*) Jesus said, "Give, and there will be gifts for you: and the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back." (*Lk 6:28*)

Being a steward, following Jesus as a disciple, means acknowledging God is in charge – not me! "Alive or dead, we belong to the Lord," said St Paul (*Rom 14:8*). We acknowledge God as the creator and the owner of everything. To God, we will have to give an account of ourselves. (*Rom 14:12*) Being a steward demands we be accountable and responsible. Stewardship embraces all that is held central to our faith and essential to living as a Catholic Christian.

A Way of Life

Being God's steward means managing responsibly the God-given resources we have – our time, our talent and our resources, our treasure. A stewardship lifestyle enhances the relationships we have with God and with one another. Being God's steward means trying to live out a commitment to be more Christ-centred and less self-centred. It involves a conversion of our heart. Stewardship is a life-long journey, a disciple's response with each of us at a different stage on the journey. At every step forward we are challenged to go further in accepting and loving God's will. St Mary of the Cross MacKillop said, "To me the will of God is a dear book which I am never tired of reading, which always has some new charm for me." St Mary surrendered herself to God: to what God wanted of her – her spirituality and her activity came out of that surrender of herself to God. Her transformation showed her as an excellent steward, she trusted in the providence of God that God will provide. St Mary of the Cross MacKillop really trusted in a power greater than herself.

You highlighted it tonight in your ritual prayer. With the help of the RCIA process, the Church is in the process of rediscovering the true meaning of Baptism. Baptism is the pre-eminent sacrament of initiation; it is the door to all the other sacraments. Baptism is best explained as the person's entrance into the Order of the Faithful, the only universal order in the Church. At Baptism, we enter the Order of the Faithful and are given the mission to spread the Good News. It is important to note that this mission is given by God at Baptism. It is likewise important realise that all other specialised orders in the Church (deacon, priest, and bishop) exist to serve the Order of the Faithful and not the other way around.

Obviously when the full meaning of Baptism is understood as active participation in the Order of the Faithful, our notion of Church will change. When we have vibrant parishes, we will have vibrant dioceses and when we have vibrant dioceses, we will have a vibrant Universal Church. It will never happen the other way around.

Seeing oneself as a steward of God's gifts to us, lies at the heart and soul of living as a Catholic Christian. It isn't so much something we do, as having a lens through which we view the way to live our life! Being God's steward can permeate our entire way of living as a Catholic, because it is founded on being a true disciple of Jesus Christ. Seeing ourselves as God's stewards has the power to change how we understand our lives, thus influencing the choices we make every day.

Wide Implications

It is humbling to realise that the fate of our planet and the future of people on this earth will be determined ultimately by the quality of how we are stewards of all God's gifts. We are called to be stewards of the sacredness of human life from conception to natural death: to be stewards promoting harmony among people of all races and cultures, because every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. How do we promote the integrity of all creation, when global warming, polluting our air, water and soil and the destruction of habitats like parts of our own Great Barrier Reef, are all signs we can all be much better stewards of creation. Stewardship of creation can help us understand the concept of Stewardship.

So often our culture wants us to accumulate and spend. Just as God is faithful to us in ways we never dreamed possible, we can be faithful to God, by daring to see the face of God in others. So as stewards with a sense of justice, we are called to live more simply and to share what we have with others, so that others may simply live! This is what Project Compassion highlights each Lent.

Where our culture encourages us to be aggressively competitive in our work, as stewards, we need to strike a balance and let go of some things in order to make quality time for family and community life.

The stewardship challenge is to discover and embrace God's way revealed by Jesus "the way, the truth and the life" (*Jn 14:6*) against the current culture of "doing it my way".

As God's stewards we are trying to place our gifts, our resources, our very self at God's disposal and service, as the Blessed Virgin did – another credible steward. We do it through the community of the Church.

A good steward is both responsible and accountable for the blessings received from God, then shares his or her gifts out of a sense of love and justice, knowing it is better to give than to receive. (*Acts 20:35*)

One day we will all have to be accountable to the judgement of God. "What did you do with all the time that you had?" "What did you do with the gifts that I gave you?" "What did you do with your life?" "What did you do with the gift of my Son, Jesus?"

Hopefully, we will be able to say: "Lord, I tried to be grateful, to thank you every day and not take your gifts for granted. I tried to be responsible and accountable for those gifts and I tried to share my gifts generously with others to make a return with increase. I tried to live Jesus' life as my own."

May God say to us, "Well done good and faithful servant (steward).....come and share your Master's joy." (Mt 25:21).

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