

"The Tradition of Stewardship in the U.S. Hispanic Communities"

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INTRODUCTION

I want to share some reflections with you on the experience and practice of stewardship in the Hispanic/Latino peoples of this country - and what their rich cultural traditions and ways of life offer to our Church and to our growth together in the challenge of stewardship. I will seek to share these traditions with you through stories about particular families of faith who, through their unique culture and traditions, show us what it means to live as stewards. I also want to share with you what I have learned about stewardship in my commitment to and participation in the social mission of our Church, most recently in my three years as Chairman of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

I want also to revisit some of the powerful reflections left to us by the late Archbishop Thomas Murphy of Seattle, in his ongoing effort to communicate the most central message of the American bishop's pastoral letter on stewardship: that stewardship is not a program; it is a way of life.

In revisiting Archbishop Murphy's thoughts on stewardship, I come away with a clearer grasp of the very foundation and human reality of stewardship. Archbishop Murphy affirmed that stewardship - if it is to be real in our lives - has to become a choice of the heart, and thus much more than a conscious decision of the mind.

How do we make "choices of the heart" ourselves and how do we move others to this kind of heart conversion? Archbishop Murphy believed that it was through stories that we can touch the human heart and best make a point. That is how I want to communicate the gifts of the Hispanic culture to you today.

It is also through our uniquely Catholic acts of worship that our hearts are touched through prayer, liturgy, and participation in the Eucharist. Our Hispanic community has much to offer in our spirit of worship and devotional expressions. It is in this area of spirituality that we might find one of the greatest treasures Hispanic peoples have as a stewardship gift to the rest of the Church. These are the three principles of stewardship that Archbishop Murphy shared in different ways in the last few years of his life:

- Each and every baptized person is called to be a disciple of Jesus. Mature disciples make a conscious decision and a conversion of the heart to be followers of Jesus Christ.
- This discipleship involves a lifelong conversion process, a change of heart that is expressed in an entire way of life - not in a single action or series of actions.
- When disciples embrace stewardship, they recognize God as the origin of life, the giver of freedom, the source of all that we have, and are and will be.

It is this last point which is, I think, the font of all else we can say about stewardship. God is the giver of all the gifts we have received, and we are trustees of those gifts.

In this spirit, I want to offer my reflections on gifts the Catholic people have received, and of which we are called to hold in trust. I will speak of the gifts of the Hispanic culture and community, the stories of families and generations who give of their substance.

I also want to touch on my gift of stewardship as chairman of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development over the last three years. In this role, I have seen marvelous gifts of talent and treasure offered by our Catholic people to support liberating, and empowering, low-income groups through self-help projects. I have seen these gifts returned a hundred-fold by low-income communities. I have seen these communities develop, in turn, the gifts of their children, families, and neighborhoods.

PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Recently I heard a very powerful testimony by Rev. Eugene Rivers, a Protestant minister from Boston working with at-risk youth. (You may remember him on the cover of Newsweek last June [of 1998] in an article entitled "God versus Gangs" about churches working to save the inner city). He was speaking in Washington, D.C. to members of Catholic social ministry organizations about the Catholic Church's rich treasure of social teachings, and how it is Catholics alone who offer a systematic, integrated, and well-developed body of social thought and precedent for action in society. Our social teachings had influence his effective work with gang youth in Boston - and he was urging us to spread the word about this prophetic body of teaching.

What are those social teachings that impressed Reverend Rivers? First, I want to lay out several principles of our Church's social teachings that guide our Catholic Church's social mission. I think these teachings can also effectively inform our stewardship efforts.

The first two of these principles I would like to offer for your reflection are human dignity and solidarity. It seems to me that a fundamental difference between Christian stewardship and "fund-raising" or development is the integrated nature of stewardship, and the spiritual content of the stewardship message as a way of life. I believe that stewardship truly honors human dignity in that it challenges each of us to respond to God's call. And as in the story of the widow's mite, even small contributions - if given in sacrifice - are dignified and holy. All gifts of time, talent and treasure are to be valued and used in the service of the common good - and every gift, each with its own inherent dignity, comes with the potential to work towards the restoration of God's Kingdom.

In Luke 21 we read about the dignity that Jesus recognized in the sacrificial contribution of the widow: "He glanced up and saw the rich putting their offerings into the treasury, and also a poor widow putting in two copper coins. At that he said: 'I assure you, this poor widow has put in more than all the rest. They make contributions out of their surplus, but she from her want has given what she could not afford...'" (Lk 21:1-4)

I have spoken with pastors who described their shift from a development to a stewardship model at their parish. They describe the development process, and the emphasis on major gifts from wealthy parishioners, and how once they shifted to a stewardship model - where every gift is

valued, and everyone gives - they didn't operate in the red. These parishes have had the powerful experience of finding that when everyone gives there is enough.

The second principle, solidarity, may seem to carry a secular ring to it. In fact it is a deeply Catholic concept, developed over time in a succession of papal encyclicals on the social teachings of the Church. I read a very informative definition of solidarity recently: "Solidarity...is the conviction that we are born into a fabric of relationships, that our humanity ties us to others, that the Gospel consecrates those ties, and that the prophets tell us that those ties are the test by which our very holiness will be judged." (Bryan Hehir, S.J., Woodstock Theological Center Forum, Georgetown University, May, 1998) I think that we must remember that this concept of solidarity is central to our Catholic faith. His Holiness Pope John Paul II certainly urges us to do so in his apostolic letter on the Third Millennium - Tertio Millennio Adveniente (No. 46). As Catholics we are called to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in need, and to partner with them in their work for freedom and justice for their communities. We are deeply tied to these our brothers and sisters, and it is in stewardship - the giving of ourselves through time, talent and treasure - that we find a most effective way to act in solidarity with others.

TAPPING THE HISPANIC TRADITION OF SHARING

All that we have and all that we are comes from the Lord. Blessed be the name of the Lord! That in a nutshell is the Hispanic man or woman's attitude about stewardship. We came with nothing into this world - no material possessions. And we will leave this world in the same way.

Because I come from a poor diocese, it is sometimes assumed that our people are too poor to contribute to parish appeals or to the national collections taken up for various Catholic programs. And while it is true that we must often be in the role of beneficiary of others' generosity, we must not be too quick to discount poor people's commitment to share their meager resources whenever they are confronted with a need.

While our Hispanic people lack a tradition of registering in our parishes and signing up for offertory envelopes, they are used to coming to the aid of people in need. The more personal approach which is used in many Hispanic parishes will usually resonate with the faithful. Such approaches include, for example, having someone from the beneficiary group make a direct appeal to the members of the congregation.

The best way for a parish to begin a stewardship program - in fact, the best way for it to initiate almost any parish program - is to organize a home visitation program. Such a program can be beneficial in many ways. It can help update the parish census. It can offer a personal way of registering new parishioners. It can explain parish services available. It can serve as an occasion to provide information on stewardship, including accounting of parish funds. A personal invitation to use offertory envelopes can be made during a visit to a parishioner's home.

As we conduct our parish visitation program in our dioceses, we can discover some cultural and religious practices around the use of money within some sectors of the Hispanic community. I would like to mention just a few customs and practices that I have encountered. You may decide that some of these experiences are similar to those in other racial or ethnic groups. Let's take a

look, then, at two or three examples of members of our community, and their participation in and practice of stewardship.

STORIES OF FAMILIES

The first example I would like to use is that of the Moreno family. The Morenos are a migrant family residing in one of the many colonias, of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Colonias, by the way, are rural, unincorporated settlements that lack basic infrastructure such as streets and sidewalks, drainage and wastewater systems, and sometimes even water. The Morenos found a small plot of land at a price they could afford, and slowly built their now spacious home one room at a time, as money permitted. The Morenos still follow the crops during the harvest seasons. They decide which states to go to, based on their telephone and sometimes e-mail conversations with their friends and relatives around the country. (Yes, farm workers, too, are learning the advantages of Internet.)

The Morenos are very good Catholics. They already know which dioceses and parishes offer outreach services to the migrant families. They are familiar with those who visit their migrant communities. In some cases the Morenos serve as contacts and liaisons between the local church and other migrant families.

One tradition which the Morenos have never forsaken is that of filling the alcancia of the Virgen de San Juan. This image of Our Lady was brought from Mexico to the Rio Grande Valley in the 1950's, and a large Shrine in San Juan, Texas, continues to be a pilgrimage center for tens of thousands of the faithful, particularly among migrant workers. An alcancia is a container, a small bank, which receives regular deposits of money from paycheck to paycheck.

At the end of the season, when the migrants return home, one of their first obligations is to visit the Virgen de San Juan Shrine, where they pray in thanksgiving for their safe return home, and for a successful harvesting season, which is not always the case. They light their velodora - a large candle - and deliver their alcancia to the "padrecito" - their affectionate diminutive title for a priest. This might seem like a small gesture, but just from the crass economics side, of such nickels and dimes and dollars was the multimillion dollar Shrine built, and continues to be maintained today. While I am not recommending the mass production of alcancias, I suggest that this example of the many practices of popular religiosity among our people should be cause for reflection, and should help inform our message of stewardship and subsequent planning efforts.

Another example I would like to hold up is Juan Dominguez. Juan came to this country from the state of Guanajuato in Mexico. Because the migrant stream is slowly drying up, and because the building trades are beginning to boom again, Juan was able to find employment as a roofer. Juan earned enough money to bring his family to Houston with him. Although he never did locate the Catholic parish in his neighborhood (the Mormons, Evangelicals, and Jehovah's Witnesses were the only ones to come calling), he did become involved in a Church-based community organization funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. This organization was organizing in the public schools where test scores were low and bilingual education was either non-existent or unsuccessful. It was helping school principals, teachers and parents turn their school into a community of learners. It was also helping immigrants learn how to process their

residency and citizenship applications, and beyond that, how to develop the art and practice of good citizenship.

It was through getting involved in the organizing of immigrants that Juan Dominguez and his family found the Catholic Church. They not only discovered their parish church but discovered it to be a fountain of truth, teaching and service. It was the locus for their organizing and their citizenship training. It was a very active member of the Metropolitan Organization (TMO), the community organization that discovered the Dominguez children at their neighborhood school, and through them, their parents. The organization taught them about investing in themselves and in their communities, offering to teach other immigrants who came after them - the same things they had been taught. They also learned the importance of investing in their parish, as it struggled to meet the needs of so many newcomers on such a small budget. Among other things, Juan and Maria Dominguez are now on the parish stewardship team!

Finally, I would like to tell you about Judy and Roberto Martinez. Both are very active in their parish, Roberto is a CPA accountant and Judy is a teacher. They are also active in their diocesan development appeal, which they consider their principal ministry. They are happy to share the gospel message of stewardship, and are eminently qualified to do so, because of the way they live it out in their own lives. The Martinez couple has a list of parishioners they contact each year at the time of the appeal. Many of the people on the list are relatives, friends and acquaintances, so their stewardship ministry to and with these is based on shared relationships. But every year, Mr. and Mrs. Martinez seek the names of new people to visit. They feel it stretches them in ways that Jesus would want them to be stretched - to have to reach out to new people and witness to them God's call to service and stewardship.

Roberto considers his stewardship ministry to have been inspired by both his mother and his grandfather. His mother was a member of the Guadalupana Society, a sodality named after Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Guadalupana Society was what often kept the parish afloat, or at least helped it to offset the larger expenses of the parish such as the air conditioning unit. The Guadalupanas knew about sacrificial giving, and sacrificial doing, too. They organized and reorganized the parish. They would seek an active member from each block, and would not hesitate to go door-to-door when necessary to attain a financial goal for the parish.

Roberto's grandfather had been a mutualista. Mutualista societies were set up over a hundred years ago in many parishes to help cover the funeral expenses of members and their families. This was one of the original parish societies involving men, long before the Cursillo and other apostolic movements came on the scene. The mutualistas, as the Cursillistas after them, would frequently enlist their compadres (or sponsors) to join them in their newly found movement. This would be a way of sharing the good news which they themselves had recently discovered, and of participating in an active way in making life better for themselves, but also for their families and their communities.

Manuela Mendez, a resident of a colonia near Las Cruces, New Mexico, resisted joining a community organization until she was faced without water, gas, telephone, sewer and adequate roads. During a meeting to discuss the water needs of the community, she felt the CCHD-funded

Colonia Development Council (CDC) had the know-how to deal with the issue of water. This is how she would describe her experience if she could be with us today:

"My thought was that I would not have anything to offer an organization like this because I did not have sufficient education and I don't speak English. With the support and confidence everyone at CDC has inspired in me, I eventually became Vice-President of the Council. Today what I most regret is not having worked earlier with the CDC. I have now joined the effort to reach the CDC's goal of working in 15 colonias by the year 2000. Even though we have had our ups and downs we continue in our eagerness to help low income people learn how to fight to overcome their obstacles to better their way of life. We might be poor, but we have a lot of dignity. I hope that in the future we can live better with all our basic needs, so that our children and our families can live better and that all together as brothers and sisters, holding hands, we can have a better life and live as happy as God wants us to live."

There are many other stories I could tell, but I think you get the idea. The reason Stewardship works within the Hispanic community is that, at its best, stewardship is about relationships. It begins with God's invitation to us to be participants in his creative and redemptive work. God invites us to be good stewards of all that we have received. God calls us to community and it is in communitarian acts that we can use our time and our skills to benefit the whole community. Stewardship helps us to pool our treasure for the benefit of the whole community. The more people can feel a part of, and a sense of ownership of, both the process and the results of stewardship - that is, how funds are distributed - the greater their commitment over the long haul. This is why a parish stewardship program works best when it has representatives from as many of the key participating organizations as possible. It is also why a diocesan stewardship program works best when it incorporates the leadership of as many parishes as possible.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

I want to suggest to each of you ways to expand your stewardship efforts in include more fully the participation of Hispanics within your diocese.

1. The first is leadership. There are many opportunities to provide meaningful leadership roles for Hispanics of all economic levels in your stewardship campaign. Expand your advisory committees, boards and structures to include Hispanic participation that reflects the composition of your diocese. Set a goal that will stretch your thinking. If your diocese is 20% Hispanic, develop your stewardship structure that reflects or expands this percentage.

This will provide an "authentic voice" for Hispanics of the church and save you from the perception of tokenism. History has taught us that to ask one person to "represent" any given group places that individual in an impossible position. This recommendation will require planning and the development of a pool of candidates with whom you have spent time and to whom you have listened. Your plan may take time - even several years.

2. The formation of a core group of Hispanic representatives is a good beginning. The most important suggestion I will make today is to invest in the training and development of these individuals. Empower them and prepare them for leadership roles that include speaking in the

public arena and developing stewardship activities that appeal to the Hispanic Catholic population. Invest in their education and work to give them a dominant voice in shaping stewardship.

Have them visit other dioceses with a strong Hispanic stewardship component. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development supports a large number of leadership development schools that could be tapped as a resource. The concept of empowerment is expanding as rapidly in society as the stewardship movement. Catholic Charities has developed a three-year plan aimed at developing an empowerment model. The reason for this interest is simple, people contribute more in their personal and public lives when their talents are recognized and developed.

You can invite the core group members to begin to meet individually with parishioners in the Hispanic community. This one-on-one encounter and relationship building is one effective way to reach out to and involve others. Encourage the group to meet with other Hispanic parishioners in the diocese to seek their ideas about stewardship.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is supporting 85 church-based organizations located in rural and metropolitan areas that build participation and leadership through these one-on-one conversations. Clergy and lay people give witness to how this involvement has transformed their lives and improved the participation at the parish level. The method has been effective in bringing in groups of 2,000 to 10,000 people to work on and support the various concerns their organization is addressing.

This process also works very effectively in helping a parish to reach out to its own parish community and neighborhood, and to fulfill its mission of evangelization to the wider community. It can also help to strengthen the hospitality efforts of your diocesan parishes. Parish priests and staff involved in church-based organizing are using the one-to-one interview as a means of developing parish stewardship programs and building their parish community. Look to see if a CCHD-funded Church-based organization exists within your community.

3. Seek ways to remove the barriers to participation in stewardship. The social mission of the church mandates that we have the right and responsibility to participate and contribute to the broader community. The Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the Economy suggests we judge the economy by what it does for and to people and by how it permits all to participate in it (ix. Paragraph 13). The same concept is true for stewardship. We want parishes to involve all Catholics in the financial, spiritual, and social life of the parish. Stewardship involvement is an excellent entry point for meaningful participation.

4. Overcoming racial isolation requires respecting and understanding all cultures – including the Hispanic culture. Study the culture by becoming involved and by seeking advice from pastors and leaders in your church community. Integrate what you learn into your stewardship programs, messages, and materials. If this sounds like a challenge, think of the challenges faced within the Los Angeles community group funded by CCHD that is building parent organizations in public school where 22 languages are spoken. "Embrace diversity" will remain a concept unless relations are forged and bridges built. One important bridge is the composition of diocesan

stewardship offices. Give serious consideration to the need for Hispanic staff, and the benefit gained by hiring staff who understand the language and the culture.

Develop examples of stewardship that are "culturally" sensitive. Recognize the time, talent and treasure given during the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in celebration of fiestas, and the importance of other celebrations, such as a young woman's 15th birthday, called her quinceanera.

Use caution when speaking to or categorizing the entire Hispanic community. Differences in celebrative, culture, and worship styles exist among the Cuban, Central American, South American and Mexican American church communities. Recognize and lift up current volunteer activities that take place in the Hispanic community. Organizations supported by CCHD offer examples of Hispanic individuals who are working to improve their neighborhoods, school systems and their quality of life.

5. Don't assume Hispanics cannot give of their treasure. It is my contention that Hispanics give a more significant portion of their treasure when compared with the giving practices of the dominant culture. Examples that come to mind include the financial assistance that U.S.-based Salvadoran families share with their families in El Salvador. The Salvadoran economy is bolstered by the "generosity" of relatives with low paying jobs in the U.S. Families are giving from their "substance" because they recognize their deep interdependence.

CONCLUSIONS

The Jubilee [is] a wonderful inspiration for our stewardship efforts. It is in the nature of being a good steward to know what belongs to whom and where all of our goods are derived. Good stewards know when to pay debts and when to have debts forgiven. More importantly, they understand why and how debts are incurred, and who shares, or ought to share, in the responsibility for them.

I also hope that...[during this] Jubilee we can bring stewardship into the center of our pastoral life. We really are pioneers in the field of stewardship, and we are just beginning to scratch the surface of this universal call and its far-reaching implications. We are beginning to understand that stewardship extends beyond the Church and reaches out to encompass all of creation and the universe. Real stewards echo the poetic praise of St. Francis of Assisi in their efforts to bring about a cleaner and more beautiful environment.

[On a recent trip to] Oaxaca in the southern part of Mexico[,] the auxiliary bishop of Oaxaca invited me to be his guest at the annual Guelaguetza, literally, "the celebration of exchange." Mexican Indian tribes come down from the mountains and celebrate their faith, their community spirit and their joy of life in dance and music. Each group has its own sacred or folk dance. Their dress and regalia are also unique for each village. At the end of each presentation, the dancers share their food and other products with the crowd; they throw fruit, bags of coffee, bread, mezcal (a locally-produced beverage), tortillas and souvenirs to the spectators.

One of the most impressive dances was the mayordomia, a Spanish work for stewardship. Apparently this three-day long fiesta celebrates the ideals of stewardship. The mayordomos, or

stewards, are carefully selected; those chosen regard the call to serve as stewards as a great honor and privilege. The community respects them as very special members. The fiesta takes place when the mayordomos complete their terms. They have sponsors or padrinos bring them gifts, but before presenting them to the mayordomos, prayers are offered for those about to begin their duties. Then comes the celebration highlighted by dance, music, special dishes and enough mezcal to make my Buick run for a week!

You who direct the stewardship programs in your respective parishes and dioceses are very special and deserve to be honored for the vital duties you are called to perform. Maybe we should start a three day celebration for you! The important thing is that we need to continue to educate our people on the call we all have to be stewards. Stewardship, after all, is one of the essential building stones of all pastoral activity. May God bless you in your efforts to bring out the best in our Catholic people.