LEADER

THE WIDOW'S MIGHT

A Retreat Guide for Lent

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INTRODUCTION

THE WIDOW'S MIGHT

RETREAT OVERVIEW

In the Book of Acts, St. Paul provides a quotation from Jesus that never appears in the four Gospels. Here is the passage:

> *…[K]eep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"*
>
> —Acts 20:35

Giving is better than getting, according to the Lord; generosity leads to greater happiness ("blessedness") than cupidity.

And yet, popular culture in our post-modern world bombards us every day with the exact opposite message, constantly trying to convince us that true happiness is to be found in *possessing* things: The right car, the right house, the right bank account, the right smartphone, the right clothes, the right friends, the right career, the right achievements… These, we are told over and over again, are the key ingredients to a truly meaningful life.

It's hard to keep resisting a message like that, which appeals to our human weakness and is communicated through such exciting and seductive media. And so, parents neglect spending time with their children, because they are busy working 60, 70, or 80-hour weeks, and marriages are shipwrecked on the sharp rocks of bitter conflict over money and other merely material things.

To counteract this insidious seduction, to experience the blessedness that comes from keeping spiritual things first and material things second, is one of the goals of the liturgical season of Lent, when the Church calls us to focus not on getting, but on giving, especially through prayer, penance, and loving service. To reach this goal, we need to continually turn our attention to Jesus, so that the priorities of his heart can gradually become the priorities of our hearts. And that's what this Lenten Retreat Guide, *The Widow's Might*, is all about.

- In the first meditation, we will hear Jesus teach about true generosity.
- In the second meditation, we will contemplate one of his parables about the limited value of material things.
- And in the conference, we will review the deep yet very practical theological concept of stewardship.

Let's begin by turning our attention to the Lord, who is with us now, eager to spend this time with us. Let's thank him for that, and humbly, confidently ask him for all the graces we need, most especially the grace of joyful generosity.

NOTES

FIRST MEDITATION

BLESSED ARE THE GENEROUS

INTRODUCTION

One day, Jesus was with his Apostles in Jerusalem, in the area around the Temple where he would often teach and preach. During a break in his activities, he noticed some people coming to make their donations in the treasury there—a place in one of the Temple courtyards with 13 donation receptacles in the shape of large trumpets pointing up and out, connected at their base to ample containers. People would place their monetary offerings in the mouths of the trumpets, and the Temple officials would gather those collections and use them for the upkeep of the Temple, as well as for helping the poor.

For a little while, Jesus watched the people coming and making their offerings. Then he took advantage of what he saw to teach his followers a surprising lesson. Here's how St. Mark describes the encounter:

> *He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, "Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."*
>
> —Mark 12:41–44

Jesus singles out this poor widow, whose contribution from a worldly standpoint is minimal, the smallest of all. No one would ever honor this poor widow with a special award ceremony; no one would ever name the wing of a building after her; no one would ever put a plaque on the wall in gratitude for her gift. And yet, Jesus sets her up as an example for his followers. What is it about this widow that made her contribution so extraordinary, so pleasing to our Lord and our God?

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

It's the attitude of her heart, something that only Jesus can see. She is truly generous with God. For her, God is everything, and so she gives everything she has to his Kingdom. She knows that she has received every good thing from God's providence, and she is grateful for that. She also knows, from experience, that she is truly dependent on God's goodness and providence. And so, instead of clinging to her meager material wealth and using it to try and control her life, she turns it all over to God, as an act of gratitude, generosity, and trust.

This attitude is what makes her gift so valuable in God's sight. It is the perfect embodiment of the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). Jesus actually says that her offering, which was tinier than tiny in terms of financial value, was worth more than all the other offerings *combined*—that's what the Greek text implies. The other contributors made donations to the Temple, but they were donations without risk, donations made from extra money, money they didn't really need anyway. Those donations didn't affect their lifestyle. Those offerings didn't come from hearts that were full of gratitude, generosity, and trust. Rather, they came (at least partly) from a sort of vanity and a sense of social conformism.

THE BASIS OF OUR SECURITY

Jesus wants us to understand that the quality of our relationship with him is directly related to the depth of our dependence on him. If we try to manage our daily lives depending primarily on our own smarts and strength, confiding in our ability to control circumstances and construct happiness with our merely human resources, we are actually closing ourselves off from God and from the blessing of his grace. In another passage, Jesus puts it like this:

> *No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*
>
> —Matthew 6:24

Mammon is an Aramaic word meaning wealth, or property. Jesus is teaching us that if we place our confidence in the apparent security that comes from the accumulation of material things like wealth, success, popularity, or power, we will become followers and disciples of those things, rather than followers of Christ; and that will close us off from his grace.

At the time, this teaching shocked his disciples. In the Old Testament, material prosperity was viewed as a special blessing from God. And so, those who were wealthy were considered especially blessed. But Jesus turns that around. He claims that material things in themselves really don't indicate anything about the quality of our relationship with God, which is the true source of meaning and happiness. He even points out that having abundant material wealth can be a danger; possessions and worldly successes can become chains that imprison the soul, that impede the human heart from truly opening itself to God so as to be filled with divine grace.

A PATH TO SADNESS

In Chapter 19 of St. Matthew's Gospel, he teaches us this lesson again, in the famous passage about the rich young man. This young man felt in his heart a strong desire to follow God more closely; he sensed that only through a deeper relationship with the Lord would he find the fulfillment that he longed for. So he does the right thing: He comes to Jesus and asks what he should do. Jesus responds:

> *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*
>
> —Matthew 19:21

Jesus could see that this young man was too attached to his wealth. He was placing his confidence and security in material things. This was holding him back from true spiritual maturity. And so he invites him to break the chains of self-sufficiency and go to a higher level of generosity and trust—the level that the poor widow had already attained. St. Matthew records the young man's response, and the lesson Jesus draws from the encounter:

> *When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."*
>
> —Matthew 19:22–24

Everything we have, we have received from God—the earth and everything in it, our lives themselves, our families and opportunities and talents. And everything that permits us to enjoy life and to make something beautiful out of our lives is also a gift from God—the air around us, the sunlight and water, the laws of physics and of biology that create an ordered, predictable, and wonderful cosmos. None of these essential elements of life are our inventions. They are God's generous gifts. And we receive them gladly. But then, when God asks us to go to the next level in our trust of him, like the mighty widow, we so often hesitate. Like the rich young man, we cling to what we think we can control, instead of accepting God's invitation.

CONCLUSION: GOING DEEPER

Let's make this Lent a time of deep personal reflection. Let's follow the example of the rich young man, who approached the Lord and asked for enlightenment about what he needed to do to go to the next level in his relationship with God. And then let's follow the example of the poor widow, giving God whatever he asks of us, even if it seems like it's all we have to live on.

Let's take a few minutes now, in the silence of our hearts, to contemplate these scenes from the Gospel, so that the message of our Lord will truly penetrate our souls. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What do I give to God on a regular basis? Why do I give it? What more is God asking me to give him? What are the roots of my hesitation to give him that?

2. When have I been especially generous with God? How did it make me feel, and what was the effect of that generosity on my spiritual life? How firmly do I believe what Jesus said in Acts 20:35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive"?

3. This Lent, what can I do to foster a deeper attitude of generosity in my heart?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

In the course of his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets. They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation." He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, "Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."

—Mark 12:38–44
NABRE

Now someone approached him and said, "Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?" He answered him, "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He asked him, "Which ones?" And Jesus replied, "'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother'; and 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" The young man said to him, "All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and said, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

—Matthew 19:16–26
NABRE

Do not let your hand be open to receive, but clenched when it is time to give … What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it?

—Sirach 4:31, 1 Corinthians 4:17
NABRE

NOTES

SECOND MEDITATION

YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU

INTRODUCTION

Material things have been getting in the way of spiritual progress since the dawn of human history. It's part of our fallen nature to make idols out of gold, and silver, and anything else that we feel we can control. This idolatry is always, in the end, a kind of self-worship, an exaggerated trusting in self, as if we could do for ourselves what only God can do: provide true meaning and fulfillment. In his encyclical letter, *The Light of Faith*, Pope Francis points this out. He writes:

> *In place of faith in God, it seems better to worship an idol, into whose face we can look directly and whose origin we know, because it is the work of our own hands. Before an idol, there is no risk that we will be called to abandon our security, for idols "have mouths, but they cannot speak" (Ps 115:5). Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the center of reality and worshiping the work of our own hands … Those who choose not to put their trust in God must hear the din of countless idols crying out: "Put your trust in me!"*

Most of us would probably not consider ourselves to be idol-worshippers or self-worshippers. And yet, we have that tendency; we really do like to put our trust and our security in things that we can see, and touch, and control, as if that will bring us the fulfillment we yearn for. And this tendency hinders the development of our relationship with God.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE PARABLE

In Chapter 12 of St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus uses a parable to illustrate how foolish we are when we give in to this idolatrous tendency. Here's how St. Luke relates it:

> *Then he told them a parable. "There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest. He asked himself, 'What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?' And he said, 'This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods and I shall say to myself, "Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!"' But God said to him, 'You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?' Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God."*
>
> —Luke 12:16–21

The man in the parable was looking for his wealth to do what only God could do—give his life lasting meaning and security. No material thing can give us lasting meaning—not money, not success, not being named to the Hall of Fame or becoming a movie star. All earthly achievements belong solely to this earth, but we don't. We are merely pilgrims here on earth, making our way to our true, everlasting home in heaven. As the last Chapter in the Letter to the Hebrews puts it:

> *For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come.*
>
> —Hebrews 13:14

Keeping material things in their proper place, and giving due importance to spiritual things—what Jesus calls becoming "rich in what matters to God"—involves the Christian discipline of detachment. All the good things of this earth have their place in our lives, and we give glory to God when we enjoy them—there is nothing wrong with that. But if we cling to them too much, if we give them too much importance and get too attached to them, they will betray us and impede our growth to spiritual maturity. We need to exercise a healthy detachment from material things in order to become rich in "what matters to God," in the things that will last forever.

The three spiritual practices traditionally associated with the liturgical season of Lent are all connected to developing a healthy detachment from material things and a healthy attachment to "what matters to God." There is simply no better way to prepare ourselves to celebrate the holy days surrounding Easter than by using these practices to purify our hearts. Let's take a look at them one by one.

ATTACHING OUR HEARTS TO GOD

In the first place, we are called to devote more time to prayer during Lent. It's a perfect time to step back and evaluate how we are praying, and to make any adjustments that need making. Prayer—daily prayer, sincere prayer, growing prayer—is essential to cultivating our relationship with God, which is what matters most to him and what will give his grace room to transform our lives.

Growth in prayer requires decision and perseverance. Here's how the Catechism explains it:

> *Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort … prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God. We pray as we live, because we live as we pray.*
>
> —CCC 2725

CLEANSING OUR HEARTS

The second traditional Lenten exercise is penance. Penance begins in the heart and overflows into action. It involves recognizing and turning away from our deep-seated sinful tendencies—the tendencies which impel us towards making idols out of material things and selfish desires—and once again orienting our lives toward God.

It's interesting to see in the history of the Church how conscious the saints were of their need for penance, for continually turning away from self-centered tendencies in order to keep their lives on God's track. Towards the end of his life, St. Francis of Assisi was lamenting his sinfulness when one of his young Franciscan brothers contradicted him. "C'mon, Francis," he said, "everyone knows you are a saint. Why do you say you are a sinner?" Francis turned to him with a serious look on his face and said, "If anyone else had received *half* as much grace from God as I have, he would be *twice* as holy."

Cultivating an awareness of our sinfulness and our sinful tendencies is important, because it keeps us rooted in the truth of our need for God's grace and mercy. If we didn't have these deeply rooted sinful tendencies, then Jesus would never have had to come to earth in the first place. He came to be our Savior, because we need a Savior. Penance reminds us of this, keeping us humble and grateful.

That attitude of the heart overflows in actions, in forming habits of self-discipline and self-control that strengthen us to resist temptations to self-indulgence and self-centeredness. This is the origin of the traditional practice consisting of "giving up something for Lent." By denying ourselves something that we like or are attracted to, and by doing it in the context of prayer and offering the sacrifice to God, we move towards reestablishing order in our souls, overcoming the disordered attachments of sin.

An essential ingredient in any Lenten penance is making good use of the sacrament of penance, also known as confession. Participating in parish penitential services and making a good confession are concrete ways to make penance a reality in our lives, and not just wishful thinking.

CONCLUSION: GIVING INSTEAD OF GETTING

The third traditional Lenten practice is loving service, or engaging in works of mercy. By intentionally moving out of our personal comfort zone in order to help others, materially and spiritually, we tune our hearts into God's heart. We don't just build bigger barns for ourselves; we follow Christ's own example of giving his life for others.

Prayer, penance, and loving service. These practices are so simple, and yet so powerful; little by little they cut away the chains that attach us to merely earthly treasures, so that we can more freely embrace heavenly treasures. If we want to renew our spiritual lives and become richer in "what matters to God," there is no surer path.

Let's take some time now to calmly and sincerely reflect on where we are storing up our treasures, and how we can become richer in "what matters to God." The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why is it so easy for us to start idolizing the good things of this world, thinking that they will bring us the happiness that we can only find in God?
2. Which of these three earthly goods do I tend to idolize more than the others, and in what way: money and possessions, pleasures and comforts, achievements and popularity?
3. This Lent, how can I live the three traditional Lenten practices (prayer, penance, and service) in a way that will really make a difference in my relationship with God?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

Then he told them a parable. "There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest. He asked himself, 'What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?' And he said, 'This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods and I shall say to myself, "Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!"' But God said to him, 'You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?' Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God."

—Luke 12:16–21
NABRE

For we brought nothing into the world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it. If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with that. Those who want to be rich are falling into temptation and into a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains.

—1 Timothy 6:7–10
NABRE

Consider this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. Moreover, God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work. As it is written: "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." The one who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

—2 Corinthians 9:6–10
NABRE

NOTES

CONFERENCE

STEWARDSHIP AND DETACHMENT—SIGNS OF CHRISTIAN MATURITY

INTRODUCTION

So far in this Retreat Guide, we have seen that the true meaning of generosity is to be found in the attitude of our hearts, like the widow who gave to God everything she had. We have also seen that all material things are limited and cannot give us the fulfillment we yearn for; we can't take them with us into eternity.

And yet, material things—wealth, money, good food, achievements, and all the rest—are not evil in themselves. In fact, God was the one who created this material world, and he was the one who gave us the capacity to enjoy it, and to make an impact on it. Some spiritual writers and theologians throughout the history of the Church have forgotten that and claimed that all material things and experiences are intrinsically evil—these thinkers have been dismissed as heretics.

WHAT "STEWARDSHIP" REALLY IS

So how are we supposed to relate to the world around us? We don't want to idolize it, but we don't want to demonize it either. The right attitude to our journey through this material world can be summed up in one word: stewardship.

Towards the end of his public life, Jesus taught a few different parables exploring this idea. Later, St. Paul and St. Peter bring the idea up in their New Testament Letters. And even in the Old Testament, from the very beginning of Creation, stewardship was a critical category for properly understanding the meaning of human life. Clearly, this idea is important to the Lord, and so it should also be important to us. What does it really mean?

Here is how Fr. John Hardon's Modern Catholic Dictionary defines the biblical concept of stewardship:

> *…[T]he management of whatever a person is entrusted with, not only to preserve but profitably administer for his master, ultimately for God.*

Every human being has been entrusted with certain gifts: life, freedom, personal talents, opportunities, the earth with all its potential… And we are called by God to develop these gifts, to use them to "fill the earth and subdue it … to cultivate and care for it" (Genesis 1:28, 2:15), as the Book of Genesis explains.

STEWARDS OF TWO KINGDOMS

As members of the human family, we are stewards, caretakers of this material world, and of our own human potential. We are called to discover, appreciate, and develop all of the possibilities that God has built into his creation. This is why the Church has always encouraged noble endeavors like science, art, literature, business, and simple hard work. When we engage in these activities, we are fulfilling our purpose and glorifying God. This is why St. John Paul II often said, "Man is the way of the Church." Fulfilling the basic human vocation to cultivate and care for the gifts we have received from God is an essential ingredient in human happiness, both for individuals and for communities.

But as Christians, we have been given gifts that are much more valuable than those the human family receives simply through being human. We have been given the gift of grace, which enables us to be not only builders of a merely human, earthly kingdom, but builders of Christ's everlasting Kingdom.

During his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pointed this out. He encouraged us not to fret over earthly concerns, as if our lives were limited to the earthly realm. Instead, he gave us a new priority, a new type of stewardship. He said:

> *So do not worry and say, "What are we to eat?" or "What are we to drink?" or "What are we to wear?" All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.*
>
> —Matthew 6:31–33

In other words, as Christians, through our adoption by grace as children of God, we have been made coworkers with Christ, partners in his work of

salvation and building up his Church. In the parallel passage from Luke's Gospel, Jesus explicitly affirms this, saying:

> *Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.*
>
> —Luke 12:32

It has pleased God to give us, to entrust to us, his own kingdom. We are stewards, caretakers, and builders of the Kingdom of Christ on earth. This is how we participate actively in Christ's work of redemption. Here is how St. Peter explains it:

> *As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace.*
>
> —1 Peter 4:10

As human beings and as Christians, then, stewardship is central to our life's mission, to what will give us lasting meaning and fulfillment. Our lives, our gifts, and resources, and our opportunities have a purpose; they have been given to us so that we can use them to glorify God and to serve the good of our neighbors—in short, to build up the Kingdom of Christ. All that, and more, is what Jesus had in mind when he said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

TWO TYPES OF STEWARDSHIP

That's what we are called to do, and that's where our lives will find their deepest meaning, but what does being a good steward look like in real life?

One modern spiritual writer has made a useful division of Christian stewardship into two general categories, two areas of our lives where we can put the gifts we have received to work for God's Kingdom. These two types of stewardship are stewardship of affluence and stewardship of influence.[1]

Stewardship of affluence has to do with how we use our tangible resources, and stewardship of influence has to do with how we use our intangible resources. Let's reflect briefly on each one.

STEWARDSHIP OF AFFLUENCE

Under stewardship of affluence, the two major tangible commodities that we have to make decisions about on a regular basis are money and time. For everyone, both of these commodities are limited. No one has unlimited money, and no one has unlimited time. And yet, to do anything in this world requires both money, or its equivalent, and time. Therefore, we are constantly deciding how we will spend our limited money, and how we will spend our limited time.

Many different factors come into play when we want to understand what responsible stewardship looks like in regards to money and time. The stewardship lived out by a married couple with children will look quite different than the stewardship lived out by a monk or a nun. And the good stewardship of a working class man who barely makes enough money to cover his most basic material needs will look different than the good stewardship of a multi-millionaire businessman. In all cases, however, the basic gospel principle of detachment applies: we are called to use our money and our time to love God and to love our neighbor, not to try and create for ourselves some kind of heaven on earth, as if we were the center of the universe. Here's how Jesus put it:

> *Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions … Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.*
>
> —Luke 12:15, Matthew 6:19–21

We all know the famous story of Scrooge, as told by Charles Dickens in his classic novel, *A Christmas Carol*. At the beginning of the story, Scrooge is a very good businessman from the world's perspective, but a very bad steward from God's perspective. Only after the miraculous visits of the three ghosts does he learn to be a good steward, to put his affluence at the service of a King greater than himself. And by learning that lesson, he also discovers a whole new

[1] This distinction comes from Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church and author of the international best-seller, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

level of happiness. Here's how one modern Catholic businessman describes this point: "My wealth is not meant merely for myself, nor is yours meant merely for you."[2] That's a good way to sum up the basic cornerstone of responsible stewardship of affluence.

STEWARDSHIP OF INFLUENCE

Under stewardship of influence, the two major intangible commodities, so to speak, that we have to make decisions about on a regular basis are talents and skills. Talents are natural gifts that come with our personality—intelligence, athletic ability, and artistic sensibility are obvious examples of innate talents. Skills are abilities that we have been able to develop over the course of our lives—knowledge of medicine or law, for example, or diplomacy and relationship building. Talents and skills often overlap, since when we find a natural affinity for something, we tend to enjoy doing it and therefore are able to develop new skills in relation to it.

Every human being has some talent, a unique combination of natural gifts. And every human being, with very few exceptions, is capable of using their natural gifts to develop some sort of skill. With these talents and skills, we can make a difference in the lives of those around us, we can make our mark in the world. This is our capacity for influence. Some people are naturally more gifted than others, and so they are capable of making a bigger social impact than others—these are natural leaders. Some people's natural talents or developed skills lead them into positions of power or authority in society—those positions too become intangible commodities, ways of impacting the world for good or for ill.

We are all familiar with popular celebrities who inspire young people. These celebrities have a large influence over the imagination and ideals of the younger generation. A celebrity who uses that influence only for self-centered reasons, or to popularize immoral behavior, is being a bad steward.

Although you and I are not celebrities, we are called to use whatever influence we have in a way that will help others more easily find and follow their true human and Christian calling. In this way, we exercise good stewardship of our capacity to influence others—we help build up the Kingdom of Christ.

Here too the gospel value of detachment comes into play. We have to overcome the self-centered fears that inhibit us from investing our talents and skills in ways that will further Christ's Kingdom. When we do, Jesus will be able to say to us what the king said to his faithful servants in the parable of the talents: "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy" (Matthew 25:23).

CONCLUSION: SEEKING FIRST THE KINGDOM

Stewarding well our money, time, talents, and skills—intelligently utilizing them to love God and to love our neighbor—requires a certain spiritual maturity. We need to know about God's Kingdom and the teaching of Christ and his Church. And we need to have a prayer life that enables us to hear God's voice in our hearts, guiding us to the fulfillment of our own calling in accordance with our unique difficulties and opportunities. In other words, from the Christian perspective, stewardship is much more than simply donating to a good cause: it's a way of life undertaken in obedience to Our Lord's admonition to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" in everything we do (Matthew 6:33).

Take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the ten questions in the personal questionnaire, which are designed to help you apply these general principles to your daily life.

[2] Frank Hanna, *What Your Money Means and How to Use It Well*, p 21.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Where am I looking for happiness? What desires occupy my mind most insistently? What fears disturb my interior peace most frequently?

2. Who would I consider an exemplary steward of affluence? Why?

3. Who would I consider an exemplary steward of influence? Why?

4. How would I explain to a new Christian the meaning of this quotation from Jesus' sermon on the mount: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19–20).

5. How responsible am I in my use of money? How sincerely do I try to follow a budget? How content am I to live within my means, as opposed to getting into foolish debt? How generously do I share my wealth, as limited as it may be, with those who are in greater need than myself?

6. How responsible am I in my use of time? What are the priorities that determine what commitments I make? How balanced or excessive is my use of time for recreation and entertainment? How much time do I invest in my most important relationships (with God, family, etc…)? How much time should I invest in them?

7. How deeply have I assimilated the fact that my resources will always be limited, that I will never have "enough" time or money to do all the things I would like to do? How should this reality affect my daily attitudes and behaviors?

8. What are my natural talents and developed skills? How am I investing them? How does God want me to be investing them?

9. What positions do I occupy that can influence others? What kind of influence am I exerting through those positions?

10. If I knew that I had exactly one year left to live, what adjustments would I make to my current way of stewarding my affluence and my influence?

NOTES

FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Happy Are You Poor: The Simple Life and Spiritual Freedom*
  by Thomas Dubay
- *Treatise on the Love of God*
  by St. Francis de Sales
- *Something Beautiful for God*
  by Malcolm Muggeridge
- *What Your Money Means and How To Use It Well*
  by Frank Hanna

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