

Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Synod 2014

Background Paper:

Stewardship:

A Disciple's Way of Life

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This section was written Bishop Donald J. Hying, the Auxiliary Bishop of Milwaukee, and it serves as the introduction for all eight Synod background papers. Bishop Hying presents “intentional discipleship” as our fundamental Catholic identity and the singular focus for all of our Synod considerations and challenges us to view all aspects of the Church in light of “formation for discipleship.”

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I. Introduction: Discipleship: Our Fundamental Catholic Identity

Introduction written by Bishop Donald J. Hying

In the Gospels, Jesus confronts us with a fundamental question: Who do you say that I am? As Christians and members of the Church, we answer with Simon, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” In faith, we can add Savior, Light of the world, the Word made flesh, the Resurrection, the Prince of Peace. Through the saving activity of Jesus’ Incarnation, life, death and resurrection, we become adopted children of the Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit, all in the mystery, communion and sacrament of the Church. The relationship that Jesus enjoys with the Father by nature of who he is, we receive as a pure offer of grace.

Baptized into the identity and mission of Jesus Christ, we proclaim Christ’s saving Gospel through a faith lived out in the words, actions, work, relationships and values of our lives. Our fundamental identity as disciples of Jesus Christ gives focus and method to the important activity of the new evangelization. As we painfully know, too many Catholics have not really been evangelized to know and experience the personal love of Jesus Christ, have been poorly catechized in the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, and do not participate in the sacramental life of the Church in any meaningful way. If we seek to change this disturbing trend, parishes must continue to grow in their fundamental identity as dynamic communities of faith which form intentional disciples. If we are not focused on formation for discipleship, we are failing the mission of Christ.

What do intentional Catholic disciples look like? How do they act? What is qualitatively different about their lives and personalities? The answer is clear yet challenging. Disciples are ordinary people who have experienced the love, forgiveness, presence, consolation and challenge of God poured out through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. They have fallen in love with the Lord and find their deepest identity in their relationship with him. They find God and the mission of his Kingdom to be the fundamental purpose of their lives and, having a strong **Catholic identity**, find the whole Catholic experience of the Scriptures, sacraments, moral life and prayer to be the transformative means of their ongoing conversion. As Paul discovered on the road to Damascus, they are people loved and forgiven by Jesus Christ.

Disciples instinctively **evangelize**, that is they naturally share their experience of God and their faith in him with others. The power of moral example itself evangelizes, as others intuitively sense that such a person lives from a very different center of meaning and purpose than secular society. In addition to witnessing by example, disciples are both courageous and articulate in their proclamation of Jesus and the difference he has made in their lives. They will freely pray with others, do volunteer work, witness to how the Lord has worked in their daily experience, offer moral advice when asked, share spiritual books, CDs and DVDs with family, friends and co-workers, all the while actively cultivating a discipleship response in those around them. The power of one Catholic who knows, practices and proclaims the faith is truly remarkable.

An intentional disciple is a good **steward**, knowing that everything in life is a superabundant gift freely bestowed upon us by the Lord, both to enrich us but also to bless and benefit others. This deep conviction of existence as a gift leads to a profound gratitude that pours itself out in deeds of mercy, love and healing. Like Mary who anoints the feet of Jesus with an extravagant costly perfume that cost 300 days' wages, we are compelled to break open and pour out the gifts of our lives in loving service of others and so fill the world with the sacred fragrance of Christ.

An intentional disciple is a Catholic maximalist, not asking what the minimum is that **must** be done in order to be saved, but rather asking what **can** be done for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Like St. Paul, a disciple has moved from the obligation of the law into the astonishing freedom of Christ, who liberates us to do every good work. In this context, the Blessed Virgin Mary is clearly the first and premier disciple who responds in total faith to the seemingly impossible proposal of the angel, places her entire being at the service of God and gives flesh to the Incarnate Word.

St. Augustine insists that when a Christian disciple places the whole mystery and gift of life at the service of God, the Lord Jesus takes flesh within that person and is offered to the world once again. For us as Catholics, in this critical moment in history, we cannot afford to proceed with business as usual. All over the world, millions of Catholics are asking the same questions:

- How can I have a deeper and more authentic relationship with Jesus Christ?
- How can I more effectively live out my faith in such a way that it actually makes a difference in the lives of others, especially my family and friends?
- How can we continue to insert Gospel values into the public square of politics, economy, health care and education?
- How can we bring back all of those Catholics who have fallen away from the practice of the faith?

In millions of different ways, intentional disciples are living out the exciting answers to these important questions. If the Gospel is the script of our lives, the new evangelization is the urgent challenge to act out with fresh enthusiasm and generosity the great drama of Christ's salvation.

Synod 2014 invites us to consider anew how to be intentional disciples, especially in the areas of Catholic Social Teaching, Cultural Diversity, Evangelization, Formation, Leadership, Liturgy, Marriage and Family, and Stewardship.

II. Stewardship: A Disciple's Way of Life: Introduction and Overview

There is much that can be said about the practice of stewardship; what we should do and how we should do it. Authentic stewardship, however, is not just an annual activity. Stemming from each individual's personal relationship with the Lord, true stewardship is not about what we do, but rather about who we are. It defines a way of life for intentional disciples.

The concept of authentic stewardship and the practice of stewardship as a way of life is unfamiliar terrain for many Catholics. As we seek to invite individuals into a deeper understanding of true stewardship, we must begin by challenging long-held ideas and attitudes.

Stewardship is often thought of as nothing more than a euphemism for fundraising; a program that we do once a year to increase financial contributions, and often with less than satisfactory results. Traditional pleas for time and talent are considered by many Catholics to be an imposition. After all, our time, our talents and our financial resources are at a premium, and "stewardship" is just another way for the church to get more of what belongs to us! This view of stewardship is fueled by ego, resentment and fear, and is directly opposed to what God asks of us as good and faithful servants.

In their pastoral letter on stewardship, the U.S. Bishops defined a Christian steward as "one who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them in justice and love with others, and returns them with increase to the Lord" (*Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, p. 9).

Faithful stewards **receive God's gifts gratefully** because they understand that we have done nothing to deserve the bounty showered upon us by our generous God. He has given us all, including his Son, because of his great love for us. Good stewards **cherish and tend these gifts in a responsible and accountable manner** for they know these gifts are not meant to be left idle or squandered away. Gifts given are meant to be nourished, to grow and to multiply.

Intentional disciples **share in justice and love with others**. They experience, in a tangible way, what it means to be a "cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). To be a good steward is a rewarding way of life. Faithful stewards are happy people who have found meaning and purpose as followers of Jesus Christ. At first glance, **returning gifts with increase to the Lord** can be difficult to grasp. Obviously, God does not need our talents, money or other resources. Yet, we are called to build his kingdom here on earth through good works and active ministry. For most Catholics, this means generous sharing of the gifts of time, talent and financial resources with their parish communities.

True stewards nurture all aspects of their lives. "They are generous lovers, they are generous parents, they are generous with their colleagues at work, and they are generous with strangers who cross their path. They are generous with their virtue – generous with patience, kindness and compassion" (*The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic*, Matthew Kelly, p. 22).

Authentic stewardship flows from a profound sense of gratitude that develops as each individual deepens in personal relationship with the Lord. As that connection becomes stronger the need to give increases until it overflows the banks of our resistance.

If more and more Catholics begin to embrace the simple philosophy expressed by Bishop Robert Morneau, a message of hope for our Church in this troubled 21st century can be found in the message of stewardship. In an address to the International Catholic Stewardship Conference in 2011, Bishop Morneau said, “Stewardship is what I do after I say, “I believe”.

This paper will examine Stewardship through the following perspectives:

- Current Cultural Realities
- Theological Foundations
- Other Related Information
- Key Issues to be Addressed
- Key Questions for Consideration

III. Stewardship: A Disciple’s Way of Life: Current Cultural Realities

In their pastoral letter on stewardship, the U.S. Bishops recognized the challenge of living as faithful stewards in America today. They wrote, “In some ways it may be harder to be a Christian steward today than at times in the past. Our country’s dominant secular culture often contradicts the values of Judeo-Christian tradition. This is a culture in which destructive “isms” – materialism, relativism, hedonism, individualism, consumerism – exercise seductive, powerful influences.” (*Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, p. 5).

The effects of our “it’s all about me” culture can be seen in the decline of active involvement in community-building groups, with participation in civic and community organizations falling dramatically over the past several decades. Membership in PTAs, fraternal organizations and civic clubs is becoming a thing of the past, and our parishes reflect this unsettling trend. Organizations that strengthened the bonds of community among parishioners are dwindling, with Holy Name societies, Christian Women’s groups and others disappearing at an alarming rate.

Consider these alarming statistics; research indicates that only 23% of U.S. Catholics attend Mass each week (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), “*Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics*”). Additional research shows that 6.4% of registered parishioners contribute 80% of the volunteer hours in a parish, and 6.8% of registered parishioners donate 80% of financial contributions (statistics from *The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic*, Matthew Kelly, p. 12).

The strong message of autonomy of the individual propagated by American culture today is mirrored in the way our society addresses material possessions and financial resources.

American culture in the 21st century celebrates personal ownership; the accumulation of wealth and the consumption of goods and services. Popular sayings like, “He who dies with the most toys wins” try to put a clever spin on the skewed notion that what we own defines who we are.

An entire segment of the entertainment industry has grown up touting the homes, cars and parties of the rich and famous. Cautions about extreme consumerism date back more than two thousand years. “Then he said to the crowd, “Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions” (Luke 12:15).

Many American Catholics have fallen prey to the nature of our consumer economy. Societal pressures and lifestyle choices play a significant role in the overall deficiency in Catholic financial giving. Over 20 years ago our Bishops recognized this disquieting trend. They wrote, “While many Catholics are generous in giving of themselves and their resources to the Church, others do not respond to the needs in proportion to what they possess. The result now is a lack of resources which seriously hampers the Church’s ability to carry out its mission and obstructs people’s growth as disciples” (*Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, p. 6).

Social scientists have been studying religious financial giving for many years and their studies confirmed that a “giving gap” between Catholics and individuals of other faiths has existed for decades (Greeley and McManus, 1987; Zech, 2000; Smith, Emerson and Snell, 2008). New research confirms that the “giving gap” remains constant today.

The average annual donation of Catholics is \$175 compared to \$588 for non-Catholic givers. Controlling for church attendance does not remove the “giving gap”. The disparity actually increases with more frequent church attendance. A 5 percentage-point gap that exists between Catholics and Mainline Protestants in the full population increases to 10 percentage-points among weekly church attenders. Similarly, the 28 percentage-point gap between Catholics and Evangelicals increases to 36 points among weekly attenders (all statistics from the University of Notre Dame Institute for Church Life “*Unleashing Catholic Generosity: Explaining the Catholic Giving Gap in the United States*”, 2012).

In addition to church attendance, the Notre Dame researchers examined a range of factors in their attempt to explain the “giving gap”, including compassion and materialistic values. One factor was identified as having the **single greatest impact** on Catholic Giving; spiritual engagement with money. The study found that American Catholics tend to compartmentalize, separating money from matters of faith and thinking that material possessions have little to do with their spiritual life. Catholics who do engage with money as a spiritual matter, and who view their money as ultimately God’s money, are much more generous. In short, spiritual engagement with money unleashes Catholic generosity within the Church and beyond, as Catholics begin putting their financial resources to work meeting community and human needs.

Blessed Pope John Paul II expressed the concept of spiritual engagement with material and financial resources in another way, “It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed toward **‘having’ rather than ‘being’**, and which wants to have more, not in order to **be** more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end to itself. It is therefore necessary to create lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices.” (*Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II, no. 36).

In addition to societal pressures, our own “Catholic way” of discussing parish support, of all kinds, hampers our ability to strengthen and increase parish ministries. Many pastors and parish leaders are uncomfortable asking for financial support, viewing this as a distasteful task that should be done infrequently or only in extreme circumstances. From a steward’s perspective, asking for financial support is an opportunity to invite parishioners to actively participate in the good work of the parish. This invitation is issued with the knowledge that God has charged us with using our gifts to serve him and others, and in the hope that the Holy Spirit will guide the hearts of parishioners to embrace, and actively participate in, the mission of the parish. From this perspective, money is viewed as a tool to accomplish mission.

Writing about his personal stewardship conversion, Monsignor Vin Rush from the Archdiocese of New York put it this way, “I had been asking, ‘How little can I give and still feel OK?’ Then one day I realized, “I hope God doesn’t feel the same way about me” (Catholic Digest, March 2006).

In response to these very challenging cultural realities, our task is to reignite the flame of faith in the hearts of Catholics; to encourage stewardship as a way of life as a grateful response to our generous God. Our Bishops recognized the importance of this task more than 25 years ago when they wrote, “Jesus’ call is urgent. He does not tell people to follow him at some time in the future but here and now – at **this** moment, in **these** circumstances. There can be no delay” (*Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, p. 14).

IV. Stewardship: A Disciple’s Way of Life: Theological Foundations

The first call to live as good and faithful stewards is recorded at the very beginning of sacred scripture. “Then the LORD God formed the man out of dust of the ground, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. The LORD God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden **to cultivate it and keep it**” (Genesis 2:7-8, 15).

Scripture passages about stewardship abound in both the Old and New Testaments; so often in fact, that there can be no question of the importance faithful stewardship should hold in the life of every Catholic. With scripture as a framework, the theology of stewardship might best be examined through the lens of the three convictions, stated by the U.S. Bishops, as underlying their pastoral letter.

“Mature disciples make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves” (Introduction to *Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, 1992).

Intentional disciples, having made the decision to follow Jesus, do so completely and without reservation. Stewardship is the **only** way of life for a disciple of Christ; there is no other option. “Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ leads naturally to the practice of stewardship. These linked realities, discipleship and stewardship, then make up the fabric of a Christian life in which each day is lived in an intimate, personal relationship with the Lord” (*Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, p. 14).

Each human being has been given a unique set of gifts; a broad range of interests and talents, faith, health, family, friends, material goods and financial resources, the natural environment – even, and especially, life itself. Faithful stewards are continually making conscious, firm decisions about how these gifts, even those that have increased through hard work and individual diligence will be shared with others and returned to the Lord. “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).

“Beginning in conversion, change of mind and heart, this [stewardship] commitment is expressed not in a single action, not 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” (Introduction to *Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, 1992).

Making a decision is an intellectual event. Decisions are made, acted upon, and we move on. Conversion reaches deeper; beyond the mind and into the heart. Conversion is an on-going process that changes the very essence of an individual, leading disciples to overcome the need to amass power, possessions and wealth simply for personal gain. Conversion involves an internal struggle, as the lure of modern culture and our need for control struggle with our calling to be faithful disciples. Our Lord has told us that answering this call may not be easy, but our ultimate reward will be great. “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23-24).

“Stewardship is a conversion journey of receiving God’s love and returning love to him. A conversion requires prayer, reflection and time to allow God to show us who we are, and the person of love we can become. Throughout the conversion experience, a disciple yearns to change and grow into the person God created them to be – a steward uniquely his own, but united in one Body through Jesus Christ” (The Pillars of Parish Stewardship, Diocese of Wichita, 2004).

Intentional disciples who speak about embracing stewardship often say they have found the true meaning of life; they understand why they are here. Good stewards live joyfully, knowing that by sharing their God-given gifts, they are making their earthly home a better place, and they look forward to someday entering their home in heaven. “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:34, 40). Good stewards evangelize others through their example, by tending to the needs of their family, friends, colleagues and community by sharing all manner of gifts to build God’s kingdom.

“Stewardship is an expression of discipleship, with the power to change how we understand and live our lives. Disciples who practice stewardship recognize God as the origin of life, the giver of freedom, the source of all they have and are and will be” (Introduction to *Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, 1992).

One single, definitive truth guides the lives of faithful stewards; God is the source of all. They understand, in the most elemental way, “The Lord’s are the earth and all it holds; the world and those who dwell in it” (Psalm 24:1). Good stewards recognizing they are caretakers of God’s abundance, are eager to cultivate, increase and share this bounty in service to God and others.

Jesus asked the first disciples to leave behind everything to follow Him; their homes, their families – all they knew and loved. With trepidation, the twelve stepped out of their comfort zones and followed Jesus. By saying “yes” to the Lord’s call, the first disciples were fundamentally changed; they had a new perspective on the world around them. While they had given up much, they received so much more as they traveled side-by-side with Jesus.

This is the promise made to all disciples, even in our day, and for all time to come: “ “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive [back] an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life in the age to come” (Luke 18:29-30).

As intentional disciples living stewardship as a way of life in the 21st century, we too are being asked to step out of our comfort zones to follow Jesus. We are asked to leave behind our attachments to possessions, financial wealth, and power. We are asked to relinquish our need for control and our fear of scarcity. We are asked to trust in the Lord’s promise, “Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you” (Luke 6:38).

Our path to stewardship conversion may be rocky and beset with obstacles, but with prayer, resolve and the help of our gracious God, we will find our way. The key is to take the first step. “In the lives of disciples, something...must come before the practice of stewardship. They need a flash of insight – a certain way of **seeing** – by which they view the world and their relationship to it in a fresh new light. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God”, Gerald Manley Hopkins exclaims; more than anything else, it may be the glimpse of the divine grandeur in all that is that sets people on the path to Christian Stewardship. Not only in material creation do people discern God present and active, but also, and especially, **in the human heart**” (*Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, p. 39).

V. Stewardship: A Disciple’s Way of Life: Other Related Information

In his book, *Excellent Catholic Parishes*, author Paul Wilkes tells this story; “This parish provides a free elementary school education for all its children, and when those children graduate, the parish pays the tuition at the regional Catholic high school. Weekly attendance at Sunday liturgies hovers at 85%, and no one budges until the servers extinguish the last candle. Over three hundred people attend weekday Mass – not including the school children. This parish has no second collections or bingo, yet its income not only takes care of the parish’s needs, but also helps other Catholic churches in the area. It supports a free medical clinic for the working poor, providing everything from heart valve replacements to amoxicillin for a baby’s infected ear. It’s a parish where perpetual adoration of the blessed sacrament has been observed for over a decade.”

“Time warp?” Wilkes asks. “A remembrance of pre-Vatican II days? A fairy-tale parish set in a sort of Catholic Oz, where everything is perfect? Well, St. Francis of Assisi Parish is in Dorothy’s Kansas, and while not everything is perfect in Wichita, this parish provides a stunning example of what happens when a young priest with a vision at once simple and profound, modern and biblical takes seriously what had always been considered a Protestant concept. In the process, he transformed not only a parish...but also the entire diocese in which he serves” (Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices, Paul Wilkes, 2001).

St. Francis of Assisi is a full-stewardship parish, as are the vast majority of parishes in the Diocese of Wichita. Over many years, the seeds first sown by pastor, Monsignor Thomas McGread, have grown into a culture of stewardship that exudes from every ministry in the parish. It wasn’t an easy process, it did not happen overnight and Monsignor McGread did **not** begin by focusing on finances. He believed, and taught, that stewardship is the biblical directive to treat all abilities, good fortune and material means as gifts from God. Those who happened to receive [these gifts] should consider them as little more than on loan, and should use them wisely and with gratitude.

From his first conversation with just a few parishioners, to a fledgling stewardship committee, to the invitation to participate in ministry, to the challenge to tithe – Monsignor McGread’s efforts have born great fruit. The lesson of St. Francis Assisi for every parish is; with prayer, stewardship formation and education, a spirit of hospitality and service – and the grace of God – every parish does have the potential to awaken the power of stewardship. Intentional disciples, living as faithful stewards, have the potential to change our parishes, our archdiocese and our world.

VI. Stewardship: A Disciple’s Way of Life: Key Issues to Be Addressed

In order for our parishes to become and remain spiritually vibrant, **therefore** financially secure parishes there are three central issues that need to be addressed relative to forming the parishes throughout the archdiocese for the work of developing a culture of stewardship. First, a communication plan needs to be formulated to persuasively and systematically communicate the critical importance of a new vision and model for stewardship to ordained and lay leaders; pastors, parish administrators, pastoral/finance councils and stewardship committees throughout the archdiocese.

Second, a formation/education plan needs to be developed to ground stewardship committees and other parish leaders in their own understanding and practice of stewardship as a foundation for their efforts to disseminate the message of authentic stewardship within their parish communities. Third, a resource development plan needs to be articulated for expanding resources to help stewardship committees and parish leaders advance the mission of their parishes through development and implementation of parish-specific stewardship plans. All three of these plans need to be formulated with specific, observable, and measurable short and long term strategic goals.

VII. Stewardship: A Disciple's Way of Life: Key Questions for Consideration

The key questions for consideration follow in direct correlation to the three key issues as articulated in the previous section. These questions are designed to focus discussion on specific strategies.

1a. How can we formulate a creative and compelling plan to persuasively communicate the importance of a new vision and model of parish stewardship to pastors, parish administrators, pastoral/finance council members and stewardship committees?

1b. What personal and material resources are necessary to make this happen?

1c. What are some specific short-term goals for making this strategy happen?

2a. How can we frame a formation/education plan designed to ground stewardship committees and other parish leaders in their own understanding and practice of stewardship as a foundation for their efforts to disseminate the message of authentic stewardship within their parish communities?

2b. What personal and material resources are necessary to make this happen?

2c. What are some specific short-term goals for making this strategy happen?

3a. How can we articulate a resource development plan to expand resources to help stewardship committees and parish leaders advance the mission of their parishes through development and implementation of parish-specific stewardship plans?

3b. What personal and material resources are necessary to make this happen?

3c. What are some specific short-term goals for making this strategy happen?

VIII. Stewardship: A Disciple's Way of Life: Conclusion

At its core, stewardship is really very simple; God calls, and we answer. Pope Francis offers us inspiration as we strive to answer that call. "In this period of crisis today, it is important not to turn in on ourselves, burying our own talent, our spiritual, intellectual and material riches, everything the Lord has given us; but, rather to open ourselves, to be supportive, to be attentive to others. Set your stakes on great ideals, the ideals that enlarge the heart, the ideals of service that make that make your talents fruitful. Life is not given to us to be jealously guarded for ourselves, but it is given to us so that we may give in return" (Pope Francis to an audience on April 24, 2013).

Imagine the power of Catholics everywhere embracing gratefully the bounty showered on us by our good and gracious God, working diligently to increase our unique gifts and talents so that they can be shared, to the fullest extent, in justice and love for others!

This is the vision of stewardship that compelled our Bishops to proclaim, "Stewardship...is all encompassing. It is, ultimately, the pull and the power of the Gospel come alive in our times and circumstances" (*Stewardship; A Disciples Response*, USCCB, p. 2).

As Catholics on the journey to stewardship conversion, let us pray; Lord, Grant us the grace to feel your presence, the wisdom to heed your word, and the courage to stay the course. Amen.