



Like Douglas MacArthur who promised the people of the Philippines during World War II that *I shall return*, or on a less noble note, Freddy Kruger who scared us by telling us *I'm back*, I am back to you again, speaking at all the Masses on the topic of stewardship. This is the second of three homilies that I am giving on this topic before Thanksgiving. When I have completed these three talks, you will be so very thankful as you sit down to eat your turkey dinner knowing I have finished these homilies.

A wise parishioner told me that when I spoke on the spirituality of stewardship last month, he overheard a parishioner say to another, *why doesn't Father, get to the point and tell us what you want!* To follow that advice, would be simple so I will give it to you in one sentence: *we need more money to run our parish.* If I sat down with that sentence, you might cheer since it would be such a short homily. However, stewardship, as we heard in the Gospel today about rendering to God what is God's and to Caesar's what is Caesar's, is based on far more than deciding to ask you to add a few dollars more to the collection plate when it passes by. It is a matter of the heart and soul. How a person spends his or her money very much determines his or her values and beliefs. Parents spare almost no expense, and rightly so, in caring for their children. Providing for our health and medical care is something we set as a high priority. Even something as seemingly simple as our internet and cable is very important to us. If the cable system is out on a Sunday afternoon when the Jets are playing, it is major crisis! Simply put, we pray for what we value.

I heard a story about a young pastor who took over a parish where there was a cranky housekeeper/cook who had worked at the rectory for more than fifty years. When she approached the new pastor and said, *your refrigerator is broken*, he responded, *Mary, it not my refrigerator; it is our refrigerator. The parish belong to everyone, including you.*

There is no your-it is ours. So, she approached him a week or so later, and told him, *your washing machine is leaking.* Again, he corrected her: *Mary, remember to say our washing machine. We are all one in this parish.* She shrugged her shoulders and gave him a grunt. A few weeks later, the Bishop of the Diocese came to install the new priest as pastor of the parish. He was eating dinner with the pastor, when Mary came into the room and said, *Father, there is a mouse in our room and its under our bed.*

A cute story, but one that has a point for me. Our parish has 4000 families on the books. Now, you know, as well as I, that we do not have 4000 families attending Mass on a regular basis. So, who makes up what we would call the people of our parish. To my mind, it the people who came daily to Mass. It is those men and women who assist in the many ministries of the parish. It is the regulars who make a serious effort to attend Mass weekly. It is those who attend the spiritual programs and retreats our parish offers. Our parish also consists of those members who may only come to Mass at Christmas, Easter, and Ash Wednesday. Our parishioners are those who come to have a child baptized, to get married her at St. Martin's, or to attend a funeral. These may be the only events they attend all year. Our parishioners are those who come to our food pantry and those who are served by the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Our parishioners are those who may not even be Catholic, such as those attend the 12 step programs held at our parish, the blood drives, the health clinics, and the defensive driving courses, A person who find him or herself discouraged, frightened and depressed, who stops by the church to light a candle or rings the bell of the rectory to ask for a priest just to talk, is part of our parish family. When one of our priests prays at the town lighting of the Christmas tree or at the blessing of a room at the firehouse, those who attend are being touched by our parish. When our Eucharistic ministers go to homes and hospitals in the name of the parish to visit the sick, they are bringing our parish to those who cannot get here. When we bless cats and dogs, when we bless cars and lottery tickets, when we meet a stranger who says, *Father, say a prayer for my daughter who is having a baby*, that is our parish in action. Our donations to the baby bottle campaign may well have saved the life of an infant.

I say that because those of you who support this parish are making all this happen. Any ministry done by a priest or a deacon, a member of the food pantry, or a religious education teacher, or a blessing at a funeral home is done because of your financial support I. It is our church and it our mission and we have been doing it here at St. Martin's. When I preach word s hope and consolation at a funeral, I can only do that because you support this parish. Whether the person may be a long-time parishioner or a person who rarely came through our doors. We do not ask if they use envelopes or attend Mass. Doesn't matter – we seek to meet their spiritual needs. You do this in the name of Jesus-we are rendering to God.

100 years ago, a group of men went to the Bishop of Brooklyn and asked for a parish in Bethpage. The Bishop told them no because there were only a few farms and not enough people to support a church and a priest. Six years later, the parish did get a

priest and the beginnings of a parish. How faithful generation after generation of parishioners have been over the past 94 years to St. Martin's and its mission. So, now to some information:

- You see the weekly collection numbers in the bulletin. We need \$17,500 to operate the parish. We occasionally meet that goal, but more often the collection is closer to \$16,000.00 or even \$15,000.00.
- A snowy weekend and vacation times make very challenging efforts to pay our bills.
- We have \$500,000.00 in the bank in savings. Sounds like a lot, but a broken boiler or clogged pipes can strike unexpectedly in a costly way.
- In the last two years, we have had to take some money from our saving to meet our operating budget. I am sure this concerns you as it does me. That is significant problem that must change, or the parish will eventually be in serious difficulty, to the point of not being able to function,
- I am convinced, in consultation with our staff and financial committee, that the issue is not one of spending. We have a tight budget and steward what we have carefully.
- Although other fund raisers do help, the key to a parish support is the first collection at Mass.
- There are less parishioners today than even when I began here six years ago. One reason is we have near 140 funerals a year, and only a few new parishioners entering. Secularization is powerful, and less people are choosing to attend religious services. Our parish makes serious efforts to be welcoming and evangelizing to invite others to know the good news of Jesus. Still, financial challenges are not only hitting us but many Catholic parishes, as well as many other non-profits. all over the United States.

So back to the parishioner who probably wishes I had taken the advice and given this talk in one sentence. So here is the summary. Our parish needs to generate more funds consistently through the weekly collection. Next month, I will address some strategies we might consider helping us with the issues I have surfaced. As General Macarthur promises, I too say, *I shall return!*