

# **Characteristics of a Christian Steward**

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# Overview

## Disciples of Christ

The life of a Christian steward is lived as a disciple of Christ. As the U.S. Bishops point out in their pastoral letter on stewardship, "Following Jesus is the work of a lifetime. At every step forward, one is challenged to go further in accepting and loving God's will. Being a disciple is not just something else to do, alongside many other things suitable for Christians, it is a total way of life and requires continuing conversion." (1)

This "total way of life" is reflected in a number of characteristics, all found perfectly in Jesus, and therefore all key to anyone who desires to grow as a Christian steward. By learning more about these characteristics, it is hoped that Christian disciples can apply this knowledge to their stewardship way of life.

While there are many characteristics that could be identified for stewards striving to follow Jesus, the following ten seem essential: **prayer, humility, trust, patience, responsibility, gratitude, generosity, simplicity, mercy, and perseverance.**

## Bound By Love

Each of these characteristics is an integral part of stewardship. Each presents its own unique challenges. Yet all are connected to one another. As a steward makes progress in one characteristic, he or she will often discover growth in the others as well. That is because all of these characteristics are bound together by the virtue of love. All of them, to be most fully lived, call for the same, total love given us by our Father in heaven and perfectly enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ. It is a love that motivates complete donation of self to God and others--a self-emptying love patterned after Christ Jesus:

"Your attitude must be that of Christ:  
Though He was in the form of God,  
He did not deem equality with God  
something to be grasped at.  
Rather, He emptied himself  
and took the form of a slave,  
being born in the likeness of men.  
He was known to be of human estate,  
and it was thus that He humbled Himself,  
obediently accepting even death,  
death on a cross!" (Phil 2: 5-8)

To give ourselves over to Christ with the kind of love He has given us requires a conversion--"a change of mind and heart, (through which) this commitment is expressed not in a single action, nor even in a number of actions over a period of time, but in an entire way of life. It means committing one's very self to the Lord." (2) Such commitment comes from the depths of our hearts and souls--inspired by grace, and motivated by love.

## **Nourished with the Eucharist**

Such commitment finds its nourishment in the Eucharist, the sacrament of love, the "source and summit of the Christian life." (3) Pope John Paul II writes that "sharing in the *Eucharist*, the sacrament of the New Covenant (cf. 1Cor 11:23-29), is the culmination of our assimilation to Christ, the source of 'eternal life' (cf. Jn 6:51-58), the source and power of that complete gift of self, which Jesus--according to the testimony handed on by Paul--commands us to commemorate in liturgy and in life: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.' " (1Cor 11:26) (4)

Through the Eucharist, we "enjoy a unique union with Christ and, in Him, with one another. Here His love--indeed, His very self--flows into His disciples and, through them and their practice of stewardship, to the entire human race." (5)

## **Living the Characteristics of a Christian Steward**

Nourished with the Eucharist, Christian stewards can go forward to more fully love God, family, and others. They strengthen this love and deepen their resolve to live as disciples of Christ by practicing the characteristics of prayer, humility, trust, patience, responsibility, gratitude, generosity, simplicity, mercy, and perseverance. For the steward who is resolved, this is no half-hearted commitment. It means a day-by-day, moment-by-moment living out of these characteristics, particularly when it is most difficult to do so. Such a commitment may seem overwhelming at times if we rely on ourselves. But the stewardship way of life teaches that we are capable of nothing on our own; and that is true especially when it comes to fulfilling this commitment to discipleship. Instead, it is made possible through the gift of God's grace, which, in His love He makes ever-present for us, so long as we ask for and respond to it.

## **The Christian Steward and Family**

While the characteristics of a Christian steward apply to all aspects of life, nowhere are these characteristics--bound together in Christ's love--more important than in the family, the domestic church. Pope John Paul II writes in his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (On The Family), that "the family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord

for the church, His bride." (6) The Holy Father also recalls how the Second Vatican Council emphasized the parents' responsibilities in teaching this love: " 'For it devolves on parents to create a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God and others that a well-rounded personal and social development will be fostered among the children. Hence, the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs.' (Cf. Gravissimum Educationis, 3)" (7)

The U.S. Bishops also stress the role of parents in nurturing stewardship. They call on parents to initiate their children "into the practice of stewardship itself, in all its dimensions, contrary to today's widespread consumerism and individualism. This may require adjusting the family's own patterns of consumption and its lifestyle, including the use of television and other media which sometimes preach values in conflict with the mind of Christ. Above all, it requires that parents themselves be models of stewardship, especially by their selfless service to one another, to their children, and to church and community needs." (8)

It is in the family, then, where Christ's self-donating love is first taught and learned. It is in the family where one first learns to pray, to grow in humility, to trust and to be patient, to take responsibility, to grow in gratitude, to be generous, to become simple, to show mercy, and to persevere. And when these characteristics, through love, are nurtured within the family, the seeds of stewardship are planted and cultivated as well. Family members first learn to grow in communion with one another, then with others:

"All members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of building day by day the communion of persons, making the family 'a school of deeper humanity' (Cf. Second Vatican Council, GS, 52): This happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows...Family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation." (9)

Through the family, each member grows in resolve to set themselves aside with the love of Christ they learn from birth. This love radiates outward, beginning with love of God and self, and extending to love of family, love of friends, love of Church, and love of others.

## **Plan of the Document**

This document presents ten characteristics of a Christian steward. The format for each characteristic is as follows:

1. One or more scripture passages that relate to the characteristic
2. A general description of the characteristic

3. An explanation of how this characteristic relates to stewardship
4. A brief summary of the life of a saint who exemplified this characteristic
5. Three questions for personal reflection

## **Conclusion**

As the U.S. Bishops point out, the greatest example of someone responding both as steward and disciple is that of Mary, the mother of our Lord. In answering God's call by saying, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say," (Lk 1: 38) she acknowledged Him as the giver of all she was and had, and herself as the caretaker of it. She committed herself to His will, no matter what the cost.

May our Blessed Virgin Mary, as patronness of the Diocese of Wichita and mother of the Church, continue to intercede for us, her children. May she guide us, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, toward an ever deeper commitment to be disciples of her son, Jesus Christ, and stewards of God's boundless love.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Suggested Uses for *Characteristics of a Christian Steward***

### **1. Personal Prayer**

During your daily prayer time, spend several days on each characteristic. To prepare, read the entire section on a characteristic. Then, as you begin your time of prayer with an act of faith, ask especially for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the particular saint whose life is presented with that characteristic. Spend one or more sessions of prayer meditating on each scripture passage in the section, how it speaks to that particular characteristic, and how it speaks to you in your relationship with God and others. Spend another session reflecting, in the same manner, on the explanation of the characteristic and its relationship to stewardship. Use the reflection questions as a guide. Finally, spend some time reflecting on the life of the saint who demonstrated this particular characteristic, and how you can better live out this characteristic through the example of the saint.

### **2. Stewardship Committees and Other Parish Organizations**

At each meeting of the parish stewardship committee or other organization (such as Pastoral Council, Finance Committee, Altar Society, Holy Name, Knights of Columbus,

etc.) devote 10-15 minutes on one of the characteristics. Begin the meeting by reading one of the scripture passages in the section. Then ask the leader of the committee or a member of it to facilitate a discussion of the section's content. (Have committee members prepare ahead of time by reading the section before the meeting.)

### **3. Small Faith Sharing Groups**

Use the document as the basis of a 10-week faith sharing session.

### **4. Parish Communication**

#### a. Monthly newsletter

Run a 10-part series on the *Characteristics of a Christian Steward* by publishing in the parish newsletter each month one of the sections of the document.

#### b. Bulletin

Ask someone from the Stewardship Committee to develop a list of one or two-sentence quotations from the document and provide them for publication in the parish bulletin.

#### c. Bulletin Board

Create a bulletin board display in the parish lobby that highlights the *Characteristics of a Christian Steward*.

### **5. Lay Witness Presentations**

Ask those who are giving lay witness presentations during the stewardship renewal to first read *Characteristics of a Christian Steward*. Discuss with them ways to incorporate these characteristics into their message.

### **6. Preaching and Teaching**

#### A. Homilies

Consider using the content of one or more sections of the document as the basis for homilies.

#### B. Classroom Ideas

Each month in the classroom, focus on one of the characteristics throughout the month. Some methods for doing this include:

- a. The first day of each week (for Catholic schools) or before each lesson (for PSR programs), begin class by asking a student to read one of the scripture passages cited in the document for the characteristic, or another of your choice that also highlights the characteristic. Hold a brief discussion about the passage, how it speaks to that characteristic, and what our Lord is teaching us with it.
- b. Each time the class prays together, include a petition to the Holy Spirit to strengthen this characteristic in everyone present.
- c. Ask students to list 10-20 specific ways that they can live out this characteristic: 1) at school 2) at home 3) at extracurricular activities such as sports, scouting programs, music lessons, cheerleading, part-time jobs, etc. 4) in the community. Discuss their answers.
- d. With elementary school-age children, ask them to make posters that convey at least one of the items from their lists in (c) above.
- e. Have students write a short story in which the lead character demonstrates the characteristic.
- f. In reading or literature, ask students to identify one or more characters from a story or book they are studying who demonstrate this characteristic, and to explain their reasons why.
- g. For younger students, read aloud a children's story in which one or more of the characters demonstrates the characteristic. (A number of the stories by Dr. Seuss, as well as the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis, are good choices.)
- h. Read aloud from the document the summary of the life of the saint who demonstrated this characteristic. Have students research the lives of other saints, and write a report about another one who also demonstrated this characteristic. Or, have the class or small groups create a skit on the life of the saint presented in the document.
- i. Sometime during the month, find an example of someone in current events who has demonstrated this characteristic. Discuss in class.
- j. In history, ask students to find examples of people who did or did not demonstrate this characteristic. Ask them to write an essay explaining their thoughts. Or, ask them to write an essay explaining how history (in the area they are studying) might have been changed if people had

demonstrated this characteristic more.

- k. In science, ask students to discuss how the characteristic relates to their study of such areas as biology, botony, chemistry, anatomy, etc. (The discussions in middle school and high school levels could be most insightful and fruitful, particularly with the characteristics of *humility, responsibility, gratitude, generosity, and simplicity.*)
- l. Throughout the month, give some type of special recognition to students who have demonstrated this characteristic.
- m. Assign students to interview their parents about the characteristic, giving them specific questions to ask. Have them hand in a one-page report on the interview.
- n. Ask student to think of someone in their life who they feel demonstrates this characteristic. Have them write a letter to this person, thanking them for their example.

# Prayer

*Then He went out to the mountain to pray, spending the night in communion with God.  
(Luke 6:12)*

*Once when Jesus was praying in seclusion and His disciples were with Him, He put the question to them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" (Luke 9:18)*

*"Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. For the one who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. The one who knocks, enters. Would one of you hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf, or a poisonous snake when he asks for a fish? If you, with all your sins, know how to give what is good to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks Him!" (Matthew 7: 7-11)*

## The Characteristic of Prayer

Prayer unites us with God. Through prayer we contemplate His infinite goodness, wisdom and power. We praise Him and thank Him for all that He is and gives to us. We acknowledge our utter dependence on Him. We ask Him to forgive our many failings. We beg Him for the grace to overcome temptation and draw closer to Him. We plead for His help on behalf of those we love.

Prayer is as necessary to our souls as food is to our bodies. St. Alphonsus de Ligouri wrote, "...What profit is there in sermons, meditations, and all the other means pointed out by masters of the spiritual life, if we forget to pray? Since our Lord has declared that He will grant His graces to no one who does not pray." (10)

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the section on Christian prayer begins with a quote from St. Therese of Lisieux: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." (11) Turning our hearts to God in prayer, then, is the first and best way to draw closer to Him, crying out in love and trust as a child does to its Father. Through prayer we acknowledge that we are nothing without God, and that all depends on His grace--in fact, even the desire to pray is itself a result of His grace.

Like human relationships, our relationship with God grows stronger the more time we spend with Him. And the closer we draw to Him through prayer, the more His grace supports us as we strive to give ourselves to Him and others through active life. Jesus reminds us of the importance of putting prayer before work with the story of Martha and Mary. He lovingly

corrects Martha, who is "busy with all the details of hospitality," saying that "only one thing is required. Mary has chosen the better portion and she shall not be deprived of it." (Lk 10: 38-42)

In his book *The Soul of the Apostolate*, Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard emphasizes how essential it is to cultivate the interior life in order to effectively do God's will in the active life. He quotes St. Bernard as saying, "These three remain: word, example, prayer; but the greatest of these is prayer." (12) He also quotes Pope St. Pius X: "To restore all things in Christ by the apostolate of good works, we need divine grace, and the apostle will only receive it if he is united to Christ. Not until we have formed Christ in ourselves will we find it easy to give Him to families and to societies. And therefore all those who take part in the apostolate must develop a solid piety." (13)

## **Prayer and Stewardship**

Christian stewards desire to give back to God the time, talent, and treasure He has so generously given them. Giving back time to the Lord begins by spending time with Him each day in prayer. Stewardship of time, according to the U.S. Bishops in their pastoral letter on stewardship, "...should include setting aside periods for family prayer, for reading of Scripture, for visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and for attendance at Mass during the week whenever this is possible." (14)

Giving top priority to God through a daily life of prayer is especially important for Christian stewards, since to many of them stewardship means a life of service. And indeed, works of service are the eyes and ears, arms and legs of a stewardship way of life. However, the heart and soul of stewardship is prayer. Through prayer, Christian stewards place themselves in God's hands so that He can direct their hands to serve according to His will.

## **A Prayerful Saint**

### **St. Teresa of Avila 1515-1582**

Known as one of the great mystics of the Church, Teresa did not come to a life of deep contemplation easily. Although as a child she and her brother played at being hermits, Teresa struggled with the decision to enter the Carmelite convent--finally forcing her will to do so. She applied herself to mental prayer, but due to the frequent visitors and conversation allowed at the convent, she began to question the time she spent in prayer. She wondered if it was more humble to set such prayer aside.

At the urging of a Dominican friar, Teresa returned to mental prayer, but still found her thoughts "more busied about desiring that the hour resolved to be spent in prayer might come quickly to

an end, still listening when the clock would strike, than upon better things."

However, God's grace and Teresa's will again took over, as she determined to commit herself to union with God. She began to receive visions and interior communications. The uncertainty about whether or not these communications came from God caused her to consult a number of learned people. She received varying opinions, which caused her confusion and suffering. At last, she met St. Peter of Alcantara, whose spiritual advice greatly assisted her.

As Teresa grew in prayer, she demonstrated how one could live both contemplatively and actively. She founded convents of reformed Carmelite nuns, leading them back from a relaxed way of life to one that was enclosed and more strict. Along with St. John of the Cross, she founded reformed Carmelite monasteries.

Her reforms met with great opposition in some areas, and this divisiveness, as well as her lifelong ill health, caused her many trials. Teresa wrote letters and books which have become spiritual classics. In her writings she explained that to grow in union with God through prayer, we must conform ourselves to His will. She emphasized detachment, humility, and perseverance. She is one of three women saints to be named a doctor of the Church.

## **Questions for Reflection**

1. What do you think about the statement, "Prayer is as necessary to our souls as food is to our bodies?"
2. What is the relationship between prayer and the active life?
3. Are you satisfied with the time you devote to prayer? If not, what can you do to make prayer a greater priority?

## Characteristics of a Christian Steward

# Humility

*After He had washed their feet, He put his cloak back on and reclined at table once more. He said to them, "Do you understand what I just did for you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and fittingly enough, for that is what I am. But if I washed your feet--I who am Teacher and Lord--then you must wash each other's feet. What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do." (John 13: 12-15)*

*"If one of you had a servant plowing or herding sheep and he came in from the fields, would you say to him, 'Come and sit down at table'? Would you not rather say, 'Prepare my supper. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You can eat and drink afterward'? Would he be grateful to the servant who was only carrying out his orders? It is quite the same with you who hear me. When you have done all you have been commanded to do, say, 'We are useless servants; we have done no more than our duty.' " (Luke 17: 7-10)*

*"What you should do when you have been invited is go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host approaches you he will say, 'My friend, come up higher.' This will win you the esteem of your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled and he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (Luke 14: 10-11)*

## The Characteristic of Humility

Total dependence on God is the hallmark of humility. The humble person takes to heart Jesus' words to His apostles, that "apart from Me you can do nothing." (Jn 15: 5) Through humility, we come to realize that all we are and all we have is given to us by a loving and generous God. We also come to recognize more clearly within ourselves the many faces of pride: Depending on ourselves, exerting our own self-importance, feeling hurt or angry over perceived slights, worrying about what others think of us, refusing to obey authority.

In his book *Fire Within*, Rev. Thomas Dubay quotes St. Teresa of Avila as saying that "nothing matters more than humility." (15) The most profound example of humility is Jesus Himself. He reminds us that He is "gentle and humble of heart." (Mt 11: 29) He reveals His humility to us in extraordinary, staggering ways-- taking on our human nature with His divine one, pouring out His life for us, and giving Himself to us in the Eucharist under the appearance of common bread and wine. Clearly He teaches us that humility is not a halfway proposition, but a complete emptying of self. To be humble is to unite our hearts with His.

## **Humility and Stewardship**

As Christian stewards grow in humility, they become more deeply grateful to God. Knowing that He is the source of all grace in their lives, they desire more and more to share His blessings to them with others. Rev. Dubay writes, "...the person who is genuinely humble, that is, who recognizes the gifts received, is much more likely to be magnanimous and generous in sharing." (16)

A daily life of stewardship offers many situations in which we can grow in humility. Choosing to let others shine in conversation while remaining more in the background, accepting criticism without being defensive, volunteering for the less noteworthy tasks around the parish, and letting go of leadership positions so that others can step in--these are all ways to practice humility in stewardship.

## **A Humble Saint**

### **St. Bernadette Soubirous 1844-1879**

Bernadette lived in the most humble of conditions along with her parents and siblings. After her father lost his mill, the already poor family moved into a damp, stone room which had formerly been used as a jail.

Bernadette was a good, obedient girl, kind to her brothers and sister. She suffered from asthma and struggled with her studies. At fourteen, she had not yet received her First Holy Communion because of her difficulty with learning the catechism.

On February 11, 1858, while on the way to gather firewood, Bernadette saw a beautiful lady appear in a natural grotto. Together they prayed the rosary. The lady continued appearing to Bernadette a number of times, asking that people do penance for their sins, and requesting a chapel to be built. She told Bernadette to drink from the spring. Finding no water where the lady indicated, Bernadette dug into the dirt. Later a spring emerged from the spot, which has been the source for a number of miraculous cures. When directed by her parish priest to ask the lady her name, Bernadette obeyed. The lady responded by declaring, "I am the Immaculate Conception." This was the last apparition of the Blessed Virgin, but for Bernadette, her life was changed forever.

Thrust out of obscurity, she endured disbelief, ridicule, adulation, and incessant questioning. Highly sensitive, she preferred privacy, but humbly submitted to constant interruptions,

remaining calm and polite to those seeking her out. She refused any gifts offered to her or her family, feeling that there was nothing special she had done.

In 1866 she joined the Sisters of Charity of Nevers. She endured harsh treatment from the mistress of novices. In her humility, she compared herself to a broom, saying that when one is finished with it, "you put it behind a door, and that is what the Virgin has done with me. While I was useful, she used me, and now she has put me behind the door."

Bernadette suffered from illness all her life. She humbly asked God not to take away the suffering, but not to abandon her in it. She developed an intensely painful tumor in her leg, and her final months in this world were spent in great suffering. As she neared death, her humility was again apparent when she whispered, "Holy Mary, Mother of God! Pray for me...poor sinner...poor sinner."

## **Questions for Reflection**

1. What are some ways that Jesus shows His humility in scripture?
2. How are gratitude and humility connected?
3. What are some areas in which you feel you could grow in humility?

## Characteristics of a Christian Steward

# Trust

*But Jesus called for the children, saying, "Let the little children come to Me. Do not shut them off. The reign of God belongs to such as these. Trust Me when I tell you that whoever does not accept the kingdom of God as a child will not enter into it." (Luke 18: 16-17)*

*Mary said, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it done to me as you say." (Luke 1: 38)*

*On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and His disciples had likewise been invited to the celebration. At a certain point the wine ran out, and Jesus' mother told Him, "They have no more wine." Jesus replied, "Woman, how does this concern of yours affect Me? My hour has not yet come." His mother instructed those who were waiting on table, "Do whatever He tells you." (John 2: 1-5)*

## The Characteristic of Trust

To trust is to become like a little child. Think of how readily a small child places her hand in that of her father's. With such a simple action, she lets him know that she is fully confident he will take care of her and lead her where she needs to go.

That complete trust is what our heavenly Father asks of us. Faith in Him at all times. Confidence in His boundless love and mercy. Trust that He will always provide for our greatest good, even if the way to it includes pain and suffering. Job realized this when he said, "We accept good things from God; and should we not accept evil?" (Job 2: 10) And, in the most profound statement of trust, he cried, "Slay me though He might, I will wait for Him." (Job 13: 15) Likewise, Abraham's trust in the Lord was put to the test, and ultimately, even that of Jesus in His Father: "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup from Me; yet not My will but Yours be done." (Lk 22: 42)

Each of us trusts God to some extent. But the measure of our trust comes not when the sun is shining, the bills are paid, the appliances are all working, and everyone we know and love is healthy and happy. Trust proves itself with the confidence we have in Him through difficult, dry times--periods of desolation, sorrow, and pain.

Again and again, Jesus corrected His apostles for their lack of trust in Him. Knowing that even those closest to Christ struggled at times with trusting Him is somewhat consoling. It gives us hope to renew our confidence in Him after we fail to trust fully. It also gives us hope to look to

Mary, who so fully trusted God to lift her beyond herself in order to do whatever He asked of her. She is a model of the confidence we can show Him. And what could please God more? As our heavenly Father, how can He help but respond to such childlike trust with anything but overwhelming love and care for us?

## **Trust and Stewardship**

A stewardship way of life does not guarantee a life without pain and suffering. In fact, throughout time, the saints have recognized that the more one shares in the sufferings of Christ, the more one grows to be like Him.

As we strive to be more faithful stewards of God's blessings, sometimes we find ourselves wanting to bargain with the Lord, telling Him we will give more back to Him so long as He keeps certain crosses away from us. Or, we let Him know that while we will give a great deal back to Him in some areas, He shouldn't expect us to give as fully in others.

The moment of truth arrives when pain does enter our lives, or we are confronted with the realization that we are still holding back in our giving. This is the moment, when, as stewards, we must choose whether or not to trust God.

## **A Trusting Saint**

### **St. Therese of Lisieux 1873-1897**

St. Therese based her "little way" of love on a complete, childlike trust in God--to the point that she called God, "Daddy" (to the merriment of the other sisters in the cloister). In times of difficulty she would renew her confidence in Him, saying, "Jesus is sleeping in my boat." This referred to Mt 8:23-27, when Jesus, asleep in the boat as a storm arose, was awakened by His apostles' cries. First He stilled the sea, then reproved the apostles for their lack of faith since He was with them all the time.

St. Therese expressed total confidence that God was with her all the time--even when the way seemed uncertain. She fully recognized her imperfections, calling herself so little that, like a child, she had to depend fully on God to lift her up to sanctity. Her total, unwavering love and trust in God was most severely tested the last 18 months of her life when, while slowly dying from the tuberculosis that ravaged her body, she experienced such a desolation of soul that heaven itself no longer seemed to exist for her. Yet she refused to stop trusting God, and never let the sisters know what spiritual suffering she was experiencing. Her last words were, "Oh, I love him! My God, I love you!" Not long after her death, Pope St. Pius X called her the "greatest saint of modern times."

## Questions for Reflection

1. What does it mean to trust God fully?
2. When is it most difficult to trust? Why?
3. What kind of trust is needed to live a stewardship way of life? How can you grow in this kind of trust?

## Patience

*"When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other. If anyone wants to go to law over your shirt, hand him your coat as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the man who begs from you. Do not turn your back on the borrower." (Matthew 5: 39-42)*

*The scribes and the Pharisees led a woman forward who had been caught in adultery. They made her stand there in front of everyone. "Teacher," they said to Him, "This woman has been caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses ordered such women to be stoned. What do You have to say about the case?" (They were posing this question to trap Him, so that they could have something to accuse Him of.) Jesus bent down and started tracing on the ground with His finger. When they persisted in their questioning, He straightened up and said to them, "Let the man among you who has no sin be the first to cast a stone at her." A second time He bent down and wrote on the ground. Then the audience drifted away one by one, beginning with the elders. This left Him alone with the woman, who continued to stand there before Him. Jesus finally straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where did they all disappear to? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir, she answered." Jesus said, "Nor do I condemn you. You may go. But from now on, avoid this sin." (John 8: 3-11)*

## The Characteristic of Patience

Perhaps the most challenging of all virtues is that of patience. Remaining calm without complaint through all of life's daily annoyances, during times of great trial, and when confronted by the faults of others, requires a continual dying to the self through patience. Patience flows from the cardinal virtue of fortitude, or courage. It takes great courage to endure the pressure cooker of aggravations, frustrations, and heartaches that build within us; to hold in with a smile what our senses cry out to release.

The motivation to courageously remain patient comes from love. St. Paul reminds us that first of all, "love is patient." (1 Cor 13: 4) Patience is a marvelous way to demonstrate our love for God and others by setting ourselves aside. As with everything else, though, we cannot exercise patience on our own. The truly patient person is not someone who has never felt a loss of patience. Rather, it is the person who struggles mightily with patience within themselves, and turns constantly to our Lord, begging for His grace to courageously set self aside and remain patient.

## Patience and Stewardship

Christian stewards have many opportunities to practice patience. First and most important is their patience with God. As they give more and more of themselves back to Him, knowing that He will not be outdone in generosity, stewards sometimes expect God to make His generosity evident sooner, or in ways other than He wills.

At these times we grow impatient, wanting what *we* want from God instead of waiting patiently on Him. Patience is remaining at peace with His will, confident that He always provides what is best for us.

Patience is also needed when relating to family members or fellow parishioners who may not be as ready to accept stewardship as a way of life. To bear with others patiently in their journey toward stewardship is to take on the heart and mind of Jesus, who so patiently bears with our own repeated failures.

## A Patient Saint

### **St. John Vianney** **1786-1859**

Known as the Cure (pastor) of Ars, St. John Vianney practiced patience in many ways. As a youth and young man, he badly wanted to become a priest in order to gain souls for God. However, he struggled with academics, even being dismissed from a seminary before he was finally ordained. When assigned to the parish of Ars, France, he patiently undertook severe penances to intercede for the conversion of his parishioners, whose faith was weak. As his holiness and humility began to touch the people of Ars, St. John spent more and more of his time hearing confessions. Soon he was spending from 12-16 hours per day in a confessional, patiently hearing confessions of pilgrims from all over France.

As St. John Vianney became more successful in his great desire to save souls, the devil began to attack him physically, and for years created loud disturbances that deprived St. John of sleep throughout the night. Even so, this saint continued to hear confessions, provide counsel, and visit the sick, maintaining his patience despite long hours and little sleep.

## Questions for Reflection

1. Would you agree that patience is the most challenging of virtues to practice? Why?
2. How is the practice of patience an act of love for God and others?
3. Consider the situations in which you find it most difficult to practice patience. What factors contribute to these situations that you might be able to avoid, or at least be more aware of in order to face them patiently in the future?

## Responsibility

*"Who in your opinion is that faithful, farsighted steward whom the master will set over his servants to dispense their ration of grain in season? That servant is fortunate whom his master finds busy when he returns. Assuredly, his master will put him in charge of all his property. But if the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking his time about coming,' and begins to abuse the housemen and servant girls, to eat and drink and get drunk, that servant's master will come back on a day when he does not expect him, at a time he does not know. He will punish him severely and rank him among those undeserving of trust. The slave who knew his master's wishes but did not prepare to fulfill them will get a severe beating, whereas the one who did not know them and who nonetheless deserved to be flogged will get off with fewer stripes. When much has been given a man, much will be required of him. More will be asked of a man to whom more has been entrusted." (Luke 12: 42-48)*

*"After a long absence, the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five thousand came forward bringing the additional five. 'My lord,' he said, 'You let me have five thousand. See, I have made five thousand more.' His master said to him, 'Well done! You are an industrious and reliable servant. Since you were dependable in a small matter, I will put you in charge of larger affairs. Come, share your master's joy.' " (Matthew 25: 19-21)*

## The Characteristic of Responsibility

Responsibility compels us to be accountable for who we are, what we have, and what we do. Those who are responsible have a serious sense of duty--a conviction of being obliged to act, whether or not others do. In fact, when others hold back, those who are responsible often shoulder even more. As a result, they are trustworthy. They can be counted on to fulfill their duty, no matter what obstacles they may encounter.

Being fully responsible, however, goes deeper than our actions. It is rooted in the very essence of who we are. It guides how we look at our lives and the world around us. To be responsible is to first understand that we are not our own masters, but that we belong to the Creator. It is also to understand that we are not entitled to receive anything, but rather are accountable for all we have been given. "None of us lives as his own master, and none of us dies as his own master. While we live we are responsible to the Lord, and when we die we die as His servants. Both in life and in death we are the Lord's." (Rom 14: 7-8)

To be responsible requires a certain degree of maturity. This maturity is not a result of age, but of how we view ourselves in relationship to God and the rest of His creation. In the movie *It's A Wonderful Life*, a young but responsible George Bailey learns this lesson from his father. "You were born older, George," his father tells him. "How's that?" George asks, not sure he has heard correctly. "I said, you were born older," his father says again.

When a lack of maturity exists, there is a tendency to focus first on self, and as a result, to hold on to various tangible and intangible attachments. With maturity, the focus shifts more and more clearly to God, and for His sake, to others. Those who grow in maturity become more and more detached. This does not mean a decrease in love; rather, detachment is a purer form of love. Through detachment, we no longer view people or objects in terms of what they can do for our sake. Instead, we begin to see them as gifts entrusted to us by our beloved Father, and we desire to conscientiously take care of His gifts for His sake.

This means, then, that responsibility extends far beyond our natural inclination to care for ourselves and our immediate families. Responsibility is caring for all God's creation, especially those most fragile and marginalized: the unborn, the poor, the sick, the aging. Responsibility is sharing all that God has given us. And, responsibility is returning with increase all that He has entrusted to us.

## **Responsibility and Stewardship**

For one who aspires to be a Christian steward, understanding and embracing the characteristic of responsibility is key. The U.S. Bishops describe 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." (17)

They also state that "this sharing is not an option for Catholics who understand what membership in the Church involves. It is a serious duty. It is a consequence of the faith which Catholics profess and celebrate." (18) Jesus stated it even more severely: "When much has been given a man, much will be required of him. More will be asked of a man to whom more has been entrusted." (Lk 12: 48)

For the Christian steward who recognizes himself as one "to whom more has been entrusted," this is a sobering statement. It underscores how serious the obligation is to be responsible, and it implies that being anything less than fully responsible is not good enough.

But when this realization is taken along with the parable of the talents, it becomes clear that the obligation to be responsible is not made out of hardheartedness, but out of love. It is made so that one day the Christian steward may hear the words, "Well done! You are an industrious and reliable servant. Come, share your master's joy." (Mt 25:21)

# **A Responsible Saint**

## **St. Maximilian Kolbe 1894-1941**

As a youth, Raymond Kolbe shared the financial responsibility of helping his older brother study for the priesthood, by staying home from school to help his father in his work. With tutoring, however, Raymond was able later to attend school as well. He, too, wanted to be a priest. He was admitted to a Franciscan seminary and took the name Maximilian. Not long after he was ordained a priest in 1918, Maximilian began to take responsibility for what he called "the most deadly poison of our times"-- religious indifference. As a result, he founded the Militia Immaculatae (Army of the Immaculate), whose mission was to conquer all souls for Christ through Mary.

In the midst of this work, Father Kolbe became ill with tuberculosis and was confined for over a year. His work came to a halt. When he returned to Krakow, though, the Militia Immaculatae began to grow. Their work spread into publication of several periodicals. As the publications became more popular, Maximilian warned against taking pride in success.

In 1939, during the German occupation of Poland, Father Kolbe was arrested by the Gestapo, then released. In 1941 he was arrested again, and transferred to Auschwitz. Made to haul gravel for the walls of the crematorium and still suffering from illness, Father Kolbe was treated more cruelly because he was a priest. Still, he took on the responsibility of encouraging the other prisoners. He prayed with them, heard their confessions, and pleaded with them to forgive their captors. He often gave away portions of his own severely limited food rations to other prisoners.

One day, a prisoner escaped. As punishment, the commandant called out ten others to be killed. At this point Father Kolbe took on the greatest responsibility of all. He asked to take the place of one of those designated to die. His request granted, Father Kolbe and the nine others were locked in an underground bunker to starve to death. For the next two weeks he consoled the others, and led them in praying the rosary and singing hymns to Mary. After those two weeks, Father Kolbe and three others were still alive. To kill them, the guards injected them with carbolic acid. As he prayed, Father Kolbe raised his arm for the injection.

On October 10, 1982, Pope John Paul II canonized St. Maximilian Kolbe as a martyr.

## Questions for Reflection

1. What does acting responsibly mean in practical terms?
2. Are you one of those who has been "entrusted with more?" If so, what does this mean in terms of the responsibility you have been given?
3. In what areas should you become more responsible? How?

# Gratitude

On His journey to Jerusalem He passed along the borders of Samaria and Galilee. As He was entering a village, ten lepers met Him. Keeping their distance, they raised their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When He saw them, He responded, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." On their way there they were cured. One of them, realizing that he had been cured, came back praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself on his face at the feet of Jesus and spoke His praises. This man was a Samaritan. Jesus took the occasion to say, "Were not all ten made whole? Where are the other nine? Was there no one to return and give thanks to God except this foreigner?" He said to the man, "Stand up and go your way; your faith has been your salvation." (Luke 17: 11-19)

There was a certain Pharisee who invited Jesus to dine with him. Jesus went to the Pharisee's home and reclined to eat. A woman known in the town to be a sinner learned that He was dining in the Pharisee's home. She brought in a vase of perfumed oil and stood behind Him at His feet, weeping so that her tears fell upon His feet. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissing them and perfuming them with the oil. When His host, the Pharisee, saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, He would know who and what sort of woman this is that touches Him--that she is a sinner." In answer to his thought, Jesus said to him, "Simon, I have something to propose to you." "Teacher," he said, "speak." "Two men owed money to a certain money-lender; one owed a total of five hundred coins, the other fifty. Since neither was able to repay, he wrote off both debts. Which of them was more grateful to him?" Simon answered, "He, I presume, to whom he remitted the larger sum." Jesus said to him, "You are right." Turning then to the woman, He said to Simon: "You see this woman? I came to your home and you provided Me with no water for My feet. She has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss, but she has not ceased kissing My feet since I entered. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she has anointed My feet with perfume. I tell you, that is why her many sins are forgiven--because of her great love. Little is forgiven the one whose love is small." (Luke 7: 36-47)

## The Characteristic of Gratitude

Gratitude is a response of the heart. It is an overwhelming rush of joy, wonder, and thanksgiving that wells up within us when we realize someone has generously given us a "good," purely out of love for us. This realization moves us beyond a sense of appreciation into a much deeper response. Because the giver is motivated by love, we respond with love. This response is gratitude.

To be grateful is not easy, due to our woundedness by original sin. Confronted with another's selfless love, we struggle with our own self love, finding it difficult at times to wholeheartedly accept the gift we are given. Because we take pride in our independence, we may balk at accepting anything done "for us," fearing that doing so makes us depend on others to some degree. Moreover, in the face of such unlimited goodness, our own limitations can cause us to question the giver's motivation, looking for hidden strings or expectation of future repayment.

As a result, we may accept the gift while at the same time diminishing its importance to us. Or, we may refuse to accept the gift at all. Either way, we find ourselves avoiding gratitude, because to be grateful is to acknowledge our own limitations in the light of another's love. To be grateful, then, calls for us to be humble.

Gratitude is rooted in our relationship with God. As we begin to realize the enormity of the gifts He gives us, we begin to understand how very small we are, how totally we depend on Him, and how much He loves us. As this realization breaks through our consciousness, however, we are faced with a choice. We can choose, through pride, to accept our Father's gifts with a presumption of entitlement, much like the prodigal son did initially when he said, "Father, give me the share of the estate that is coming to me." (Lk 15: 11) Or, we can choose to accept God's gifts gratefully, acknowledging our own smallness and responding by giving our hearts fully back to Him who so lovingly gives everything to us. To do this is to respond like the tax collector in the temple, who "...kept his distance, not even daring to raise his eyes to heaven. All he did was beat his breast and say, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'" (Lk 18: 13)

This growing sense of our own unworthiness in the light of God's boundless love and generosity is highlighted most of all through the gift of His son Jesus Christ. The more we reflect upon Jesus' total donation of self to us, despite how often we have turned away from Him, the more grateful we become.

Through the Eucharist, our gratitude to God is nurtured and shared. "The Eucharist is a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Father, a blessing by which the Church expresses her gratitude to God for all His benefits, for all that He has accomplished through creation, redemption, and sanctification. Eucharist means first of all thanksgiving." (19)

As we grow more grateful to God through His son, Christ our Lord, we become more grateful to other people, as well. We find ourselves better able to let others give of themselves to us--not because we think we are deserving, but precisely because we know we are not.

## **Gratitude and Stewardship**

The more grateful we become, the more we grow as Christian stewards. That is because we begin to understand more fully the words of 1 John 4: 10-12: "Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God, but that He has loved us and has sent His Son as an offering for our sins. Beloved, if God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another. No one has

ever seen God. Yet if we love one another God dwells in us, and His love is brought to perfection in us."

When we realize that God has loved us first, through no merit of our own, we experience the need to gratefully respond to His love by caring for others with time, talent, and treasure. Just as God has given us so many "goods," purely out of love for us, we desire to love Him in return by spending our lives in prayer and service. We desire to live the lives He gives us as disciples of the son He gave us. And in gratefully doing so, we come to see that through stewardship, God's love is brought to perfection in us. We begin to understand, at last, that stewardship is love.

## **A Grateful Saint**

### **St. Frances Xavier Cabrini 1850-1917**

Although every saint has demonstrated their gratitude to God for His love and generosity, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini is a great example of someone who loved God with a grateful heart.

Maria Francesca Cabrini was the youngest of 13 children, and as a child, she dreamed of becoming a missionary to China. However, following her parents' desire, she became a teacher at age 18. Two years later, both her mother and father died.

Frances applied to be admitted to two religious communities, but was refused by both due to her poor health. Then her bishop and a priest who knew of her quiet goodness asked her to work at an orphanage. During her six years there, Frances endured harsh treatment, particularly from the woman who had founded the institution.

Eventually the bishop closed the orphanage. He recalled to Frances her desire to be a missionary sister and, since no such order was available, he asked her to found one. Faced with such an overwhelming challenge in the aftermath of an apparent failure, Frances showed the humility and trust that flowed from a grateful heart. She quietly agreed to the bishop's request.

She found an abandoned Franciscan monastery that she and seven other young women used as a convent for their new order, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. To honor one of the greatest missionary saints, Frances added the name of Xavier to her own.

The order quickly grew, and Mother Cabrini's gratitude to God again evidenced itself by her trust in His generous providence. Despite lack of funds and other obstacles, additional houses for the order were opened. Mother Cabrini even won approval to establish two houses, a school, and a children's home in Rome.

At last, in 1889, Mother Cabrini was asked by Pope Leo XIII to be a missionary--but not to China. Instead, she was to go with six sisters across the ocean (she had a fear of water, having fallen into a river as a child) to the United States. The sisters were to open an orphanage for Italian children, and to manage a school.

Upon their arrival, however, they learned that the benefactress for the orphanage had rescinded her offer, and there was no place for the sisters to stay. The archbishop thought Mother Cabrini should return to Italy. She politely but firmly declined, saying that as the Pope had sent her, she must stay. Within a few months, she had opened the orphanage.

Mother Cabrini's work took her back to Europe, to Central and South America, and to cities across the United States. By 1907, the order consisted of over 1,000 sisters. More than 50 schools, orphanages, and hospitals had been established.

Mother Cabrini's maxim, "I can do all things in Him," highlighted her humble gratitude to God for all He gave her. Because she became a naturalized citizen in 1909, she is the first American citizen to be canonized a saint.

## Questions for Reflection

1. Do you find it difficult, at times, to accept the generosity of others? If so, why do you think this happens?
2. How has your gratitude to God for His generosity to you affected your life as a Christian steward?
3. How can you continue to grow in gratitude to God and others?

# Generosity

*"Give, and it shall be given to you. Good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over, will they pour into the fold of your garment. For the measure you measure with will be measured back to you." (Luke 6: 38)*

*But a Samaritan who was journeying along came on him and was moved to pity at the sight. He approached him and dressed his wounds, pouring in oil and wine. Then he hoisted him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, where he cared for him. The next day he took out two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper with the request: "Look after him, and if there is any further expense I will repay you on my way back." (Luke 10: 33-35)*

## The Characteristic of Generosity

Generosity is not giving what is easy to give, but giving what is hard to give. That is why it is possible to give, without being generous. True generosity exacts something from the giver. To be generous is to give to the point that it costs. Those who give generously do so at great cost to themselves.

Jesus taught this with the example of the widow's mite. Although the widow's offering of two small coins appeared to be much less than those who gave larger amounts, she "put in more than all the rest. They made contributions out of their surplus, but she, from her want has given what she could not afford--every penny she had to live on." (Lk 21: 3-4)

The widow gave generously because she gave at great personal cost. In her case, her generosity exacted a material price--she sacrificed her own material comfort for the sake of others.

Generosity, however, does not end with sharing material goods. To be generous is to give at personal cost in all aspects of one's life. From letting someone else take credit for an idea shared earlier with them, to getting up in the middle of the night with a child so that one's spouse can stay in bed; from parking further away from church or the grocery store so others can have closer spaces, to foregoing a much-anticipated day of relaxation in order to care for someone else's needs--all of these can be examples of generosity. The test as to whether or not they are, is if the giver finds them hard to do.

## Stewardship and Generosity

A stewardship way of life means extending one's self beyond the minimum requirements. It means living with generosity in all aspects of one's life. This is not easy, due to the effects of sin. The U.S. Bishops write, "Sin causes people to turn in on themselves; to become grasping and exploitative toward possessions and other people; to grow accustomed to conducting relationships not by standards of generous stewardship but by the calculus of self interest: 'What's in it for me?' Constantly, Christians must beg God for the grace of conversion: the grace to know who they are, to whom they belong, how they are to live--the grace to repent and change and grow, the grace to become good disciples and stewards." (20) With God's grace, Christian stewards can overcome the temptations of self-interest and generously follow Christ.

In his encyclical letter, *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), Pope John Paul II speaks of going beyond the minimum requirements. He uses the example of the rich young man (Mt 19: 16-21) who asks Jesus what good he must do to inherit eternal life. The Holy Father explains that Jesus responds by inviting him "to enter upon the path of perfection." (21)

Doing this means going beyond the minimum requirements. It means generously living the commandments, loving God and others, and following Christ. The Holy Father writes of this generosity in the following way: "Those who live 'by the flesh' experience God's law as a burden, and indeed as a denial or at least a restriction of their own freedom. On the other hand, those who are impelled by love and 'walk by the Spirit' (Gal 5:16), and who desire to serve others, find in God's Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practice love as something freely chosen and freely lived out. Indeed, they feel an interior urge--a genuine 'necessity' and no longer a form of coercion--not to stop at the minimum demands of the Law, but to live them in their 'fullness.'" (22)

As we grow with God's grace in a stewardship way of life, this "interior urge" to freely give--no matter what the personal cost--grows in us as well. And each time we give what is hard for us--whether time, talent, or treasure, we take one step closer to freedom, to perfection, and to eternal life.

## A Generous Saint

**Pope Saint Pius X**  
**Giuseppe Sarto**  
**1835-1914**

Throughout his life, this child of poverty who grew up to become pope demonstrated great generosity. At age 10, Giuseppe wanted to be a priest. His family could not afford to educate

him, so a parish priest stepped in to help. But Giuseppe had to walk five miles to school each day. To save the soles of his shoes, he carried them over his back.

During Giuseppe's years at the seminary, his father died. Knowing how his family would struggle financially, Giuseppe offered to stay home and help. His mother, however, reassured him that God would provide.

After he was ordained, Giuseppe became assistant pastor in the village of Tombolo. His love and kindness extended to every parishioner, but most of all, to the poor. Having little of his own, he would at times pawn his silver watch in order to be more generous with the poor. On the way home from preaching in other parishes, he would give away the stipend he had received to those in need.

Soon Father Giuseppe Sarto was assigned to the parish of Salzano, whose parishioners were of a higher class. They complained to the bishop about having to accept as pastor this poor, country priest, but Father Sarto won them over with his generosity and love. He often gave away food and clothing from the rectory. He was generous with his time as well, working so hard that he usually went to bed after midnight and rose at four in the morning. During a cholera epidemic, Father Sarto went to care for the sick himself, to spare the other priests from possible infection. He believed strongly in educating children and adults in the faith, and worked hard to promote this.

Father Sarto was named bishop in 1884 and cardinal in 1893. In 1903 he was elected pope, even after he had declared himself unworthy and agonized over whether or not to accept the office. He took the name Pius X. Throughout his papacy, Pope Pius X's motto was "to renew all things in Christ." He fought Modernism and tried to live simply. He was instrumental in giving aid to disaster victims and was known for his continued generosity to the poor.

But perhaps the greatest evidence of Pope Pius X's generosity can be seen with his desire to make the Eucharist more readily available for people to receive. He decreed that children receive communion at the age of reason, instead of waiting several more years as they had at that time. He urged Catholics to receive communion daily. And, he encouraged daily reading of the Bible.

Pope Pius X had predicted that war would break out in 1914. When it did, it caused him great suffering. He said, "I would gladly give my life to save my poor children from this ghastly scourge." On August 20 of that year, he died.

## Questions for Reflection

1. Are there, perhaps, times when you have given, without being generous? If so, how?
2. When have you given at great personal cost? What did you experience afterward?
3. In what areas do you find it most difficult to be generous? Why?

## Simplicity

*"Do not worry about your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink, or use for clothing. Is not life more than food? Is not the body more valuable than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? Which of you by worrying can add a moment to his life-span? As for clothes, why be concerned? Learn a lesson from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work; they do not spin. Yet I assure you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was arrayed like one of these. If God can clothe in such splendor the grass of the field, which blooms today and is thrown on the fire tomorrow, will He not provide much more for you, O weak in faith!" (Matthew 6: 25-30)*

*A scribe approached and said, "Teacher, wherever You go I will come after You." Jesus said to him, "The foxes have lairs, the birds in the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." (Matthew 8: 19-20)*

*"He summoned the crowd with His disciples and said to them: "If a man wishes to come after Me he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in My steps. Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will preserve it. What profit does a man show who gains the whole world and destroys himself in the process?" (Mark 8: 34-36)*

*He told them a parable in these words: "There was a rich man who had a good harvest. 'What shall I do?' he asked himself. 'I have no place to store my harvest. I know!' he said. 'I will pull down my grain bins and build larger ones. All my grain and my goods will go there. Then I will say to myself: You have blessings in reserve for years to come. Relax! Eat heartily, drink well. Enjoy yourself.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life shall be required of you. To whom will all this piled-up wealth of yours go?' That is the way it works with the man who grows rich for himself instead of growing rich in the sight of God." (Luke 12: 16-21)*

## The Characteristic of Simplicity

Simplicity is countercultural. In today's society, acquisition is a sign of success. More is better. Our culture encourages materialism, pleasure, indulgence, and instant gratification.

In contrast, the characteristic of simplicity detaches us from the material. Simplicity challenges us to examine what we need versus what we want. It challenges us to ask ourselves, in the words of Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy, "What do I own, and what owns me?" (23) It asks us

to slow down and evaluate the work and other activities with which we fill our time by considering the following question: Which ones lead us closer to God, and which ones do not?

Indeed, by simplifying our lives we let go of objects, work, and activities to which we have become attached out of self love. By freeing ourselves of these attachments, we become able to give ourselves more fully to God. Simplicity removes the material "noise" that distracts our attention, and quiets our souls so that we can direct our thoughts to the divine.

The Holy Father addresses the need for simplicity in his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (On The Family). He emphasizes the parents' responsibility in this matter, saying, "...parents must trustingly and courageously train their children in the essential values of human life. Children must grow up with a correct attitude of freedom with regard to material goods, by adopting a simple and austere lifestyle and being fully convinced that 'man is more precious for what he is than for what he has.' (Second Vatican Council, GS, 35)" (24)

Contrary to society, simplicity reminds us that we are not what we possess--that the less we have to hold on to, the freer we become.

## **Simplicity and Stewardship**

Because of the influence from our culture, the path to simplicity is not an easy one. The roots of materialism are so far-reaching that Christian stewards who strive to simplify their lives make a humbling discovery: Each time they commend themselves for letting go of an attachment, they realize there is still more to which they are clinging.

Detachment, however, is a step by step process. And the more we let go of those objects and activities that distract us from God, the more we grow in holiness.

In their pastoral letter on stewardship, the U.S. Bishops call for people to adopt simpler lifestyles, saying, "This is true not only of affluent persons and societies, but also of those who may not be affluent as that term is commonly understood yet do enjoy access to superfluous material goods and comforts." (25)

As we let go of those things we want to possess, we begin to realize the fundamental point of stewardship--that there is nothing we truly own. Everything is grace.

# A Simple Saint

## St. Francis of Assisi

1181-1226

Perhaps more well-known than any other saint, Francis taught others how to live in simplicity. But first, he had to teach himself.

As the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, Francis liked to spend money and enjoy himself. He dreamed of someday becoming a great knight. He went to war, was taken prisoner for a year, and finally returned home, only to suffer an extended illness. He again went to war, outfitted with expensive clothing and equipment. But when he came upon a poor, ragged knight, he felt ashamed and insisted they trade clothes.

Francis became ill again, and was unable to continue on with the soldiers. During this time, he heard a voice ask him to serve the Master and return home. He did, and began to spend much time in prayer. He realized that to give himself to Christ he had to conquer himself first, detaching himself from all that kept him from God. One of his first tests came when he passed a leper while on horseback. Repulsed, Francis wanted to gallop quickly away. Instead he forced himself to stop, give the leper some money, and kiss him.

One day while Francis was praying he saw Christ on the crucifix ask him to repair His house. Taking the words literally, Francis began to rebuild the church of San Damiano, begging for alms to do so. His father, enraged at the change in Francis, took him home, beat him, locked him up for a time, and then disinherited him. Francis continued his work, living in poverty and often ridiculed by the people of Assisi.

In 1209, on the feast of St. Matthew, Francis' way of life was confirmed to him when the gospel of Matthew (10: 7-19) was read. In it, Jesus instructed his apostles to go preaching the good news, to freely give, and to go without gold, or a second tunic, shoes, or a walking stick.

Francis embraced these words, living so simply that he possessed only one coat, tied with a cord around his waist. He begged for alms to continue rebuilding churches, and for food to eat. He served lepers and others who were ill. He lived in a hut built of wood and clay.

As men came to join him, a simple rule was established and submitted to Rome for approval. Francis refused any property to be held by the order, so that they could live in simplicity and poverty. He wanted even the food they ate to be simple. The brothers worked for their food with manual labor, and by begging. They served the poor in whatever way they could, for Francis insisted that they always give what little they had to anyone in need.

Francis devoted his life to prayer and preaching, guided always by his desire to live as simply as Jesus did. He believed that the more simply he lived, the closer he would grow to Christ. In 1224, Francis received the stigmata. The last years of his life were marked by great suffering-

-both from his failing health and the stigmata, as well as from increasing divisiveness among the Friars Minor regarding the rule of poverty.

In a final act of simplicity, as he lay dying, Francis asked to be placed on the ground, naked, covered with an old, borrowed habit.

## **Questions for Reflection**

1. What are some subtle ways that our culture encourages materialism and indulgence?
2. Is your life as simple as it should be? If not, what can you do to simplify?
3. What are you attached to? How might these attachments be keeping you from God?

# Mercy

*"Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice.' " (Matthew 9: 13)*

*"Then the just will ask Him: "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You or see You thirsty and give You drink? When did we welcome You away from home or clothe You in Your nakedness? When did we visit You when You were ill or in prison?" The king will answer them: 'I assure you, as often as you did it for one of My least brothers, you did for Me.' " (Matthew 25: 37-40)*

*At the sight of the crowds, His heart was moved with pity. They were lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9: 36)*

*"That is why the reign of God may be said to be like a king who decided to settle accounts with his officials. When he began his auditing, one was brought in who owed him a huge amount. As he had no way of paying it, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the official prostrated himself in homage and said, 'My lord, be patient with me and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with pity, the master let the official go and wrote off the debt. But when that same official went out, he met a fellow servant who owed him a mere fraction of what he himself owed. He seized him and throttled him. 'Pay back what you owe,' he demanded. His fellow servant dropped to his knees and began to plead with him, 'Just give me time and I will pay you back in full.' But he would hear none of it. Instead, he had him put in jail until he paid back what he owed. When his fellow servants saw what had happened they were badly shaken, and went to their master to report the whole incident. His master sent for him and said, 'You worthless wretch! I canceled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant, as I dealt with you?' Then in anger the master handed him over to the torturers until he paid back all that he owed. My heavenly Father will treat you in exactly the same way unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart." (Matthew 18: 23-35)*

## The Characteristic of Mercy

Mercy is an outpouring of compassion toward others--a living out of the Golden Rule: "Treat others the way you would have them treat you." (Mt 7:12) Mercy manifests itself in many ways. Comforting someone in their suffering is one form of mercy. Advising someone in distress or

uncertainty is another. Feeding, clothing, and housing those in need, visiting those who are sick or imprisoned, burying those who have died--all of these actions are corporal works of mercy.

But perhaps the greatest measure of mercy lies in the degree to which one forgives others. To be truly merciful is to forgive without limit. Peter learned this from Jesus when he asked, " Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?" 'No,' Jesus replied, 'not seven times; I say, seventy times seven times.' " (Mt 18: 21-22)

But the willingness to forgive every time we are wronged, or think we are wronged, is not easy. In fact, it can be extraordinarily difficult. When someone hurts us, we find ourselves wanting to fight back--if not overtly, then by holding onto the hurt with anger, resentment, bitterness, coolness in behavior, retaliation, or separation. We begin to feel justified in responding this way, because of how we have been treated. Our human nature rages within us to hold on to these feelings; mercy demands that we let go.

Jesus spelled out how serious this demand is: "If you forgive the faults of others, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours. If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you." (Mt. 6: 14-15) And indeed, each time we pray the Our Father, we are reminded of what God requires from us in the form of mercy: "Forgive us our trespasses *as* we forgive those who trespass against us."

What He expects is really another version of the Golden Rule: Treat others however you would ask God to treat you. Put that way, how can we possibly refuse? And yet, when others cause us to feel overwhelmed by hurt and anger, forgiving them can seem an impossible expectation.

It is important to remember that God does not expect the impossible from us. With His grace, He makes it possible for us to love beyond our limited human nature and to let go of feelings of hurt and anger in order to forgive. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states this quite beautifully:

It is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession. (26)

To forgive does not mean that we will not experience deep hurt, or desire to hold onto that hurt. It does not mean that the moment we forgive, the hurt will disappear. Nor does it mean that we must wait until we no longer feel any hurt in order to forgive.

Forgiveness is not giving in, it is letting go. It is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength. To forgive is to be merciful. And because to forgive is at times so difficult, it is all the more beautiful and holy when we do. When we forgive, we truly unite ourselves to the person of Jesus Christ, who loves us with unlimited mercy, who understands our pain, who lived it

Himself, and who, in His final moments of agony on the cross, said, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they are doing." (Lk 23: 34)

## **Stewardship and Mercy**

The stewardship way of life calls for a letting go of all that we hold on to. To be merciful, especially through forgiveness, is one of the hardest yet most beautiful ways the Christian steward can let go.

Mercy is also the spark that fans the embers of stewardship into a fire of compassionate service. Mercy, through the cardinal virtue of justice, opens the eyes of the Christian steward to see the disparity in the overabundance of what he or she has, compared to what others have not. Mercy compels the already responsible steward into accepting even greater responsibility for the welfare of others. As a result, Christian stewards extend their time, talent, and treasure to those in the parish or local community, and to those within the universal Church who are in great need--whether that need is spiritual, material, or emotional.

As with all the characteristics of a Christian steward, however, one grows in mercy by first practicing this characteristic in the home. The opportunities to show mercy to one's spouse, children, and other family members present themselves daily. Indeed, sometimes it is more challenging to forgive those we love most for their hurtful words or actions, than those outside our families.

With one's parish family, too, there are many opportunities to practice mercy. Forgiving a parishioner or the members of a parish organization for an action that has caused hurt is a beautiful form of mercy. Refusing to speak unkindly about other parishioners or their children is another form of mercy. And letting go of any feelings of illwill toward those who do not yet give their time, talent, or treasure in proportion to what they have been given is yet another form of mercy.

Christian stewards who practice mercy in all these forms--through compassion, service, and forgiveness--demonstrate in a profound way their understanding that as they do for others, so will our Lord do for them.

# A Merciful Saint

## **St. Thomas More 1478-1535**

A brilliant lawyer who became chancellor of England, Thomas More demonstrated mercy throughout his life--even to the moment before his execution.

During his life, Thomas attended daily Mass, and regularly performed penances. He seriously considered entering monastic life or the priesthood. However, he decided to remain a layman, and he married Jane Colt. The couple had four children.

Thomas often showed mercy to his poor neighbors by inviting them to dinner. Mealtime included readings from scripture by one of his children, as well as joke-telling and family discussion. Thomas helped the poor in other ways, as well. He spent long hours in prayer.

When his wife died young, Thomas married Alice Middleton. His prudence and wit impressed King Henry VIII, and Thomas quickly rose in rank at court. His elevation to chancellor was short-lived, however. He opposed several of the king's actions directed toward the Church, and resigned his office. This had a drastic effect on the family's living conditions. Thomas, however, bore it cheerfully, trying to live peacefully and to spend his time writing.

All the while, though, pressure was being applied regarding King Henry's divorce of his wife, Catherine of Aragon, and his subsequent marriage to Anne Boleyn. The king had claimed that his marriage to Catherine was not valid. Thomas had remained silent about his position on the matter. But the king insisted that an oath be taken which recognized his marriage to Anne Boleyn as valid, and any children of theirs as heirs. The oath also rejected the authority of the pope.

Thomas refused to take the oath and was imprisoned in the Tower of London. After 15 months, weak from illness, Thomas was tried for opposing--in conversation with others--the Act of Supremacy, which made the king head of the Church of England. Thomas responded that he had always kept silence, but he was still convicted and sentenced to death. Finally, then, he spoke out, denying the king's claim to be head of the Church.

His mercy shone through as he told his judges he would pray for them and hoped to meet them in heaven. Not only that, on the morning of his execution, Thomas reassured a friend that he was praying for King Henry. And, in a profound and final act of mercy, he kissed and encouraged his executioner. Moments before his death he said he "died the King's good servant, but God's first."

## Questions for Reflection

1. Do you agree that forgiveness is the greatest measure of mercy? Why?
2. Is there someone who has hurt you that you have not yet fully forgiven? If so, what is preventing you from forgiving, and what can you do?
3. What are some specific ways you can show mercy to others, including your family, parish family, and those you do not know?

## Perseverance

*"This is the meaning of the parable. The seed is the word of God. Those on the footpath are people who hear, but the devil comes and takes the word out of their hearts lest they believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. They have no root; they believe for a while, but fall away in time of temptation. The seed fallen among briars are those who hear, but their progress is stifled by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and they do not mature. The seed on good ground are those who hear the word in a spirit of openness, retain it, and bear fruit through perseverance." (Luke 8: 11-15)*

*Jesus answered him, "Whoever puts his hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the reign of God." (Luke 9: 62)*

*After hearing His words, many of his disciples remarked, "This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously?" From this time on, many of His disciples broke away and would not remain in His company any longer. Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you want to leave Me too?" Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe; we are convinced that You are God's holy one." (John 6: 60, 66-69)*

## The Characteristic of Perseverance

To steadfastly continue on when the way is hard or unclear is perseverance. In fact, at times perseverance requires us to go beyond what we feel we are capable of doing. This is when our need for God becomes most evident--when we realize we can no longer depend on ourselves to keep going. Yet because we cling to our desire for independence, the times that most call for perseverance and, therefore, God's grace, are also the times when we can experience the most temptation to turn away from Him. It is then that we open ourselves up to discouragement and ultimately, despair.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton wrote about this, saying, "So many communions and confessions with so little fruit often suggest the idea of lessening them--to fly from the fountain while in danger of dying from thirst! But, in a moment He lifts up the soul from the dust." (27)

Perseverance calls for humility and trust. With humility, we understand that left to ourselves, we certainly will not be able to endure the most difficult of trials. We come to see that only God can lift us up and carry us across the chasm.

Recognizing this, however, we are still faced with the decision of trusting Him to do just that. True perseverance is continuing on with the confidence that God will provide the strength to do so.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks of the difference between depending on ourselves, and trusting in God to persevere. "For all these reasons, let anyone who thinks he is standing upright watch out lest he fall! No test has been sent to you that does not come to all men. Besides, God keeps His promise. He will not let you be tested beyond your strength. Along with the test He will give you a way out of it so that you may be able to endure it." (1Cor 10: 12-13)

Those who persevere, trust in God to provide the way out.

## **Perseverance and Stewardship**

Because stewardship is a way of life and not a short-term endeavor, the Christian steward will need perseverance to continue on through the difficult times. For indeed, those who embrace a stewardship way of life will experience trials that call for perseverance. In one case, a steward may face misunderstanding from others about how she is trying to live as a disciple of Christ. In another case, a steward may experience an unexpected decline in his financial situation, and find himself questioning his commitment to tithe. In yet another case, a steward may struggle with how to practice stewardship when her spouse is not as fully committed to it.

In all these cases, as well as others, Christian stewards are called to remember the first conviction which underlies the U.S. Bishops' 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." (28)

Such a decision can only be fulfilled with perseverance--placing our trust in God to carry us through.

## **A Persevering Saint**

**St. Elizabeth Ann Seton**  
**1774-1821**

The life of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton is a testament to perseverance. Elizabeth was born in New York shortly before the American Revolution. Her childhood was not a happy one. When Elizabeth was only three, her mother died. Her father remarried, but he was often gone and her

stepmother was distant to her. Raised in the Episcopalian faith, Elizabeth took comfort in reading the bible.

At eighteen, she fell deeply in love with William Seton, whose wealthy father owned a fleet of merchant vessels. They married in 1794, and for the next four years, Elizabeth found it hard to believe how happy she was. The first two of their five children were born, and Elizabeth thrived on her vocation as a mother. In the midst of her prosperity, she felt called to help those in need, and she helped found an organization to assist poor widows. Little did she know that within a few years, she would be one herself.

Life began to change when Will's father died. Will and Elizabeth took responsibility for Will's seven half brothers and sisters. Three more children were born to the couple. Will took over the family business. But in a few short years, the business went bankrupt, and Will was dying of tuberculosis. Because Will thought a change of climate might help his health, the couple sailed for Italy along with their oldest child, eight-year-old Anna.

Upon arrival in Italy, however, they were quarantined by the Italian authorities in a cold, damp building for a month. It was a living nightmare for them. When they were finally released, Will lived only a week longer.

Will's Italian Catholic friends, the Fillichi family, took care of Elizabeth and Anna until they could return home. During their time together, the Fillichis taught Elizabeth about the Catholic faith. She found herself drawn to the Eucharist.

Elizabeth returned to New York, only to learn that her dearest friend and sister-in-law, Rebecca, was close to death. Destitute and left with five young children to raise, Elizabeth agonized for a year over the decision to join the Catholic Church. At last she joyfully embraced the faith, only to encounter great anger and rejection from her relatives and friends. She persevered through it, drawn forward in her growing passion to do God's will, wherever he led her.

Elizabeth moved with her children to Baltimore, where at the invitation of the president of St. Mary's College, she started a boarding school for girls. At the same time, she felt drawn to religious life, so long as she could remain first a mother to her children. Eventually, she founded the Sisters of Charity and moved to Emmitsburg, Maryland, along with her children, to establish the convent and a Catholic school for girls.

Elizabeth continued to persevere through the poverty and other hardships of the community; through years of personal illness with the tuberculosis that eventually claimed her life; through the death of her oldest daughter at age 16 and her youngest daughter at age 14; and through her constant worry about the behavior of her sons. Her motherly compassion, charity, and hard work inspired others.

Before her death, the Sisters had established another school and two orphanages. The schools are considered the beginning of the present Catholic school system. Today, Elizabeth's Sisters of

Charity are at work throughout the United States. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton is the first native born American saint.

## **Questions for Reflection**

1. Why do we sometimes push God away when we need Him the most?
2. As you recall a period of trial in your life, did you find that your faith was tested? Looking back, how did God help you persevere through that trial?
3. What words of advice would you give to someone else who is struggling with perseverance?

## Conclusion

To live as a disciple of Christ, the Christian steward is called to love with the same, complete donation of self as Jesus. This love is made possible through the grace of God, and is manifested in the ten characteristics of prayer, humility, trust, patience, responsibility, gratitude, generosity, simplicity, mercy, and perseverance.

Jesus Himself shows us most clearly how to practice each of these characteristics. Scripture contains many examples of how these characteristics should be lived out, as well. And, our Blessed Mother Mary and the saints are excellent models of these characteristics.

The Eucharist is the sacrament in which the love to live out these characteristics is nourished and strengthened. The family is the wellspring of these characteristics, where the Christian steward first learns what they are and how to practice them. From the family, the Christian steward continues to live as a disciple of Christ by practicing these characteristics in the parish, local community, and universal Church.

Through the characteristics of prayer, humility, trust, patience, responsibility, gratitude, generosity, simplicity, mercy, and perseverance, the Christian steward grows to more fully live a stewardship way of life, and in turn, deepens his or her commitment to be a disciple of Christ.

# Notes

1. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 14.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
3. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 11.
4. John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 21.
5. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 37.
6. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, 17.
7. *Ibid.*, 36.
8. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 34.
9. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, 21.
10. St. Alphonsus de Liguori, *The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection*, (1927) Introduction, p. 2.
11. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2558.
12. Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, O.C.S.O., *The Soul of the Apostolate*, (1946), p. 112.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
14. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 28.
15. Thomas Dubay, S.M., *Fire Within*, 1989, p. 117.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
17. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 8.

18. Ibid., p. 4.
19. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1360.
20. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 29.
21. John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 16.
22. Ibid., 18.
23. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 41.
24. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, 37.
25. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 27.
26. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2843.
27. Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, (1990), p. 74.
28. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship A Disciple's Response* (Dec. 21, 1992), p. 1.

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