

# Introduction

What do you most hope and pray for when you think about your parish? Do you wish parishioners were more committed to Christ? Do you hope for more involvement in the parish, or more lively work in service and mission? In the words of one pastor, “I pray that my parishioners will live their faith with the whole of who they are, at the parish, but just as importantly, in their lives. I want the parish to be a place that helps them to be all they are called to be as Christian disciples. I wouldn’t be disappointed if, in the midst of that transformation, the parish’s bills got paid! In my ‘ideal parish,’ we would be able to serve those in need in our community and world through living stewardship. People would simply give from their hearts.” Now there’s a statement of hope for our parishes and our Church! What would happen in the lives of people and in our world if our parishes were more like the one this pastor hopes for?

## TWO CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES

Two friends from different parts of the country were chatting about this on Good Friday. One friend said, “Oh, we had the worst Holy Thursday ever. The preaching was irrelevant, the liturgy had distractions, and the assembly was non-responsive. It saddens me that this once vibrant

parish is sinking into some sort of apathy and funk. I just might have to find another place to go.” The other friend replied, “I’m so sorry to hear that. My parish was like that once, and I was struck last night by how much has changed. The liturgy last night was a true celebration of a thankful community, a gathering of people who are living what they pray. Not only was the liturgy prepared and celebrated well; people truly participate now, and as I watched families arriving, I realized that many of them, most really, are truly living their faith. It took some time to make the changes and it took patience as things developed, but it has been worth it. I wish more people could experience what I did last night.”

## **WHY THIS BOOK NOW?**

After hearing and living countless stories like the one above, it became clear that the Church needs more parishes like the second example. We became convinced of the need to equip parishes to become places of living discipleship and stewardship, communities of faith like the one described in the Acts of the Apostles, in which the people possessed “glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). We know there are parishes throughout the United States where people are not just coming to Mass but are fully engaged in the life of the parish. We also know that there are plenty of parishes where this is not the case; ones where attendance, participation, and collections are down; ones that seem to have lost the flame of faith and the fire of love.

So we set out to write a book that provides principles to guide pastoral leaders as they seek to transform their parish into a place where people embrace Christian discipleship. The principles are rooted in the wisdom of our Church’s

documents, are drawn from exciting work by the Gallup Organization, and reflect pastoral experience, our own and that of many pastoral leaders from parishes throughout the United States. Through our study and experience, we believe we have something to say about the connections between conversion, discipleship, and stewardship, and the ways parishes can foster real life in Christ so that people express their faith through a generous outpouring of love. More importantly, we give you not just the mind stuff (why to do it) but the heart stuff (how it is driven by God) and the hands stuff (how to do it). So, here you have it, a guide to forming generous hearts.

## THE STATE OF CATHOLIC STEWARDSHIP

Early in U.S. Catholic history, contributions were low primarily because of the socio-economic status of Catholics. In spite of the limited income, however, the Church was instrumental in the establishment of schools and hospitals, of libraries and social service agencies; Catholics contributed a large portion of their limited income to build churches as lasting testimonies to their faith, serving parishes and neighborhoods for subsequent generations.

As Catholics moved up the socio-economic ladder, however, their giving stayed on the lower rungs. It is well documented that Catholics currently give less than their Protestant counterparts. And this is not due to the clergy abuse scandal: “Per capita monetary giving to Catholic activities is now only half of what it was two decades ago, down from 2.2 percent of income in the early 1960s to 1.1 percent by 1984” (Dorothy Vidulich, “Stewardship also requires greenbacks, critic says,” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 8, 1993). Note that the above statement was written well before the publicity of the

scandal. After 2002, there wasn't a drop in collections, but a shift in the type of donating: "Catholics put an estimated \$5.8 billion in Sunday collection baskets to support their local parishes in 2002, an increase of 4.9 percent, or twice the rate of inflation. Yet they cut their pledges to bishops' annual appeals for diocesan operations by 2.3 percent, to \$635 million" (Alan Cooperman, "Catholic donations rise, despite sex scandal," *Washington Post*, November 7, 2003). Additionally, there have been more contributions to foundations and creative financing.

The church does have wealth—real estate, financial assets, and the like. However, there are some common misconceptions about the Church's wealth and finances according to Charles Zech: "In spite of its enormous wealth, the U.S. Catholic church faces many challenges in meeting its responsibilities. These responsibilities involve supporting a variety of ministries, including worship, teaching, evangelization, service, and developing Christian community" ("Population shifts pose problems, opportunities for church finance," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 12, 2005). These misconceptions may be part of the reason some Catholics don't give. Dorothy Vidulich reported that "Hartford Auxiliary Bishop Peter A. Rosazza said many financial problems the church faces are 'unknown to average Catholics.' If they were actively involved, they would contribute more" ("Stewardship also requires greenbacks, critic says," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 8, 1993).

## A NEW LENS

Now, fifteen years later, we know that Bishop Rosazza was on to something. When people are engaged in their parish,

they are not only better stewards of money, they contribute to the creation of a dynamic parish and their faith influences the way they live their lives. As Patricia Lefevere, writing about researcher-psychologist Paul Baard, reports in the *National Catholic Reporter*, “The degree that churches meet basic motivational needs, people attend more frequently, give at higher levels, offer their services more often, and even in some cases go on to full-time ministries” (“Church grows when pastor helps people find God’s love,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 21, 2001).

Groundbreaking work by Dr. Al Winseman and the Gallup Organization provides a clearer understanding of the connection between parishioner engagement (which we will explain in more detail as we explore the first principle for parish life) and spiritually committed individuals—people who give generously of themselves in service to their parish and neighborhoods and who contribute financially to a much greater degree than their “not-engaged” counterparts. Grasping this research and reflecting on it in relationship to our parishes will cause us to shift our focus in some crucial ways. The studies, particularly when considered side-by-side with the vision of the gospels, New Testament accounts of the early Church, and current Church documents, provide a lens through which to take a new look at what we do in parish life, and why.

This book is for pastors, parish leadership teams, parishioner leaders or pastoral staffs, parish pastoral council members, stewardship commission or committee members, faith formation committees or planning groups, spiritual life or worship committees or guiding groups, finance or administration commission or committee members, long-range planning teams, and anyone interested in contributing

to the life of your parish. The process it supports will be most effective if you read it together, using the book as a journal, workbook, and planning tool. Each section includes questions for your personal reflection as well as suggestions for discussion among your group(s). Set aside time to discuss each principle and additional time after you have studied all that is included in the pages that follow.

This book is divided into seven sections, each devoted to a principle for parish life. At the end of the book there is a planning process to help shape your parish's life based on the principles, plus a list of helpful resources and Web sites where you can acquire additional learning and support.

The **Seven Principles for Parish Life** will lead to embracing a life of discipleship and stewardship, as individuals and as a community of believers. The principles are born of pastoral leadership experience in parish and diocesan ministry, through careful study of sacred scripture, theology, Church documents, current research, and in conversation with friends and colleagues throughout the United States. The principles are all interrelated; together they provide direction for you as a pastoral leader as you guide your parish to live faithfully as disciples and stewards. Within the Principles sections, we will define terms used by people of ministry in a variety of disciplines, to support dialogue among leaders in all aspects of the life of your parish. We will point out topics that are explored further on our Web site ([www.thegenerousheart.com](http://www.thegenerousheart.com)) and resources for your consideration as you develop strategies based on your study and discussion of the seven principles.

Within these principles, the background for **Developing a Vision** is included. By carefully reading sacred scripture and our Church's documents, a vision of the Christian

community as lived out in the Catholic parish begins to emerge. In the introduction to their pastoral letter on adult faith formation, the U.S. bishops tell us that adopting practices that contribute to this vision sets the stage for a community of people who possess a “lively baptismal and eucharistic spirituality with a powerful sense of mission and apostolate” (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, USCCB: Washington, 1999), and are therefore ready to step out in faith. Following a scriptural piece that keeps us connected to the ministry of Jesus and the early Church, the vision sections of this book will put you in touch with insights from our Church’s documents in relationship to our seven principles.

After developing a vision, we examine and **Explore Successful Practices**. Embracing the vision of each principle leads us to develop corresponding practices for our parish communities. Therefore each chapter includes successful practices used by parishes as they step out in faith. Sometimes it is helpful to learn from the experiences of others who share a common vision. The practices are provided as a way of “priming the pump” for the development of your own practices.

Lastly, the book concludes with a process dedicated to **Shaping Parish Life**. Once you have acquired or developed your understanding of this vision of the parish as a community of disciples and stewards, you will be eager to help your parish begin or continue to embrace the principles found within this book.

The only way to affect growth or to develop strategies that will benefit your parish and its members is to take the vision that you will acquire here and let it guide you as you put a plan into place. You can read this book knowing

you are being equipped to lead your parish to become a community of discipleship and stewardship.

### **FORM A GENEROUS HEARTS TEAM**

It will be most helpful to have a group of people in your parish read this book at the same time, study the principles and vision, and consider your current practices. Look at your parish and build your Generous Hearts Team to reflect the people who are part of it: youth; young adults (single and married); adults (single and married); older adults; ethnic and cultural groups (those currently represented and those who are in the pews but may not be involved); male and female. In other words, include everyone! Then, your team will be ready to consider your community's needs and the hopes you have for your parish through the Shaping Parish Life process.

### **PARISHES COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES**

Every parish has its own distinct rhythm, with elements that constitute life within the faith community for its parishioners. Many Catholic parishes today find the composition of the parish or its leadership changing:

- ✦ declining neighborhoods often result in dwindling membership;
- ✦ parishes that were once homogeneous in cultural composition are now rich with ethnic diversity;
- ✦ parishes are clustered together for purposes of planning and administration, often with a canonical pastor and one or more pastoral administrators or parish life coordinators;

- ✦ suburban parishes are often large and complex;
- ✦ some parishes have Catholic schools that are thriving; for others, once-vibrant schools now face declining enrollment, closure, or the formation of a regional school system.

Every parish has its particular character with its corresponding challenges. Our hope is that, as you read this book and discuss its contents with your Generous Hearts Team and others, you will take the character of your parish into honest account. The principles and vision explored within this book will remain constant, but the way in which life is shaped based upon the principles is certain to be different for every parish.

Now, before you proceed, consider your own parish. No one needs to know your assessment, unless you decide to share it. Or, invite your Generous Hearts Team to discuss these questions with you as you begin to dream about your parish's future.

- ✦ What evidence do you have that parishioners embrace a living relationship with Christ that leads them to be people of profound generosity, who live their faith with the hands of a servant?
- ✦ What are the special challenges that your parish faces at this time? How can you construct your Generous Hearts Team in a manner that will insure thorough representation, so that the conversations that take place will take the character of your parish into honest account?
- ✦ How is each member encouraged to grow in faith throughout his or her lifetime?

- ✦ How is your parish, and how are your parishioners, embracing a life of generous stewardship of all you are and have and will be?
- ✦ In what ways does your community care for those most in need? How do parishioners live their faith in their lives away from the parish, in their homes, places of work, and in the world?

We are the two friends whose Holy Thursday story began this introduction. Our experience is yours, we are sure; our story is your story. We, like you, know that our parishes can be places of hope and love, signs of Christ's loving presence in our lives and in our world. We need only look again at all we are and do within parish ministry, consider the principles in this book, draw others to share this common vision of parish life with us, and take some first steps to make the vision a reality. Our parishes (and we ourselves) will be transformed, as we become communities of disciples and stewards who live their faith with glad and generous hearts.