

32<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (November 8, 2009)

Fr. Jerry Kopacek

First, I want to call your attention to one of the inserts to today's bulletin ... an update on the U.S. Catholic bishops' concerns about the health care proposals being considered by Congress that do not protect the sanctity of unborn life or the freedom of conscience. The bishops have asked that this important information be given to all parishioners throughout the country; please take some time to read and inform yourselves and then to act on these critical issues.

Our scripture readings today put the spotlight on two women, two widows who in the eyes of the world were anonymous at best. But their faith and their generosity have been remembered and held up for us as examples for thousands of years. The poor widow from Zarephath (1 Kings) was going to prepare something very meager for her son and her before they died. But she responds to the needs of Elijah; as a reward for her kindness, her food supply (flour and oil) did not run out—they had enough to live on. And the widow in the gospel put her last two coins in the temple treasury—all that she had to live on. An extraordinary generosity indeed—one that Jesus noticed and praised.

A generosity based on faith and gratitude (a gratitude that remembers that all that we have comes ultimately from God), a willingness and a desire to give from one's substance (and not merely from the leftovers): that is what authentic stewardship is all about. These readings provide a particularly timely opportunity to reflect on our call to be generous stewards of what God has given us: our time, talents and treasure. Regarding treasure, you recently received a letter from the parish inviting you to renew and even increase your sacrificial giving in 2010. You will notice the pledge cards in the pews; I'll say more about that process in a few moments.

I'm not going to go into a whole lot of detail about money at this point; for those details, I refer you to the annual financial report [...] you received earlier this year. That report shows once again how this parish has been a good and careful steward of the funds you have contributed. Our parish staff and pastoral and finance councils did a great job in keeping total expenses under budget. That was especially important since parish income was also less than what we had budgeted. I know that all of you have bills to pay (and so do I). But I trust you know that St. Ed's has lots of bills to pay as well—money that goes for a wide variety of goods and services that keep this parish alive and functioning. Every month our business manager prepares dozens of checks for me to sign for everything from electric and other utility bills (including the heat in winter and air conditioning in summer!) to staff salaries to what is needed to maintain our buildings and grounds to subsidies for our Catholic schools, religious education and other faith formation programs...and so many other things as well. Obviously we get no government or other outside financial help; there is no 'church bailout' program—we depend completely and totally on your generosity.

We also need to keep remembering that stewardship—grateful giving—is not about financial giving only. It certainly and necessarily involves that; again, we have to pay our bills as well as do our part to help the work of the larger archdiocesan and universal Church as well. But stewardship is more fundamentally a spirituality, indeed a way of life. How do we respond to the fact that God has given us all we have—life, time, talents as well as treasure? In recent years Archbishop Hanus has been challenging our archdiocese to grow in its understanding of stewardship and to embrace it more fully. In fact, he recently promulgated a new set of guidelines for our parish pastoral councils—one of which calls for each parish to have a stewardship committee. Here at St. Ed's, we have actually been ahead of the game—for several years we have already had such a committee in place, and an outstanding one it is! We meet on a regular basis to educate ourselves more formally as to what stewardship is all about and how we might challenge us as a parish to live it out more fully and authentically. The more we think about it, the more amazed we are at how many people contribute in so many ways to the life and mission of this parish. We are trying to

gather some detailed information about that so that you will be able to see how much you folks already do; I guarantee you: you will be amazed as well. And we want to acknowledge your generosity more formally—we are planning a volunteer appreciation event on Sunday, January 31, about three months from now. Stay tuned for further details on that over the next few weeks!

Why do we do what we do? Why do we give the amount we give? What is our motivation or reason for giving of our time, talent and treasure? Motivation is really the critical point about stewardship. Recall again the point Jesus made about those who contributed to the temple treasury—what we might call the first-century equivalent of the collection basket. That poor widow gave a very small amount in absolute terms—just a few cents' worth, not enough to make even a small dent in what it actually cost to maintain the temple as the place of worship it was. But Jesus praised her generosity because she gave all she had—it was a gift of the heart. One spiritual writer captures very well the heart of this gospel and the heart of genuine stewardship: “God does not consider the value of a gift, but looks at the heart and the particular situation of the giver. The widow, who out of love deprived herself of all that she owned, gave much more than the rich who donated large sums without depriving themselves of the least comfort.”

It's kind of like the little child who brings to mother a fistful of dandelions or a picture drawn at preschool just for her. The world sees nothing but a bunch of weeds or scribbles on a page, but Mom sees it as a gift of love more precious than dozens of red roses or any Rembrandt or Picasso. And you know just what Mom will do: those dandelions will go in a glass of water, and the drawing will go on the refrigerator door...right by all the other drawings!

I will not tell you what you must give; I cannot do so. I know that many people are facing severe financial challenges these days, some more so than others. But we cannot stop there; we should not even start there. Again, reflect and pray about your reasons for giving—time and talent as well as treasure. Think about what you have. And then remember that it all ultimately comes from the love and providence of God—he who will never, ever be outdone in generosity. Stewardship—the spirituality of gratitude—leads us to joyfully and thankfully give back to God the first fruits of our labors and our gifts. It does not give God only some of the leftovers. Mother Teresa of Calcutta—Blessed Teresa—once spoke of an occasion that illustrates this point. One evening a gentleman came to the sisters' house and said there was a Hindu family with many children who had not eaten in several days. He asked if the sisters could do something. So Mother Teresa got some rice from their supplies and went to that family. When she got there, she saw the hunger in the shallow eyes of the children, real hunger. The mother of those children took the rice from Mother and divided it in two portions and left the room with one portion. She said simply, “Next door they are hungry, also.” This mother, in dire poverty and with hungry children of her own--shared what she had been given with others who were also in need. True story.

I would ask you to please pass the pledge cards and pencils to the others in your pews. Take a moment now to fill it out and then place it in the collection basket or drop it off at the parish center. I would also remind you about e-tithing: arranging to have your contribution made automatically and electronically from your bank account. The mailing you received from the parish has information about that as well; it's a very easy and effective way to make your contribution. I am truly grateful for all the ways you good people give of yourselves to the work of the Church. I thank God every day in my prayers for every one of you, and I pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us all to a continued generous and thankful response to what God has first done for and given to us.