

## THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, Year C

Amos 8:4-7; Ps 113:1-2,4-6,7-8; 1 Tm 2:1-8; Lk 16:1-13 (Long Form)

### *STUCK IN A RUT*

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun

Saturday, September 21, 2019, 5:00 p.m. Mass

Sunday, September 22, 2019, 8:30 and 10:30 a.m. Masses

I get a lot of comments from people.

Here's one:

“Jesus did not speak about money very much,  
and neither should you!”

The truth is that Jesus spoke about money quite a bit  
because how we use our money reveals our spiritual values.

In today's gospel Jesus said,

“You cannot love God and money” (paraphrase, Lk 16:13b).

Next week we will have the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31).

They are both about money.

Actually, I have a moral obligation to speak about money,  
and how we use our money.

Generosity is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22).

St. Paul says, “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7).

Jesus says, “To those who have been given more, more is expected” (paraphrase, Lk 12:48).

We at St. Bart's have a problem.

Our parish is stuck in a rut when it comes to giving.

Over the last several of years there has been almost no increase in giving.

I really dislike hard-sell or aggressive fund raising.

I believe that the appeal should be a gentle invitation,

and that people, out of their faith and the goodness of their hearts,  
will hear the invitation and respond.

Two years ago we were in the midst of the *Ignite Your Faith* campaign.

We used Matthew Kelly's book, *The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic*.

The third sign of a dynamic Catholic is generosity (Chapter Four, pp. 109-140).

I invited our parishioners to be dynamic Catholics,

to be generous, to be strong financial supporters of our parish.

It was not aggressive, not hard-sell.

The result: the number of intention cards that were returned went down,

and the amount that was shared by parishioners that year  
was about the same as the previous year.

To be frank, I was disappointed.

Last year I thought a light-hearted approach would be nice,  
so we had a refrigerator up here,  
and we went through the refrigerator, all of our necessary expenses,  
and spoke about how people typically give the church their left-overs,  
but how God does not want our leftovers.  
God wants our first fruits (see Ex 23:19a; 34:26a; Lv 23:10; Dt 18:4; 26:10).  
God wants us to give him praise and thanks for the blessings that we have received.  
We are to make a return to the Lord.  
The Lord is to get the first dollars, not the last, the leftovers,  
because God comes first.  
I tried to be gentle and clear, not aggressive, not hard-sell.  
The result:  
the number of intention cards that were returned last year went down even more,  
and our overall giving last year increased by 1%.  
I was disappointed again, and frankly, not feeling very effective.  
This is a predicament.  
1% does not even keep up with inflation.

Fretting over this, I asked a number of our parishioners to get together  
and I asked them to give me their advice about we should do.

It was a beautiful Friday evening in July.  
They could have been out on the lake.  
But they love Jesus so much,  
and they are so committed to their Catholic faith,  
and they are so dedicated to our parish,  
that they said, “OK, Father, let’s work on this together.”

I gave them a frank assessment of our parish,  
and in unison they told me, “You have to tell the parish exactly what you have told us.”

I explained to them, and now to you,  
the financial reports in the bulletin last year in my opinion were a bit misleading.  
The bulletin gave the impression that we were more than \$100,000 behind in giving.  
But the budget income amount in the bulletin was a 7% increase from the previous year.  
It was a goal, an “aspirational budget” set by administration and the Finance Council,  
a stretch, how much we need to meet increasing costs,  
and how much we need to pay for the upgrades associated with the strategic plan.  
In the end, the increase in giving was 1%.

With this gap or shortfall, it would seem like we should be in a crisis,  
but we aren’t – at least yet.  
While we were down on income, we were also down on expenses.  
The parish’s biggest expense is salaries.  
Two positions, the Director of Engagement and the Director of Evangelization,  
were in the budget for the full year, but they were not hired until mid-year.

It amounted to a considerable savings.  
At the end of the year, we did not finish in the hole, in the red,  
but slightly to the good, barely in the black.

In the annual report that you just received in the mail,  
there are two pie charts, one for income showing \$3.5 million in revenue,  
and one for expense, showing \$3.1 million.  
It looks like we are \$400,000 to the good.  
That \$400,000 is not from regular parishioner donations,  
but rather, from a large will that was received last year.  
It went to savings. We need a buffer.

So I told our group that got together this summer: we have a problem.  
The good news is that we finally are fully staffed;  
that our parish is alive, much more than many other parishes.;  
and we have some savings.  
But, when we put the budget together for this year,  
we could not get it balanced without making cuts in personnel or programs.  
So the trustees and the Finance Council and the Pastoral Council were very emphatic:  
we cannot be making cuts; it is no time to pull back.  
We have so much spiritual momentum.  
We have to implement the strategic plan.  
We have to be a great parish.

Now I'm a fiscal conservative.  
I am all about living within our means and having a balanced budget.

So they advised me, if we need to dip into savings, we should dip into savings.  
So they councils recommended a budget for this year that is \$120,000 in the red.  
The plan is that if we fall short, we will dip into savings to make up the difference.  
The good news is that we have enough money savings right now to do this,  
but it will only work in the short term.  
This is not sustainable for long term.

The other thing that I told our summer group  
is that if we were to analyze parish donations,  
when it comes to giving,  
for the last several years, in general,  
people have given as much one year as they did the previous year.  
The majority of our parishioners have copied the same number over  
for two or three years in a row.  
Donations are a flat.  
The proof is last year's 1% increase.  
Expenses are up.  
We have a gap, and it is growing.  
We have trouble.

So I asked them, “What should I do?”

They said unanimously, “Tell the parish what you are telling us.

Tell the parish like it is.”

So here I am trying to do just that.

The group had two others things that they said I should do for you.

“Number One: answer the question,

‘Why does the parish need all that money, anyway?’

And Number Two: when you do your ‘little appeal,’

Speak in business terms because the parishioners will all understand.”

“Why does the parish need all this money?”

“What does the parish do with all this money?”

The money is used to fund our mission,

to be a community of disciples of Jesus,

to make the name of Jesus known and loved,

to be together on a spiritual journey that will lead to eternal life.

It takes people to do this.

The parish’s single biggest expense is salaries.

When you look up here, you see Richard and me.

And there is Pastoral Care, Engagement, Evangelization, Formation, Youth Ministry,

our Administrator, Development, Communications, Accounting, office staff, and maintenance.

And then we have the school: teachers, specialists, the principal, and the office staff.

Those of you who have jobs, you want to be paid a decent amount;

our employees want to be paid a decent amount, a just wage.

Nobody is getting rich by working for the church.

There have been modest salary increases each year: 2.5 or 3%.

Health care costs have gone up, too.

There are program costs: materials, books, computers, transportation.

And then all of the same costs that you have at home:

utilities, insurance, furnishings, repairs, home improvements.

It is expensive to run a first class operation.

Number Two.

They told me, “Father, you speak in spiritual terms all the time – maybe too much.

Speak in business terms this time.”

I typically speak about “tithing” or “making a return to the Lord.”

They said, “No! No! No!”

They said, “Speak about cost of living. Speak about inflation.

Speak about the value of the dollar.”

They told me, “The parishioners all have increasing costs at home.

So they will understand increasing costs to run the church.”

They also told me in no uncertain terms,

“Let them know that the dollar that they contributed last year, or two years ago,  
is worth less today.

If parishioners intend to contribute equal value,  
it is necessary to increase the dollar amount.”

They also told me,

“Parishioner donations ought to keep up with inflation or increases in the cost of living.  
So if inflation went up 3% last year,  
then what each parishioner contributes should go up 3% for the year,  
just so we can hold even.”

They were pretty forceful with me,

and they urged me to be very forthright with you.

They also told me,

“For the households that have not increased their giving over the past several years,  
they should not only do a 3% increase for this year,  
but they should go back and catch up for the previous years when they held even.”

They had another piece of advice for me.

The group was bothered by the fact that we have a deficit budget for this year.

It was their opinion that we ought to try to wipe out the deficit  
and not dip into savings at all.

They did some quick math, and it was pretty easy to do:

the amount of the deficit divided by the number of regular donors.

The result: if every regular donor makes a one-time gift of \$200

over and above their regular stewardship giving, it will wipe out this year’s shortfall.

They were quite insistent with me, “Father, don’t soft peddle. Challenge us.

The parishioners of St. Bart’s are very generous, and we will respond.

We have responded in the past, and we will respond again.”

This is all about funding our mission as the Church.

If we want to have a parish that is alive and growing,

it requires stewardship commitments that are alive and growing.

It is a matter of faith,

and what we do with our money expresses our priorities.

This is something to pray about.

This is our parish’s year of the Holy Spirit,

and generosity is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

From your prayer, come up with a plan, what you intend to give back to the Lord.

Then, please act on your plan, use one of the intention cards,

and name a specific amount to serve as your guide for the coming year.

The good work of the Church is of paramount importance.

The Lord Jesus wants us to be his partners in building the Kingdom of God.

In today’s gospel Jesus says, “You cannot love God and money” (paraphrase, Lk 16:13b).

Let’s not be stuck in a rut. Let us love God by the generous way we use our money.