

Our Time, Talent, and Treasure

His Grace, Michael – Bishop of New York & the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

Over the past two years, my travels have taken me across the breadth and depth of our Diocese. Having visited our 57 communities, the focus of my concern for this new year is “building up the strength of our parish churches.” Decades ago many of your grandparents and parents founded our parishes; then they built our temples; and finally they adorned the interior beauty of those churches. Now, it falls to us, to carry on their legacy by strengthening our parishes so that they will remain beacons of Holy Orthodoxy in our communities, not only for our children and grandchildren but until Christ comes again.

Strengthening our parishes means that each one of us must use our time, our talents, and our treasure in thanksgiving to God for all the blessings He gives us each year, each week, each day ... for the building up of Christ’s Holy Church. It has been my goal as your diocesan bishop to do my share to build up the strength of our parishes. I have tried to visit each of our communities as often as I can ... not only for anniversaries, ordinations, and other special occasions ... but also for just normal weekend services. Our Diocese has provided conferences and gatherings for parish council members, choir directors and singers, altar servers, young people, and families.

Also on deck for this year are conferences for Church School curriculum and outreach efforts. We have NOT raised diocesan assessments; instead, we have tried to generate income in a new way: the Distinguished Diocesan Benefactor Program. The Diocese has urged an alternative way of funding the national Church as well. I have personally asked not to be given honoraria during my visits, and whatever gifts I have received I have returned or given to diocesan causes. All of this has been done “to strengthen our parish churches.”

But this is hardly enough; it falls upon all of us to do everything we can in gratitude to God for His countless blessings: to share our time and talent and treasure to make our parishes stronger. I urge each of you to examine your hearts and ask: Do I give worthily of the 168 hours of life God gives me each week back to Him through my time in personal prayer and my participation in Sunday Liturgies, Saturday Vespers, and weekday feasts?

Make every effort this year to come to Church more often; to bring with you elderly persons or those who cannot drive; to invite family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers who are not attending church services to participate in the beauty of worship in your parish. Make this your goal of 2012: *Each one, reach one; each one, touch one* – for Christ and our Church.

Whatever gifts God has given you – as a singer or a teacher, an accountant or a computer expert, a baker or a landscaper, an electrician or a carpenter, a lawyer or a doctor or a nurse – share your talents for the strengthening of your local church. Whatever services you can provide for the parish, do so for the glory of God and in the spirit of those founders, builders and benefactors who came before us.

Lastly, with rising costs of utilities and insurance, health care coverage and everyday expenses, it is essential that each one of us, out of love for our Savior, make sacrificial gifts to His Church that are of proportionate measure. Each of us needs to give to our parishes as much as we are able to ensure their continued, healthy operation.

What does a proportional gift of sacrificial love look like? Let’s not use the standards of the world, but the example of the Scripture. Let’s examine the very first gift of sacrificial love that God accepted in the Bible. In Genesis 4, we read that God received the offering of Adam’s younger son Abel – which was the first born of his flock of sheep. God rejected the offering of Cain – what was left over from the harvest of fruits from his farm.

Like Abel and so many others in the Scripture after him, we too need to give our first and our best as our offering to the Lord. Let me suggest – that those of us who work, offer the first hour worth of wage each week (something known only between us and God) in thanksgiving to the Lord for all His blessings – cheerfully, lovingly, and regularly each week. The first of the harvest of our labors, every week – that is our pledge – whether we come to church that week or are on vacation – in gratitude to God Who blesses us every week, and for the benefit of His Church in our parish community. And if you are already doing this – then consider if you can do even more – if your blessing from Him has been greater.

Let us remember the words of God Himself through His prophet: “Put Me to the test, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not open for you the floodgates of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it is overflowing” (Malachi 3:10). All this I have presented might seem a great deal of giving of time and talent and treasure, but we must remember how much our God has already given to us. Besides our life, our talents, and our other blessings, “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16) ... “Greater love than this has no one,” Jesus said, “than to lay down one’s life for his friends ... You are My friends if you do what I have commanded you” (John 15:13-14), and then He went to the Cross. We must never forget that God is the greatest Giver. No matter how much we give back to Him, we cannot out give what He gives to us.

And so, in this new year, my beloved in Christ, I urge you to open your hearts in gratitude to God for all His blessings and give ever more of your time in Church, your talents for the parish, your treasure in the name of the Lord – and in so doing strengthen your parish church. In imitation of the founders, builders, and benefactors before you ... and to the glory of the God who loves us more than we love ourselves – the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages! Amen.