

First Fruits

The Stewardship Newsletter of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

February 2019 Volume 4 / No. 2 nynjoca.org

Stewardship of the Priest

by Archpriest Gary Joseph Breton

If we define stewardship as caring for all that God has given to us, then it stands to reason that we need to care for the priests of our parishes. This may be obvious to many, but others may take for granted the necessity to care for one's parish priest.

How should one care for one's parish priest? I would like to offer five particular ways in which one can do so: 1) Pray for him, 2) Understand his role, 3) Support his work, 4) Offer to help him, 5) Compensate him.

1) Pray for him. The Orthodox Church guides us in our daily prayers to pray for others, including our parish priest. Your priest needs your prayers. He has a difficult job. He must combat not only his own shortcomings, but the resistance to the Faith that he encounters as he endeavors to lead his flock and preach the Gospel to the world around him. We Christians are involved in a great spiritual battle. By virtue of his position, your priest is often the lightning rod who stands on the front line and receives the direct blows from the enemy. When a priest knows that he is being prayed for, he is encouraged and empowered to endure the blows and persevere with love. This battle is constant, and the strategy of the enemy often changes. The prayer of the faithful for the priest is always welcomed and is essential to his leadership role in warring against an enemy who seeks to destroy the Christian Faith wherever it is in evidence, especially in the life of the parish.

2) Understand his role. It is important that we understand the role and responsibility of our parish priest. In our diocesan by-laws, we find this statement which conveys two important points: "At the head of the parish is the Rector, who is assigned by the Bishop." The first point is that the Rector (parish priest) is at the head of the parish. We may think that the priest is only responsible for the "religious" activity that takes place in the parish, but it is stated later in the by-laws that he "assures that all activities within the parish serve the

mission of the Church." The second point is that the diocesan bishop assigns the priest to a particular parish. This differs from other faith communities that "hire" a pastor to serve them. So, we see that the parish priest is assigned to a parish by the diocesan bishop to make sure that the parish is reflective of "the Church" in all that it does and proclaims. This includes oversight not only of the liturgical aspects of the parish, but of those pertaining to parish finances, education, outreach, evangelism, vocations, etc. So, the role and responsibility of each and every parish priest is to oversee all that occurs within the parish to which he is assigned by the diocesan bishop.

3) Support his work. We may be tempted from time to time to criticize what a priest does in his ministry or how he does it. Some criticism may be valid, but it is important that we refrain from making judgments on his decisions and choices when it comes to overseeing the parish. Instead, encourage him. Offer him advice (not directives) in a spirit of love and care for the well-being of the priest and the parish. Gently remind him if a promise he has made has not been fulfilled in a timely way. Accept his humanity and his shortcomings; know that he may not be an expert on time management or may not have superior people skills. Accept his decisions with grace and humility, knowing that in his judgment, each decision is made for the good of the parish. Forgive him for his mistakes and encourage him with good words of support. All of this goes a long way to help him become an even better parish priest and help the parish to become even more healthy in its relationship with him.

4) Offer to help him. There is much to do in a parish: worship services; visits to the sick and/or shut-in parishioners; maintenance of the church, hall, rectory, grounds; fund-raising; meetings; church school; adult education; coffee hour; weekly bulletin; etc. It is unhealthy for a parish to expect the priest to be solely responsible for the accomplishment of all, or even

many, of these aspects of parish life. Yes, the priest is ultimately responsible for ensuring that all these things are done in good order, but the burden of making them happen should belong to the entire parish. When a task needs to be done, offer to help. When a committee is formed, offer to join and even to chair it if you are able. When you see a piece of litter on the parish grounds, pick it up and dispose of it. Parish life requires community effort. If we all have a part in this effort, the priest will be able to more effectively address what is most needful for the parish.

5) Compensate him. This is a sensitive and complicated subject. It should be very straightforward, but many variables often creep into the compensation conversation to muddy the waters and create confusion and tension. Does the parish compensate the priest completely for medical coverage? What happens when the priest's family medical coverage is provided by the Matushka's secular employer? What about housing, mileage reimbursement, pension, social security, continuing education, etc.?

Clergy compensation guidelines for our Diocese were published several years ago with an updated version planned for future release. Likewise, other OCA dioceses have developed their own guidelines over the years. These are all in place to ensure that priests are sufficiently supported financially by their parish so that they can effectively do the work that needs to be done in God's Vineyard. These guidelines are helpful, but the overarching guideline for compensating the parish priest must be the Bible. Like the Apostles did, your priest has most likely left behind a life that included secular employment. He was possibly the breadwinner of the family before he entered seminary and became a priest. He still has living expenses, just as you do. His life now is to serve God and serve his parishioners. The priest is not after "your money"; he is seeking to support his ministry and his family. This requires the financial support of his parishioners, those whom he is serving and to whom he is ministering.

So, support your parish priest financially with your cheerful giving. Continue to give, but also continue to pray for him to live up to the high calling of his priestly ordination. He will be judged by God for his ministry. God will judge us all, priests and laypeople alike, for our actions and our inactions. Let us not be judged as being spiteful and vengeful, but as caring and forgiving and open-hearted.

These are but five ways in which parishioners can support their parish priest, and there are surely many

other ways. In all that we do, let us love our priest. Let us support his ministry of preaching and teaching the Gospel as it manifests itself in parish life. Let us be a help to him. Let us be appreciative of his efforts made on our behalf. Let us pray for his salvation so that he may stand before God and have his ministry be judged by Him as worthy and well done.

Thoughts on Stewardship

by Archpriest Peter Olsen

Our finances tend to be the key area that people refer to when speaking of stewardship. I think the main reason is that often money is one of the most difficult things for people to give. At least for me that used to be the case. I was okay giving my energy, offering my time, or sharing my abilities, but money was not something that I was interested in giving away. That is probably why God had to work on me for so long to help me change my attitude!

One of the things that helped me was keeping focus on the fact that I came into the world with nothing and would leave with nothing. I began to look at all my possessions as merely being "on loan." This has helped me begin to see myself more as a "steward" rather than a "possessor".

I remember a friend of mine saying that he was talking to a well-known violinist about his violin. The violinist had mentioned that the violin was a couple hundred years old and worth many hundreds of thousands of dollars. The interesting point I remember from the conversation was the way the violinist viewed himself as a steward of the instrument. He knew that many great musicians had played the instrument before he was even born. He was also not naive to think that he would be the last to play the fine instrument. He understood that it was just temporarily passing through his hands.

The violinist's outlook on his violin has really helped me get a better understanding of the role possessions should have in my life. Changing my thinking in this way has affected how I handle my money and even my weekly buying decisions. It's not that having possessions is a good or bad thing, just that we need to see it in the proper perspective.