

Stewardship keynoter: 'It's a way of life, not a program'



Written by Lou Jacquet

Wednesday, 12 October 2011 08:48

WARREN — The annual diocesan Stewardship Day, held this year on Sept. 22 at Blessed Sacrament Parish here, featured a priest from the Diocese of Cleveland whose parish has embraced stewardship in a big way and seen results beyond their expectations and imagination.

Father Timothy O'Connor used humorous anecdotes and concrete examples to share the vision of how his parish, St. Joseph in the Cleveland suburb of Avon Lake, has made stewardship "a way of life" since 2005. Many blessings and benefits have come out of that decision, he told those present, adding that stewardship — properly understood — can benefit parishes in the Diocese of Youngstown as well.

Father O'Connor, a Cleveland diocesan priest ordained in 1975, has been pastor of St. Joseph for 16 years. In that time, he said, it has grown from 800 to 1,750 households.

"I'm not an expert on stewardship," he said. "That's not why I'm here today. I'm here as a witness to stewardship as a way of life in my life and in an ongoing way in our parish." The parish motto is "One Family in Christ." Like every parish in the Cleveland Diocese, it is partnered with other parishes. The Cleveland Diocese, which once had 565 priests in 1970, now has 257; there are now 174 parishes where there had been 224. Stewardship has been critical to the success of parishes working together, he said.

"I have seen what we are doing as a cluster of parishes, very similar to the success of embracing stewardship as a way of life. If we don't do stewardship as a way of life fully, it is very hard to partner fully. Because of stewardship as a way of life in our parishes, we are trying to ask people to think beyond themselves and their own family to think about the whole parish family, the diocesan family and the Church universal family."

Instilling stewardship was important when St. Joseph had to build a new church to seat 1,300, and renovate its existing church into a parish hall, the priest said. "Stewardship as a way of life helped direct our vision," he explained, noting that it is an ongoing process that is "not done" and "remains day-to-day."

After attending a workshop on stewardship, the pastor came away with an important insight, he told those present. "Capital campaigns emphasize treasure, with the hope that time and talent will follow," he said. In contrast, "'stewardship as a way of life' looks at the time and talent and hopes the treasure will follow."

Father O'Connor drew appreciative laughter when he recounted "growing up in a stewardship family," where he had to give one-tenth of his fifty-cent-a-week allowance to the parish in emulation of his parents' tithe. "I grew up Catholic," he explained. "I didn't know any other way. I thought everybody did this. I wish!"

Because stewardship is "a way of life and not a program," he said, it is no surprise that those who give generously are those most interested in the life of the greater Church family. Parishioners who don't value the life of the Church and the parish will not share of the treasure, no matter how many mailings they might receive on the subject, the priest added.

At St. Joseph's, stewardship was initiated for one year after prayer and discussion with consultative groups. A professional stewardship firm was brought in to begin the process. Collections have indeed gone up, but the key thing, Father O'Connor said, is that participation in the life of the parish keeps growing. A monthly parish newsletter has helped in that regard,

highlighting some of the 70 ministries the parish is now involved in.

The parish Stewardship Committee does not solve problems, the pastor said; it discusses “how to enable wonderful things to go on in our parish. We’ll try new ideas even if they are not my cup of tea.” Among the results: attendance at Mass on Sundays and weekdays has increased, three young men from the parish have entered the seminary and one has been ordained, and parishioners now expect homilies on stewardship and don’t equate them with mere appeals for funds.

“Now they understand it is time and talent as well as treasure,” Father O’Connor stressed. “It’s a whole package. Our time, our talent and our treasure are all gifts to us from God. I show my gratitude by sharing generously. People in the parish sacrifice different gifts but they all come from the heart. I give according to the way I have been blessed; someone else receives according to what they need. It’s really the Acts of the Apostles in flesh and blood. That’s what stewardship is as a way of life. Stewardship enables us as stewards to become, day by day, better disciples of Christ.”

Father O’Connor shared a dramatic example of stewardship’s impact on his parish. A parishioner had given an anonymous donation to fund a three-night retreat with Matthew Kelly, an Australian/American author speaker who has traveled around the world speaking on Catholicism. “What a gift!” the priest said. The church was filled each night, standing room only, and later the parish bought 2,100 copies of Kelly’s book, “Rediscovering Catholicism,” to be gift-wrapped and given to parishioners on Christmas Eve. The whole process led to faith formation, evangelization and re-evangelization on the part of many, Father O’Connor added.

Kelly’s latest book, “Dream Manager,” flat out changed his life, the pastor said, by making him realize that he had stopped dreaming and become too practical in his goals for the parish. “It changed the way I view parish life and my role in parish life,” Father O’Connor explained.

He had felt he didn’t have time to dream, being the only priest serving the parish, but once he did, new things began to happen at the parish. A Sunday evening Mass was added and drew crowds; tuition was reduced at the parish school.

“I ask you today,” he said, “what is your dream? Do you know what it is? Have you stopped dreaming? Do you know what your spouse’s dreams are? Do you know what your kids’ dreams are?”

Father O’Connor noted that “everything great in history has been built by people who believed that the future can be bigger than the past.” He challenged the members of parish stewardship committees present to be dreamers, to think of new ideas for their parishes. Those who stop dreaming, he added, “lead lives of quiet desperation and, little by little, the passion and energy begin to disappear in our lives.”

Pat Palombo heads the office of Development/Stewardship in the Diocese of Youngstown. For information on available materials for use in parishes, contact him at 330-744-8451.