

**Homily for Mass for the Bishop's Gift Society Banquet
Christ the King Church, Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, just yesterday, I and several leaders from the diocese returned from a short trip to southeast Kansas to meet with some of the leadership of the Diocese of Wichita. The purpose of our trip was not to negotiate with them to try to get Bishop Kemme to come back to our diocese, although we were tempted to do so! Instead, the goal of our visit was to learn some lessons from them about their model of stewardship, one which has become extremely well-known and effective.

The story of stewardship in the Diocese of Wichita is one of growth. It began with the vision of one pastor in one parish more than forty-five years ago. The vision spread to other parishes in the diocese and in 1984, Bishop Eugene Gerber began the process of discerning how such a model could be employed to meet the growing challenges and needs throughout the diocese. The following year, those involved in the process reached a consensus that the diocese would embrace a parish-based stewardship way of life. The results have been astounding. The weekly Mass attendance is nearly double the national average. Every child desiring Catholic

education has the opportunity to receive it without paying tuition. Twenty-five percent of the parishes in the diocese have 24/7 adoration chapels where the faithful come to pray. The number of seminarians in formation for the priesthood is over sixty. These are but a few of the remarkable blessings for the diocese that have emerged due in large part to this culture of stewardship.

During my four years as bishop here in our diocese, I have travelled to nearly every parish and have seen the various ways in which the faith is lived and passed on to new generations. There are many very good things that are happening that give me great hope for the future of this diocese. At the same time, though, it is easy to fall into a sense of complacency, operating on what I would call a maintenance mode whereby the status quo is considered sufficient as we move forward.

In this regard, it is helpful to reflect on the notion of stewardship. Stewardship is a theme that runs throughout the Scriptures. At the very beginning of creation, we hear how God entrusted man with the task of being a steward of all of creation.¹ In our first reading for today's Mass, St. Paul reminds us that we should all be regarded as "servants of Christ and

stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). As stewards, we must be conscious that what has been entrusted to us is not meant to be buried and remain unused, but rather, we are called to make good use of those gifts so that they can grow.² A key part of stewardship in God’s plan, then, is growth.

Over the past year, I have begun to consider how it is that we can begin a process of strategic planning for growth in the Church here in our diocese. The growth envisioned is far more than just a quantitative increase in the number of people or the amount of money available to our parishes and the diocese. It is also essential to ensure that we give significant attention to the qualitative growth that will guarantee sustainability for generations that follow. I am aware that such a plan for growth is ambitious, but it is one that I am very optimistic about, especially given my familiarity with what this diocese has to offer and the many ways in which various groups are already poised to contribute to that growth.

One such group that gives me encouragement is all of you who are members of the Bishop’s Gift Society for the Annual Catholic Services Appeal. Your generosity is greatly appreciated, not just because it helps to

provide much needed financial resources, but because you are aware that the campaign is about more than just money. You believe in the value of the many services that are funded by the campaign, services that are aligned to assist our parishes to grow both quantitatively and qualitatively. It is very fitting that the theme for our campaign this year, "Growing Communities of Faith," reflects this concept of growth which is at the heart of what it means to be good stewards of the gifts that the Lord has generously shared with us.

I would therefore encourage you to continue the wonderful efforts that you have demonstrated in supporting the Annual Catholic Services Appeal. In addition to what you are already doing, I would like to invite you to see the important role that you play in fostering a spirituality and a culture of stewardship and growth in your families and parishes. Such a culture will not be possible if we expect the leaders and those with special training to carry all of the load. All of us have a part to play, and all of you who are convinced of the value of building such a culture have much to offer in helping this idea become a reality.

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel, our Holy Father Pope Francis offers a helpful reflection in this regard as he talks about the various ways in which each of us are called to contribute to the work of evangelization. You can easily substitute the word evangelization with the word growth as it means the same thing in the context in which I have been using it. The Holy Father writes:

All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we

are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”.³

My dear brothers and sisters, I am asking that each of you see yourself as a missionary disciple in assisting in the important work of growth in our parishes and in our diocese. This begins with gratefully recognizing that all that we have is a gift from the Lord, and out of that generosity, we respond with generosity by sharing those gifts with others and by supporting those services which assist the faithful to deepen their relationship with Christ so that they may become missionary disciples themselves, stewards of the gifts that they have received.

May our reception of our greatest gift in the Holy Eucharist at this Mass enflame our hearts with a desire to embrace more fully a path of discipleship and stewardship throughout our diocese as we all journey together toward the reward of eternal life promised to those who have been faithful servants of what has been entrusted to them.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Genesis 1:28.

² Matthew 25:14-30.

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.