

WHAT DO I OWN AND WHAT OWNS ME?

*Reflections on the Stewardship Message of
Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy*

by
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Introduction

My first private conversation with Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy took place in 1990 in Seattle. I was beginning a research project (the findings of which were eventually published as *The Reluctant Steward*) whose purpose was to examine the attitudes of pastors and seminary leaders on faith and money. As a former rector of the Archdiocese of Chicago's major seminary (St. Mary-of-the-Lake, Mundelein, Ill.) and the newly appointed chairman of the United States Catholic bishops' ad hoc committee on stewardship, Archbishop Murphy was at the top of my list of persons to interview.

It was not easy to schedule an appointment with Archbishop Murphy. The Archdiocese of Seattle had assigned an administrative assistant to the then-coadjutor archbishop, but he kept his own calendar and was difficult to pin down. After multiple phone calls and many proposed and rejected dates, I finally got an appointment. I was told that the only slot available on the archbishop's calendar was a Wednesday morning breakfast meeting at a hotel in downtown Seattle (within walking distance of St. James Cathedral and the Chancery office). I was advised that the archbishop's time was limited and that I should be prompt.

I remember two things about this first personal encounter with Archbishop Murphy. The first was his passion for stewardship. The second was his personal warmth and gracious hospitality.

I was keenly aware of the archbishop's limited time, but he never gave any indication that he was in a hurry. In fact, he was so caught up in the discussion of "sturdship" (as he pronounced it) that he acted like he had all the time in the world.

During this one-hour interview, the archbishop taught me about stewardship—using anecdotes, stories and personal examples that I would later hear over and over again in his Diocesan Stewardship Day talks and in the presentations he made during the International Catholic Stewardship Council's (ICSC) Institute for Stewardship and Development. The core of this stewardship message can be found in a talk Archbishop Murphy gave in Indianapolis in November 1993 to representatives from the five Catholic dioceses of Indiana. This talk, which the archbishop called "Reflections on the Pastoral Letter," was preserved on videotape by the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, and it has been used in a wide variety of pastoral and educational settings ever since. In addition, the archbishop's final reflections on stewardship, which were published posthumously in the fall of 1997 in a chapter entitled, "Giving from the Heart" (GH) in *The Practice of Stewardship in Religious Fundraising*, Volume 17 of "New Directions in Philanthropic Fundraising," a professional journal published by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University and Jossey-Bass Publishers.

During the seven years I was blessed to know him, I heard Archbishop Murphy give his stewardship talk (or some variation of it) at least 15 times—in parish halls, hotel conference rooms, retreat houses and seminaries from Baltimore to Chicago to Orlando to Indianapolis to Los Angeles. I have now watched the archbishop's videotaped talk at least 30 times—on wide-screen projection equipment in state-of-the-art auditoriums and on 13-inch monitors with tinny audio in cavernous old church gymnasiums. The message is always powerful. The audience reaction is always the same. Archbishop Murphy's passion for stewardship is contagious!

As a result of this immersion into the teaching of Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy, which began during breakfast in that Seattle hotel a dozen years ago, I have come to the conclusion that the archbishop's stewardship message can be summarized in one two-part question: *What do I*

own, and what owns me? He posed this question to me during our breakfast interview, and he kept on asking it for the next seven years until he was taken from us (too soon by our reckoning) on June 26, 1997.

What do I own, and what owns me? I believe this question is the key to the archbishop's understanding and practice of stewardship *as a way of life*. Archbishop Murphy was keenly aware that, in the final analysis, he owned (or controlled) nothing and was, instead, owned (or possessed) wholly and completely by "a good and gracious God." This basic insight permeates all his teaching, and I believe it is the heart of the stewardship message that he sought to convey in his talks, written reflections and (above all) in the work of the U.S. bishops' committee on stewardship.

At the time that I first came to know Archbishop Murphy—and was privileged to teach with him and travel with him throughout the United States—his most powerful illustration of the stewardship message was his personal experience of major surgery in Chicago in the 1970s.

As I was wheeled into the surgical room, it suddenly dawned on me: You know, when you're in that surgical room it doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter one darn bit what you own. What matters at that moment in time is a competent surgical team and a good and gracious God.¹

To surrender control (or the illusion of control) and trust in the generous God who has given us everything we have, and all that we are, is the sum and substance of Archbishop Murphy's experience of stewardship as "a lifestyle that reflects who we are and what we believe."

At the end of his life, when he was dying from leukemia, Archbishop Murphy's witness to stewardship became much more profound. But it was the same message: Life is a gift to be cherished, shared and given back to the Lord with increase. In the end, we will be held accountable not for who we are (our status, prestige or accomplishments) and not for what we

¹ All quotes are taken from Archbishop Murphy's videotaped remarks, "Reflections on the Pastoral Letter," November, 1993, Indianapolis, IN.

possess (houses, cars, bank balances or stock portfolios). Instead, we will be asked to render an account of our taking and giving. We will be asked:

Have you shared yourself (and your possessions) generously with others—because it's the right thing to do and because you really want to? Have you nurtured and developed all God's gifts and returned them with increase? Can you honestly say that you have "lived a lifestyle of sharing" and, so, have "built a holy place within your life, your parishes, your diocese, your Church"?

Thomas J. Murphy did not formulate a theology of stewardship. As a bishop, he articulated a pastoral vision of stewardship as a way of life, and he communicated that vision in many ways. Surely the most significant and enduring way that Archbishop Murphy shared his vision of stewardship with others was through his leadership role in the development and publication of the U.S. Catholic bishops' 1992 pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*.

I believe it is important to note how significant this pastoral letter was to Archbishop Murphy and to his stewardship message.

The archbishop said many times that the stewardship pastoral could be summarized in one sentence from St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: "What God wants is for all of you to be holy" (1Thes. 4:3). For Archbishop Murphy, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* was designed to be a spiritual reflection on the call to live a holy life in today's world. As such, the pastoral is a powerful expression of the stewardship message that the archbishop and his brother bishops on the ad hoc committee wanted to convey to the Catholic people of the United States, described by Archbishop Murphy as "citizens of a wealthy, powerful nation facing many questions about its identity and role in the waning years of a troubled century."

Archbishop Murphy took delight in the fact that *this* pastoral letter doesn't look like a church document. It's too easy to read and understand! The archbishop was also intensely proud

of the fact that “the stewardship pastoral, if you look at it carefully, only mentions finances twice in its entire 64 pages!”

Stewardship: A Disciple's Response is a pastoral (and, in many ways, poetic) expression of the vision that was at the core of Archbishop Murphy's stewardship message. It is not systematic theology, biblical study or even catechetical instruction. The stewardship pastoral is a spiritual reflection on the way mature disciples are called to follow Jesus Christ without counting the cost. It's a reflection on the journey to holiness that is at the heart of Christian life.

Individuals or groups who look to the pastoral letter to provide practical guidelines on church fund raising or finances are bound to be disappointed. According to Archbishop Murphy, the pastoral letter is not what many people expected because “stewardship as we look at it and reflect on it goes beyond the mere sharing of financial gifts. . . . It asks us to do something that is far more difficult, and that is to share ourselves.”

Archbishop Murphy did not consider *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* to be the “last word” on stewardship. In fact, shortly before he was hospitalized with leukemia in 1996, the archbishop asked me to help him solicit funding for a “National Pastoral Plan” for stewardship. Because of his subsequent illness and untimely death, I never got the chance to find out what Archbishop Murphy had in mind for this “national pastoral plan.” All I know for sure is that he regarded the pastoral letter as the beginning of a stewardship journey—not the end.

Thomas J. Murphy was given a rare gift. He could inspire others with his passion for stewardship . . . “as something far more radical than fund raising . . . as one of the chief characteristics of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ . . . as a call to faith and conversion . . . as a source of grace and deepening spirituality.” The archbishop was a good steward of this precious gift, and the pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, is his legacy!

When my breakfast interview with Archbishop Murphy was finished, I began to put away my things—conscious of the archbishop's limited time. “What do you have scheduled for the rest

of the morning?” he asked me. I told him that I planned to return to my hotel room and write up my notes.

He said, “Come with me to the chancery. I want you to meet Archbishop Hunthausen and the great people who work in our stewardship office!”

So, off we went, walking up the hill overlooking Puget Sound, still talking about stewardship, and when we arrived at the chancery, Archbishop Murphy personally gave me a tour of the building and introduced me to everyone we met along the way! I felt like a prodigal son returned at last from a faraway land (and a lifestyle that could hardly be called good stewardship). Three hours later, I said goodbye to Archbishop Murphy and returned to my hotel room.

Without realizing it, I became a disciple of Archbishop Murphy that day. He had won me over (lock, stock and barrel) with his passion for stewardship and his amazing, overwhelming hospitality. There would be many more days—at the ICSC conferences and institutes, at meetings and seminars, in cars and on airplanes. (We even went through a Los Angeles mudslide together on our way from LAX to St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo. We arrived at the seminary long after the time for our evening presentations, but Archbishop Murphy’s reputation was such that all classes were cancelled the next morning and we received the students’—and the faculty’s—undivided attention!) On each of these occasions, I had a similar experience of his passion and his hospitality. I also heard him ask himself, me and everyone else in the room, “What do I own, and what owns me?”

Archbishop Murphy taught me that stewardship means letting go of my independence, my ego, my need for control and my desire to “be someone.” He showed me that true stewardship means “that I depend on a good and gracious God for who I am and what is mine—because they are all gifts to me.” He illustrated his powerful stewardship message with funny stories, personal examples and whatever media he had access to (videotapes, paintings, poetry, even Peanuts cartoons). One of his favorite quotes was from an artist in the Pacific Northwest who painted nativity scenes in contemporary settings. Regarding the artist’s depiction of the birth of Jesus as

an infant born to poverty and homelessness, shivering in his mother's arms, the archbishop quotes the artist, saying, "We are invited to hold a shivering God within our hands, and that shivering God, in turn, holds us."

Archbishop Murphy taught that "stewardship invites us to assume a lifestyle of sharing, and in the divine economy, to discover the richness of finding God." May we find this abundance of grace and deepening spirituality in the Scriptures, in the pastoral letter on stewardship, and in the words and example of this good and gracious steward, Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy.

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