

Funding the Diocese on Two Mites

And he sat down opposite the treasury (of the temple), and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living." Mark 12:41-44

As you all know we are in the process of seeking to adopt another way of looking at how we fund the needs for the Midwest Diocese. We had hoped to have this proposal ready for you at this assembly to vote on. However, we needed more time to properly determine the needs of the Diocese and how that relates to the proportional giving method, which I am hoping the Diocesan Assembly will adopt at the 2018 Assembly. It is my expectation that we will be ready to present a proposal to you then. I apologize to those who hoped for something to happen sooner.

I started with the gospel story from Mark because I think it conveys a paradoxical and important message about giving. To be honest I think some of us when we think about funding the diocese or our parishes, we want our wealthy parishes to put large sums of money in the treasury so we can adequately cover the needs for our budget. The idea of collecting two copper coins from parishes to fund a diocese or from people to fund a parish doesn't make any sense. But there is something more important here worth commenting on. It speaks to the attitude we have about giving and how we think through our giving.

As our Lord said, the rich people who gave large sums of money gave out of their abundance. The giving was also calculated. There was apparently no sacrifice involved in what was put in the treasury. Isn't that how the majority of us run our lives and determine our giving? We calculate and figure out what can I give in such a way that it doesn't cost me to give.

In looking at the widow, she put in a mere two copper coins in the treasury. But as our Lord said, she out of her poverty put in everything she had, her whole living. There was a great sacrifice in her giving and it cost her to give. She wasn't playing it safe. Why did she act this way? The text doesn't give an answer; it only leaves us to further reflect upon this.

I will get back to this gospel story. Speaking now for myself I always hated the idea of counting parish numbers as a priest because it defined parish members in terms of money given. The temptation of course would be to report less numbers because people didn't give a certain monetary amount and so don't count them as members. It didn't matter if they came to church regularly or received the sacraments or volunteered their time. No dues, no fair share assessment paid, no member. So now I find myself at the receiving end

of parish reports and seeing that in some, numbers have noticeably declined from the previous year.

We also have less people supporting a budget that (so it seems) continues to increase. I reported last year that from 1996 we have had a 35 to 40% drop in diocesan membership. Based on our current situation, are we asking too much? At what point does the diocese need to live within its means? We have not had an assessment increase since 2009 as we have been funding our budget deficits over the last few years from the escrow fund which the 2014 Assembly approved as means to address the deficit. However once the remainder of the escrow money is spent, we will need to address that we have been spending \$25 to \$35 thousand more that what we receive from our parishes. If we stay on the current formula of fair share assessment, we will either need to raise the assessment or cut our budget to exercise good stewardship.

What is a fair and equitable way of addressing this? What doesn't make sense to me is making a fewer amount of people support an increasing budget. But is the budget too much? I imagine we could cut salaries or stipends but is that fair given the work that is done by all? It is not as if people are living high on the hog from these stipends. The good news is that I will get on Medicare next year, which should decrease health care costs that the diocese needs to provide for me. But that won't make up for the deficit either.

The reason why I support a proportional giving formula for supporting our diocese is that it makes giving a function of what parishes **actually have**, to give. It eliminates the membership numbers game as means of determining what that amount **should** be.

But let me get back the story of the widow and the two copper coins. Call me a fool but I actually like the idea of our diocese being funded on her two mites. I want to further reflect on what her motive could have been in giving which I think is the key to this whole thing.

Motivation number one: The widow gave everything she had, her whole living, Giving can't be calculated where we can play it safe. Giving does involve a sacrifice; it can't be costless. *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Matthew 13: 45-46* The sacrifice in giving becomes joyful and determined based on these words from Matthew. Zacchaeus demonstrated this same attitude of giving in his repentance before our Lord as reported in the gospel of Luke. I have to believe that what motivated the widow's giving cited in Mark was joy and adoration towards our Lord.

Motivation number two: The widow out of her poverty gave everything she had, her whole living

In giving everything she had, she loved the Lord with her possessions. She understood nothing belonged to her and she was only giving back to the temple what belonged to the Lord to begin with.

Motivation number three: The widow freely gave everything she had, her whole living

She didn't worry about herself and what would happen to her by giving all that she had.

I realize here I am venturing from the realm of reason and rationality to becoming a fool and not too practical. What am I trying to say? Starting with myself we need to have more of us in the Diocese behaving like this widow. The two mites of her giving are not just about two copper coins, but what they represent. We will never arrive at healthy giving on a diocesan level unless this continues to happen on a parish level and even more so on a personal level.

I am reminded of a story I have shared with many of you so forgive me for repeating it. Sometime in the 1980's there was a story on 60 Minutes about a family (husband and wife) who I believe had four kids. When the time came for all four to be put through college, the parents sold their comfortable home and moved into a trailer home. They used the money from the home sale to pay for the tuition. You see what mattered to them more was the well being of their children and the their life as a family. This foolish act of love was self-emptying. Too often in life we focus on keeping what we have and preserving what we have. This couple reminds me of the widow who gave her two mites or copper coins.

Typically this address deals with the state of the diocese. I do think this issue regarding the eventual Stewardship proposal goes to the heart of diocesan health and stability. So much so that I have asked David Batrich, the Stewardship Director of the Serbian Diocese to speak with us in a few minutes about why it is so important that we become good stewards of what we have been entrusted with.

Last year I shared with you what my vision of the Diocese is and where we need to go. I have shared with you an encyclical on family life and the hope to develop a family ministry oriented web page. We are now in the mode of doing a yearly diocesan youth activity, I have spoken of the need to encourage vocations for seminary due to a huge clergy shortage I see looming in the next 4 to 6 years. We are regularly meeting as a missions department and striving to be more intentional in our approach to mission planting. Last July's Small Parish Forum had the most attendance since its inception. These endeavors need to be funded; we just can't rely on volunteers to do this. I haven't even begun to address the need to provide greater support to choir directors and the ministry of music. I would love to have us fund a two year placement for newly graduated seminary priests to serve in a parish under an experienced parish priest and then send them onto an assignment. I must admit I feel gun shy in pushing for these things to get funded when I

look at our deficit spending. How can I ask for more money to fund these things when we are spending more than we take in now?

To be a good steward of the Church whether that is on a national, diocesan, parochial, or personal level is not a matter of pulling rabbits out of a hat. But it does mean if we make seeking His Kingdom and His Righteousness the core value that drives us, then our treasures will be devoted to that, and less so towards the things of this world we feel we need to have in order to live. To walk this path requires us to live and abide in Christ, to have that life fulfilled in our sacramental participation in the life of the Church. It means to live a life of asceticism (not just for monks) so that we can joyfully struggle to discern between wants and needs in our lives so that we can embrace the one thing that is needful. Once we do, it will not be taken away from us.

With love in Christ, the unworthy +Paul