

Beginning last weekend and continuing this weekend and next, I am preaching and teaching about stewardship. To recap the definition of stewardship:

1. It is recognizing that everything we have and are is a gift from God.
2. It is taking the time to be grateful for those gifts.
3. It is returning a portion of those gifts to God.

Two weekends ago, I preached on cultivating an attitude of gratitude – a grateful heart that realizes all that we are and all that we have are gifts from our loving God and that Thanksgiving was the foundation of our prayer life and hence our lives as grateful stewards of all God’s gifts to us. How did the challenge to write down ten reasons for giving thanks every day this past week and not to repeat any from day to day? I must confess that I missed yesterday. I will add another day.

Join me in singing this song: “O When the Saints Go Marching In.” Who among us wants to belong to that company of saints marching into heaven? Please raise your hand. I think that we all want to belong to the Communion of Saints in heaven. St. Paul captures this our greatest hope in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

Our stewardship theme this weekend is belonging and participating. Make a mental list of the organizations, teams, shared activities and community or parish groups - to whatever you belong and to which you feel connected and involved. Why did you join? Comradery, shared interests, desire to serve, or enjoyment?

When I say, “belong,” I mean that you are not just on the membership list. No, much more than that. You are involved in helping to the group to accomplish its purpose; you are working with others to achieve a worthy goal.

You can see that I am leading up to your belonging to St. Agnes parish (apply these words to you and your parish). Most of you here belong to St. Agnes. You are on the membership list. You receive envelopes. But I mean in the deeper sense of belonging:

1. That you feel a connection with fellow parishioners;
2. That you are actively involved;
3. That you want this parish to accomplish her purpose;
4. That you are willing to work and cooperate with others to achieve her worthy goals.
5. That you are willing to invest time, energy, talents and skills and even finances to advance this mission of the Church.

What are the purposes and goals of St. Agnes that would make it worthwhile to belong in this fuller sense of the word?

Personal growth in holiness and closeness to God of each of her members.
Discovering the richness of our Catholic faith.

Sharing the Good News of Jesus.
Inviting others to come to know and love the Lord
Getting to heaven.

Belonging in the sense that I matter to these people and they matter to me just does not happen. How would a new family or person recently registered in the parish develop a sense of belonging? It would begin with experiencing a welcoming environment and a welcoming people. That can be as simple as making the decision not to leave after Mass without asking the name of someone that you do not know. Smile at the parents who are trying to manage their children and participate at Mass. Slide over in the pew to make room for another person. Little things that say, "Welcome! I am glad that you are here to worship the Lord with us." Imagine. If we all decided to do that on a regular basis. If we became intentional about it. Friendships could begin, connections made, stories shared, and opportunities to participate in parish life made known beyond Mass.

A sense of belonging is foundational for stewardship. That sense of belonging, of feeling connected to the parish, to her people, leads to the desire to get personally involved by sharing time, talents, abilities, or whatever. To pitch in however I can.

Of course, that desire to participate actively in the parish needs opportunities to do so. When I talk about participation, I want the message to say, "All are invited! All are needed! All need to give back to God in some way."

I present a challenge. If you are not involved beyond Mass, get involved in one thing:

- Prayer – 13th of the Month Club.
- Appreciation Dinner in January.
- ChristLife in January – seven weeks
- Good public speaker – Lector
- Good listening skills – join the Marian Ministers of Care to visit the homebound.
- Need service hours as a teen – cross bearer.
- Love kids – become a catechist for the Children's Liturgy of the Word.
- You like to create videos – creative use of the flat screen
- Good with technology – tech support...recording homilies, Mass, etc. for the website or live streaming.
- Have a passion for the poor – look into the St. Vincent de Paul Society or the Mission Committee.
- Artistic talent – design promotional material for parish events and activities
- Gift of hospitality – help us develop a Welcoming New Parishioners program, for example.
- Want to know more about the faith – watch for the various mini-series the parish offers.
- Enjoy meeting people and have good communication skills – perhaps you can help us offer after- hours' office hours.
- You're good with the camera – there are plenty of opportunities to photograph parish events and activities for the website and Facebook.
- You have a heart for those who are grieving – Comfort Blanket.

There will a list of these opportunities and others available in the packet that you will receive new weekend.

I asked at the beginning of the homily, “Who wanted to belong to the company of saints in heaven?” and all of our hands went up. Here is a final thought on belonging. If we want to belong to the company of saints in heaven, we first have to belong to the company of saints on earth – we who are saints in the making in this parish of St. Agnes.

We now move to the Sacrament of the Eucharist when we will be united to Christ through Holy Communion. And through Him to each other. Our belonging and participation in the parish starts with His Eucharist.