

Stewardship a path toward deeper spirituality, holiness

LOS ANGELES - The Archdiocese of Los Angeles officially launched an initiative to renew the local church with the release of a new pastoral letter on stewardship Sept. 8.

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony presented the letter, "For This You Were Called: Be Thankful," at a stewardship convocation for more than 125 parish leaders and ministers representing 17 parishes that are part of the initial pilot wave to develop a spirituality of stewardship at the parish level.

Calling it "exciting" and "providential," the cardinal said the new stewardship initiative "really is basic renewal of the church."

The effort comes at a historically important moment, added the cardinal, because it follows more than five difficult years of confronting the scandal of sex abuse within the church.

"Your faith over these years has been so inspiring to me," he told parishioners gathered at the Archdiocesan Catholic Center in Los Angeles. "This is a very special moment for us and I think that the whole stewardship concept is one of the main pillars of rebuilding who we are here in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles."

A spirituality of stewardship ("corresponsabilidad" in Spanish) begins with gratitude and recognition of God's abundant grace, he said.

"Gratitude is the foundation for authentic Christian living," said the cardinal, quoting from the eight-page pastoral letter.

"One of the great things that Jesus gives us," he added, "is that whole sense of understanding the grace that comes to us constantly, but interspersed with that grace will always be times of trial and difficulty."

The cardinal noted repeatedly that stewardship links closely with the goals of the archdiocese's 2003 synod.

"The convergence of the synod vision, mission and direction just lends and fits so perfectly with stewardship," he said. "Because unless the six pastoral initiatives have an underpinning of a deeper faith and sense of discipleship and that sense of gratitude and giving back to others; unless we have that as a basis, there's always a danger we'll start implementing the synod pastoral directives and then find

ourselves into action and activities with no foundation.”

A spirituality of stewardship, he added, is the “method” and “the grace, the path, the road map” to be able to move forward on concrete archdiocesan goals. He encouraged parishioners throughout the archdiocese to read, reflect and comment on the pastoral letter.

“This pastoral letter on stewardship is really from all of us. It is not just me. It is all of us together as members of the body of Christ,” emphasized the cardinal.

Indeed, scores of lay leaders, clergy and religious have worked on the effort to launch an initiative called “Growing Stewards” that is now a pilot program at 18 parishes.

However, one of the obstacles to implementing the initiative is a common misunderstanding that stewardship is only about tithing.

Monsignor John Barry, pastor of American Martyrs Church in Manhattan Beach, said he originally resisted the efforts of his parish leaders to introduce stewardship principles throughout the parish.

“I kept saying, ‘No, we don’t need stewardship. I don’t want to talk about money,’” recalled Monsignor Barry.

Lay leaders boldly told their pastor that he didn’t really understand the essence of stewardship, and asked him to read “What Do I Own, and What Owns Me?” by Dan Conway, a leading Catholic layperson on stewardship in the U.S. and the author of several books on the topic. Conway was present at the convocation.

Monsignor Barry said he began to see stewardship from another perspective.

“A genuine conversion to stewardship means seeing everything differently with new eyes and acknowledging that everything we have does come from God as gifts to be cared for responsibly and shared generously with others,” said Monsignor Barry.

The archdiocese retains the services of RSI Catholic Services Group, and specifically the guidance of Conway and Art Ledesma, to increase awareness of stewardship spirituality and assist parishes in developing and implementing their stewardship action plans.

“Christians are called to be good stewards in big things - like the environment, racial harmony, peace and justice,” said Conway. “We’re called to be stewards of the world, stewards of the global community, stewards of the planet earth.

“But we’re also called to be stewards in the little things - what we do on an ordinary Saturday afternoon, how we spend our time, the amount of quality time we share

with our spouses and our families.”

Stewardship also encourages parishioners to discern through prayer God’s call to full, conscious and active participation in the mission of the church, added Conway. The point of the parish action plans, he said, “is to help your parishioners to visualize, to see where their gifts of time, talent and treasure are going and what difference they make in the spiritual and faith lives of the people that we serve.”