

Sharing and giving for those we'll never meet (Dec. 12 – 3:45 pm)

When was the last time you cried after receiving communion, the Body of Christ? Consider this for a moment as you think about those who can't. On a recent visit the hospital, I entered the room of a woman suffering from cancer and at her side was a frightened husband. When I offered communion, they initially declined and explained that they hadn't been to confession. When I assured them that receiving is what Christ wants for us and Canon Law requires simply that they go as soon as possible and practical. They both then requested communion and both wept as they received Christ. Though that was my experience on that one day, it's an experience all of us bring to others as members of Christ's church.

Now halfway through the Advent season, we find ourselves more than ready to celebrate the birth of Christ and preparing ourselves for what lies ahead – His second coming, the promise of Easter and life beyond the one we hold so dearly to while here on earth. Hopefully, this fills you with so much anticipation and joy, that regardless of where you are in life, the heartfelt promise of Christ will carry you through knowing His Father and ours is awaiting our return home. Now that's what I call the true Joy of Christmas as we celebrate Gaudete Sunday, which literally means to rejoice.

Today, and with full admission and disclosure, we're taking advantage of this Sunday to ask you for greater use of your time, your talent but most importantly your treasure. This, in simple terms, is a much needed and heartfelt appeal. As such, it's important to remember we're doing so as the talk is entitled, "Sharing and giving for those you'll never meet."

Looking at today's readings you'll find that John's message of renewal and repentance was and remains very practical. He told the people back then and continues to tell us today three things.

First, every follower of God must share what they possess with their neighbors.

Second, God, he points out, commands that each person be treated with respect and honor.

Third, John exhorted his listeners -- that's us today – to turn to God and to walk in His way of love, righteousness and generosity.

To avoid confusion, remain practical and prevent leaning toward high theology, let's consider a few examples of what giving can be and for many of you already is.

A couple of years ago, a parish family decided to purchase a baptismal font. Though we didn't have a permanent place for the font, it was very important to them personally and to all of us though most users are strangers to them. And yet, here it is now and will be for years to come very much in the spirit of John's message.

Other followers include Fr. Stolinski. Though some were lectured for walking in the grass or some other infraction, he loved God and he loved this church. And though he could have left his money to family and friends, he chose us, his brothers and sisters in Christ. Specifically, he left \$200,000 to include a \$1,000 school scholarship each year for ten years.

Pius, who is now deceased, is a friend of a current parishioner and he donated \$50,000.

Mike Medved, who now lives in Wyoming, donated the brass resurrection cross which now hangs in our chapel.

Janet, who is now deceased, received a \$10,000 memorial in her honor for our church community.

Dale, who remarried and moved to Montana, and his wife, Marj, who is deceased, purchased the camel for our nativity scene. It was such a selfless gift, that during her funeral, the camel was placed on the altar.

Paul and Sue, who now attend another church, donated the statues of St. Matthew and Mary in memory of his father.

We have a gift from Jerry and Nancy, who are both deceased. They valued Catholic education and their gift went toward school scholarships.

Finally, and truly the act of generosity that brings us here today with a church just months away, is the anonymous donation of \$218,000 that paid the previous debt in full.

Without question, our parish is extraordinarily generous and the work done thus far is without question moving us in the right direction. Specifically, did you know that of the money pledged during the capital campaign, more than half is already received and we're only one-third of the way into the campaign period of three years?

We are working very hard to create a culture of success as Disciples of Christ as we serve the many ministries for our parish and community, for our overall financial responsibilities.

Why a culture adjustment? Each year we find ourselves with a shortfall and then recover well over Christmas and Easter. But starting this year and with our church in its infancy, our objective is to have no shortfalls regardless of the time of year.

So how can you help? Starting today, we're asking that all of us extend a bit more generosity in our giving and there are a number of ways to do this for your family, our parish and our community.

One is through Faith Direct. Of the more than 600 families in our parish (which is an increase of nearly 30 families in just the past year alone), only 127 are actually enrolled as recurring donors. What this activity does for us is provide a steady income that's not dependent on the weather, the season or attendance. If you need help signing up, just ask and we'll provide the pathway for you.

Like texting? You can text your weekly giving and this gives you the option of adjusting how much you give. But it also provides an easy opportunity to give even when you're not here.

Another is to commit to a certain level of giving through an annual appeal and fulfill that stated commitment. That part of the new culture will begin during Advent. Again, with monies promised and pledged, better accounting practices are assured. Right now we're meeting our requirements through the generosity of a select few when the burden can easily be spread across all of us.

Another option is to consider Estate planning where monies set aside in a will can either be dispersed upon death or, better yet, via a direct contribution now so as to enjoy the fruits of your labor while still with us.

Another opportunity exists in the school grandparent program, whether you're actually a grandparent of a student or not. For those who have children well into their adult years, this affords you the opportunity to adopt a student and make a Catholic education possible. And as you do so, consider all the activities and events you'll get to enjoy again as a scholarship grandparent.

But even simpler than all of that, and to be very direct and to the point, if all members of the parish, not families, but every member of our parish, would increase their giving by 20 percent, that would not only meet the shortfall, but ensure shortfalls are a thing of the past.

What does this look like? Let's consider a family of five. If the weekly giving is \$100, we're asking that you consider an increase to \$24 per person making it a weekly contribution of \$120.

Let's consider a family of four who generously gives \$32 per week. We're asking that you increase to \$38.

One last example is for a family of seven, the size of my family growing up. We struggled very much and were very poor. I understand that extra is a very unfamiliar word. But I also know that our parish helped define our family and today I stand before you as a product of that giving and upbringing. So if a family of seven gives \$42 a week, that's \$6 per person. We're asking that you increase to \$50 a week. That's an increase of about \$1.14 per person.

In a little more than a year we'll be in our church, the crown jewel of Sarpy County, and that promises to see more weddings, baptisms, funerals, sacramental celebrations, and yes, parishioners.

We'll be in our new home to worship and welcome God our Father. It is our hope that this fills you with the message of today, Gaudete Sunday, which is rejoice in the true spirit of Christ and the Christmas Season. Let that spirit and culture of sharing begin today.

God bless you all and May God continue to bless our St. Matthew parish, families and community