



ON TITHING

FROM THE ARCHDIOCESE OF SAINT LOUIS

What is tithing? Tithing is the practice, established by God in the Old Testament, of returning 10% of your blessings to God. Originally, the tithe was given to the temple or the Church in the form of produce or livestock, since this really was the only income that the people had. As our society shifted from a barter-based system of trade to a monetary exchange system, the tithe began to be paid in currency. Whether one gave monetary income or profit from the fields was really not as important as it was for the believer to understand that the tithe was what was owed to God. The tithe was not given based on the needs of the priests, of the Church, or of the poor. It was given simply in recognition and gratitude for the blessings that God had bestowed on the individual. Thus, every believer had a need to tithe to God.

"The tithes of the herd and the flock shall be determined by ceding to the Lord as sacred every tenth animal as they are counted by the herdsman's rod." ~ Leviticus 27:32

Why don't we read about the tithe in the New Testament? Jesus actually called his followers to a standard of giving that went far beyond the tithe. He called us to give up everything and follow Him. The early Christians were able to do this. However, as the Church expanded throughout the world its followers needed to be reminded that generous giving is a hallmark of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Church Council of Macon in 585 A.D. ordered payment of tithes. In the 8th century, Charlemagne made tithing to the Church a civil law. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) also reiterated the call to tithe.

"Tell the rich in the present age not to be proud and not to rely on so uncertain a thing as wealth but rather on God, who richly provides us with all things for our enjoyment. Tell them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, ready to share, thus accumulating as treasure a good foundation for the future, so as to win the life that is true life." ~ 1 Timothy 6:17-19

Is tithing still necessary in the Catholic Church today? Tithing is absolutely still necessary in the Catholic Church today. When God introduced the concept of the tithe in the Old Testament He told the Israelites this contribution was necessary from them to support the work of the Levites and the poor in the community. Today our Church still needs our support to pay the expenses and financial obligations it incurs as it operates in a commercial society. Salaries, benefits, insurance, maintenance, utilities and service fees are all expenses that never even existed when Our Lord first decreed that each of us was to give back a percentage of what we have. Additionally, we are still called to care for the poor among us.

"Each year you shall tithe all the produce that grows in the field you have sown...so that the Levite who has no share in the heritage with you and also the alien, the orphan and the widow who belong to your community, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all that you undertake." ~ Deuteronomy 14:22, 29

Why does the Church often refer to tithing as “giving back?” Throughout sacred scripture God tells us that everything belongs to God. He made the world and all that is in it. He made us and blessed us with absolutely every gift we have. Our lives, our families, our health, our education, our unique talents and skills, our job and our income are all blessings from God, entrusted into our care for the good of all peoples. Thus, when we tithe we are really only giving back 10% of something that ultimately belongs to God anyway. The amazing thing is that our God is a generous and abundant God who lets us keep and enjoy 90% of all His blessings.

“The Lord’s are the earth and its fullness: the world and those who dwell in it.” ~ Psalm 24:1

Why can’t my parish just ask for my support when it has special needs? Many parishes do function in this way. Inevitably this leads to endless fundraising activities and still there is more that every parish needs and wants to do. There is never an end to the ministry that a parish could do, if it had the funds. Parishes that have successfully paid their own bills and maintained their own property can reach out to other communities in need and offer their assistance. However, without a constant flow of income through tithes given freely in the Offertory a parish must appeal for funding for every activity or ministry it wishes to undertake. Parishioners get tired of the constant talk about money and the demands on their time that this kind of approach takes. Our Lord warned about this kind of fundraising approach and yelled, *“Stop turning my Father’s house into a marketplace.”* Yet this is often what we have done when we resort to constant sales and fundraising activities rather than simply asking parishioners to bring their tithe to God’s altar first.

“He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables and to those who sold doves he said, ‘Take these out of here and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.’” ~ John 2:15-16

Is anyone exempt from the tithe? Our Lord exempted no one from giving. In the story of the “Widow’s Mite” it is important to note that He did not reach into the Offering box and give the widow back her two small coins. When He multiplied the Loaves and Fishes He asked for all the food that anyone had. Even the Levites or priests of the Old Testament were not exempt from the tithe. Today, although many parishioners are unaware of it, priests are still usually most generous in giving back a percentage of their own small salaries to the parishes in which they serve.

“Give the Levites these instructions: When you receive from the Israelites the tithe I have assigned you from them as your heritage, you are to make a contribution from them to the Lord, a tithe of the tithes ...”
~ Numbers 18:26

Tithing is such a great sacrifice? Are there any real benefits? In addition to the fact that you are following God’s will and providing your Church with the resources it needs to carry out the work of Jesus Christ here on earth, those who embrace tithing report that this approach has numerous benefits. The satisfaction that comes from gratefully sharing your blessings is tremendous.

- » When you take a hard look at your spending and plan to make God first in your budget you quickly begin to realize the difference between what you need and what you want.
- » You begin to eliminate the endless clutter of material wants from your life and start to more fully appreciate the many blessings that you already have.
- » You realize that commercialism works to convince us that we never have enough of the right things, even though God has already blessed you with all that you need.
- » You stop being “possessed by your possessions” and begin to slow down and prioritize not only how you spend your money but also how you spend your time.

- » Once you stop trying to satisfy yourself with material possessions and spending, you may even find that you enjoy simple pleasures more fully – especially time to deepen your relationships with God, with loved ones and with your community.

Ultimately, those who tithe often feel that the practice brings more joy, more peace, more contentment and more balance to their lives.

“Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” ~ Luke 6:38

When I decide to work towards a tithe, should I be calculating it based on my gross or net income?

When striving to give a full tithe, you should calculate the amount you give back to God based on your gross income. The reason for this is that stewardship calls us to give back to God first, before we take care of any of our own wants, needs or obligations – including our obligation to our government. After all, God should come before Uncle Sam, shouldn't He? By placing God first – above all other financial obligations – we show how much we love and trust Him. Some people may never be able to reach a full tithe. Others reach that goal and keep giving, knowing that in reality it all belongs to God.

“Honor the Lord with your wealth, with first fruits of all your produce; then will your barns be filled with grain, with new wine your vats will overflow.” ~ Proverbs 3:9-10

With our current financial obligations, I don't know how it would be possible for us to convert to giving away a full 10%. Are there any other options?

Even if giving a full tithe is not immediately possible for you, it is important to work towards this goal. You can begin by committing to giving a gift that is planned, proportionate and sacrificial. Most Catholics do not even know how much they give back. When they take the time to calculate that amount they are often surprised and discomforted. We often think we are very generous yet despite the strong urging throughout sacred scripture to give back 10% the average Catholic today gives less than 1%.

The first step in working towards a tithe is to determine what percentage you are currently giving back. Then see if you can increase that percentage by at least ½ percent. If you increase your giving every year by at least ½ percent or more, you will eventually reach a full tithe. A full tithe is 10%. It is usually suggested that you give 5% to your parish and 5% combined to any other charities that touch your heart.

Of course, it might be necessary to eliminate something from your family or personal budget in order to increase your giving every year. Eliminating discretionary monthly expenses – such as a phone or cable packages, memberships, entertainment, subscriptions, etc. – is often a good place to start. Sometimes input from the entire family might be helpful in finding a way that you can tighten the budget so that more can be given upfront to God. A legalistic approach to a certain percentage really isn't as important as developing an overall grateful and generous way of life. Many who begin on this type of stewardship journey eventually find that they feel called to increase their giving even beyond the 10% level.

“Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.” ~ Luke 12:48

Is it really such a horrible thing if I decide not to work towards giving a full tithe back to God? Although the Church and the world it serves may suffer when Christians decide to take care of their own needs and wants before giving back to God, ultimately what will suffer most will be your relationship with your God. It is God who asks for the tithe. It is God who blessed you with gifts to share. It is God who will one day ask for an accounting of how well you shared your gifts with others.

"Dare a man rob God? Yet you are robbing me! And you say, 'How do we rob you?' In tithes and offerings! You are indeed accursed, for you, the whole nation, rob me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house and try me in this way, says the Lord of hosts; Shall I not open for you the floodgates of heaven to pour down blessings upon you without measure?" ~ Malachi 3:8-10

Tithing is such a huge step. How can I find the courage to commit to this way of life? Tithing truly does take great faith. Simply place your trust in God. If you wait until you feel that you are financially comfortable you will never take the step. The commercialism of our society works to convince us that we never have enough. No matter how much we have, there is always something else we will want. If you are ever going to tithe, you will have to step back from your endless list of wants and believe that our generous and abundant God will always provide you with all that you need and even with enough to give back a generous share.

"He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?" ~ Romans 8:32

Is there a simple way to know if I am truly tithing, without doing all the math? Here is an easy formula for determining your tithe to your parish:

- Take your pre-tax income.
- Round it to the nearest thousand.
- Then take off the last three zeros. For example, a person making \$40,000 annually would take off the last three zeros and be left with \$40.
- This is the amount you should be giving every week, if you are giving 5% back to God through your parish.
- You would also want to be giving the same amount – the other 5% – to other charities that are important to you, such as schools, hospitals, social service agencies, missions, religious orders, etc.

If you're not sure the formula works check the math. 5% of \$40,000 is \$2,000. Divide by 50 weeks. (Easier and quicker than 52 weeks.) You would give \$40 a week.

You can also check on your tithing level every year as you complete your income tax. It's easy to calculate. Divide your total charitable contributions for the last year by your gross income for that year. Move the decimal point over two places and that is your percent of giving. So if your answer is .0346, you are returning 3.5% of your income to God. If you are not happy with the number, plan ways to increase your giving.

"Then he said to the crowd, 'Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions.'" ~ Luke 12:15