

Principles of Christian Giving

I am moved to write this after some time observing how we handle money in the Orthodox Church. Those who might think this an unworthy topic for Christian consideration perhaps should consider how often in the New Testament money forms an important part of our Lord's teaching. As examples we have the rich young ruler attached to his wealth who couldn't follow Christ (Luke 18:18-23) and the poor widow who could indeed follow Him by giving all that she had (Mark 12:41-44). Again we can contrast St. Paul who urged the churches in Greece to outdo each other in generosity (2 Corinthians 9:1-5) and Annanias and Sapphira who died trying to hide their wealth from God (Acts 4:32-5:11). All these and many other examples from the Scriptures and the lives of the Saints, too numerous to mention, show how money simply cannot be ignored when the churches consider their common life and mission.

No matter how uncomfortable this may be for some the gospel constrains us to get our stewardship of money right. We cannot serve both God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24). I offer these reflections therefore under the wise guidance of our Archbishop and in the communion of our churches both as an invitation to contribute to an ongoing debate and a review of how we handle money in the Deanery, and perhaps even in the Archdiocese itself. I shall not limit myself to the theology of this subject, (known to most of you), but shall pass fairly quickly on to the practical issues since, I believe, it is here that we encounter most of our problems.

Let us be honest and declare what we see when we survey our Orthodox communities here in the UK and Ireland. Let us face the problems first. Many of our priests and deacons have to work in secular employment to provide for themselves (and some their families) and of these, some full time. Usually this is because, for whatever reason, the parishes are not able to support them financially. For those who are married with a working wife and older children the situation is often eased but even then the situation is unstable since the Church is effectively relying on another earner to fund a substantial part of its work, a condition that will not last forever!

In many of our churches the believers can be and are extremely generous but sometimes only occasionally when there is a wedding to celebrate or a roof to repair. The regular and sustained weekly giving of a thankful heart to God's work is less easy to nurture. For this reason we often see a secularisation of Church finances in the avoidance of our accountability to God for his blessings in our lives. Instead of a thankful response to God's graciousness we see an unrelenting burden of fundraising; by which I mean social events designed to appeal (very often) to those who don't attend church leading to the attitude that "although I don't come to Church at least I give a little now and again."

We simply cannot order our affairs before God in this way. The fruit of such compromises with Mammon are there for all to see: a burned out clergy who cannot fulfil their ministries without compromising their health, an ineffective deployment of priests for the demands of mission, a limited vision of what can be achieved by the grace of God at every level of Church life and an unrealistic accounting for the cost of Christian witness. There are some of us priests and deacons, for example, who still only claim expenses and not a Church salary, let alone even dream of a pension. We can no longer say that funding the next priest after me is not my concern. St. Paul did not envisage that *all* his successors would be making tents without wives and families. In his second letter to the Church at Corinth (chapters 8 and 9) we read him teaching the Church how to equip itself for the work ahead. We therefore have a responsibility to order our Church life *now* in a way that will establish good practice both for today *and* for the future.

Here then are some basic principles of Christian giving derived from the New Testament itself:-

THE GOSPEL - "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." [2 Corinthians 8:9]

THANKSGIVING - "... for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God." [2 Corinthians 9:12]

JOYFULLY - "for God loves a cheerful giver ..." [2 Corinthians 9:7]

WILLINGLY AND SACRIFICIALLY - "... for they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will." [2 Corinthians 8:3]

GENEROUSLY - "... he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." [2 Corinthians 9:6]

TRUSTINGLY - "... and God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work." [2 Corinthians 9:8]

REGULARLY - "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up as he may prosper ..." [1 Corinthians 16:2]

that is:- PROPORTIONATELY

The tithe (10%) of course was of course the Old Testament norm. If anything the New Testament standard goes beyond that by teaching sacrificial giving arising from conversion of life. Each person or household should of course prayerfully consider God's will in this matter. We live by grace not law.

It is clear then from St. Paul's teaching that our Christian stewardship of money is a spiritual matter and not at all a worldly concern, (or at least it should not be!) It arises from our responsibility in love to serve God, the household of God (the Church) and the poor. It cannot be thoughtless, sporadic, uncaring or evasive. It is best served by informed prayer and a weekly freewill offering. The rest simply concerns how this is to be achieved in the Church and how the Church itself manages its responsibilities to God and its membership in a prayerful allocation of its resources.

As to the first question, many churches have discovered that if the people of God are encouraged to pray and fast in an informed manner about what proportion of their income to give to God's work week by week then the finances sort themselves out. In Manchester we do this once a year on a Sunday we designate as "Thanksgiving Sunday." For two weeks beforehand we all pray and fast about our giving for the next year, helped by a teaching leaflet, then on the Sunday concerned and at an appropriate point in the Liturgy (for most this will be at the end) we all complete a pledge card which is offered to God. These cards are then used to administer Gift Aid tax rebates, Church budgeting, envelope or bank order distribution ... in short anything to do with finance.

Of course, individuals still make thank offerings for personal celebrations and we still have special appeals for large projects but the point is that our ordinary day to day expenditure is covered and our mission is enabled by our giving rather than limited (unduly!) by our giving.

As to the second question of our accountability for gifts received, this must involve the highest standards of professional care both in handling money and in the keeping and publishing accounts. We must also ensure that the believers have access to all the information they need to see such care in action. Finally the Parish Council must consider in a prayerful Christian way how God's gifts are to be deployed for God's work under, of course, the guidance of the priest and our Archbishop.

How each local church goes about this is up to them as instructed and guided by Metropolitan John but I do believe that as a Deanery and as an Archdiocese we have spiritual guidelines in Holy Tradition that can help us. Maybe it will not be too long before all our communities can afford a full time ministry with a fitting temple and a properly resourced presence in our spiritually needy land. What is clear to me is that none of these goals will be possible without a truly Christian approach to Church finance and mission.

Fr. Gregory Hallam

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