

**Homily for Mass for the Diocesan Adult Enrichment Conference
Decatur Conference Center and Hotel
Decatur, Illinois**

**Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A
November 16, 2014**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, a couple of months ago, I and several leaders from the diocese travelled to southeast Kansas to meet with some of the leadership of the Diocese of Wichita. The purpose of our trip was not to negotiate with them to try to get Bishop Kemme to come back to our diocese, although we were tempted to do so! Instead, the goal of our visit was to learn some lessons from them about their model of stewardship, one which has become extremely well-known and effective.

The story of stewardship in the Diocese of Wichita is one of growth. It began with the vision of one pastor in one parish more than forty-five years ago. The vision spread to other parishes in the diocese and in 1984, Bishop Eugene Gerber began the process of discerning how such a model could be employed to meet the growing challenges and needs throughout the diocese. The following year, those involved in the process reached a consensus that the diocese would embrace a parish-based stewardship way

of life. The results have been astounding. The weekly Mass attendance is nearly double the national average. Every child desiring Catholic education has the opportunity to receive it without paying tuition. Several of the parishes in the diocese have 24/7 adoration chapels where the faithful come to pray. The number of seminarians in formation for the priesthood is over sixty. These are but a few of the remarkable blessings for the diocese that have emerged due in large part to this culture of stewardship.

During my four years as bishop here in our diocese, I have travelled to every parish and have seen the various ways in which the faith is lived and passed on to new generations. There are many very good things that are happening that give me great hope for the future of this diocese. At the same time, though, it is easy to fall into a sense of complacency, operating on what I would call a maintenance mode whereby the status quo is considered sufficient as we move forward.

In this regard, it is helpful to reflect on the notion of stewardship. Stewardship is a theme that runs throughout the Scriptures. At the very beginning of creation, we hear how God entrusted man with the task of

being a steward of all of creation.¹ As stewards, we must be conscious that what has been entrusted to us is not meant to be buried and remain unused, but rather, we are called to make good use of those gifts so that they can grow.² A key part of stewardship in God's plan, then, is growth.

Over the past year, I have begun to consider how it is that we can begin a process of strategic planning for growth in the Church here in our diocese. The growth envisioned is far more than just a quantitative increase in the number of people or the amount of money available to our parishes and the diocese. It is also essential to ensure that we give significant attention to the qualitative growth that will guarantee sustainability for generations that follow. I am aware that such a plan for growth is ambitious, but it is one that I am very optimistic about, especially given my familiarity with what this diocese has to offer and the many ways in which various groups are already poised to contribute to that growth.

In our discussions with the people of Wichita, they were quick to point out that stewardship is not primarily a financial issue. Rather, stewardship is first and foremost about faith. It is for that reason that this message of stewardship is so important for a group like this. Your

gathering together to learn new ways of sharing the Catholic faith in your parishes, schools, and families is intended to be put into practice so that this gift will continue to grow throughout our diocese. It is very fitting that the theme for this year's conference is "Growing Communities of Faith."

Our Gospel for today's Mass challenges us in this regard, inviting us to see that the blessings received and skills obtained during these days are not meant to be buried in the ground. They are meant to be shared with others so that this growth, which the Lord desires, can become a reality. This will only be able to take place if we each adopt the identity of a steward who has been chosen by God and entrusted with a particular part of His overall mission of building up the Kingdom of God.

Combined with this call to be a steward of God's gifts for the growth of the faith is another theme that we find in our liturgy during these final weeks of the liturgical year, namely, the end times. In our second reading for today, St. Paul stresses the need for vigilance for "the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The Gospel for today is also presented to the disciples in the same vein, for Jesus tells them just

before the passage we heard that they are to “stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:13).

We must take seriously this call to vigilance in making good use of the gifts entrusted to us. We are to avoid the attitude of the unfaithful servant in the previous chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, the one who said to himself: “my master is long delayed” (Matthew 24:48) and who proceeded to neglect the duties that were expected of him by his master. We should not fall into the trap of waiting for the opportune time or ideal circumstances to enter into this work of contributing to the growth of the Catholic faith in our respective apostolates and ministries. The time for action is now, for that opportune time or ideal circumstance may never come.

At the same time, the unexpectedness of the end should not cause of to live with a sense of undue anxiety. Such worries distract us from doing what needs to be done in the here and now. Remaining faithful to our duties of the present moment is one of the best ways for us to be prepared for that unknown moment. As the Gospel parable that I just mentioned says: “blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so”

(Matthew 24:46), referring to the fact that the servant was faithful to the task of the present moment.

The final goal for all of us is salvation. At our judgment, the Lord will ask us for an accounting of how we have lived our lives and how we have used the gifts that He has given to us. If we have been good and faithful stewards of those many gifts, we have great hope that we shall be welcomed into the reward of eternal life. We all have the added privilege of sharing the gift of our faith with others so that they too may come to direct their lives along a path of intentional discipleship as they strive for this same reward of eternal happiness and peace.

I would therefore encourage you to continue the wonderful efforts that you have demonstrated thus far in spreading the faith. Your work is at the heart of fostering a spirituality and a culture of stewardship and growth throughout our diocese. All of us have a part to play, and all of you who are convinced of the value of building such a culture have much to offer in helping this idea become a reality.

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel, our Holy Father Pope Francis offers a helpful reflection in this regard as he talks

about the various ways in which each of us is called to contribute to the work of evangelization. You can easily substitute the word evangelization with the word growth as it conveys the same meaning in the context in which I have been using it. The Holy Father writes:

All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples."³

My dear brothers and sisters, I am asking that each of you see yourself as a missionary disciple in assisting in the important work of growth, especially since the faith must be at the center of any strategy for growth in the Church. This begins with gratefully recognizing that all that we have is a gift from the Lord, and out of that gratitude, we respond with generosity by sharing those gifts with others as we assist the faithful to deepen their relationship with Christ so that they may become missionary disciples themselves, stewards of the gifts that they have received.

May our reception of our greatest gift in the Holy Eucharist at this Mass enflame our hearts with a desire to embrace more fully a path of intentional discipleship and stewardship throughout our diocese as we all journey together toward the reward of eternal life promised to those who have been faithful servants of what has been entrusted to them.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Genesis 1:28.

² Matthew 25:14-30.

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.