



The Unsung

BY YOUR PARISH PRIEST

“WE PRIESTS ARE INCREDIBLY privileged, because despite the difficulties we face, we usually get to see the best in people. They speak to God in our presence in Confession, saying things they might never say to anyone else; they help us to fulfill our ministry by serving on the council, cleaning the church, tending the grounds, and doing all the work we don’t have time to do if we’re visiting the sick, serving the cycle of services, counseling parishioners—doing priestly work.”

These were the words of a venerable archimandrite, a holy and unpretentious man who had no lack of difficulties in his parish ministry. After sitting with young priests and listening to their struggles, he would often give them this gentle correction. Like a mother who finds her child playing with all the wrong things, he would gather them up, turn them 180 degrees, set them down, and give them a push in the right direction: “*We are incredibly privileged...*”

These are my words, too. Even if I don’t say it from the amvon, it occurs to me, when I stand in the silence of my icon corner, to marvel at the sacrifices of my parishioners. In an age that can seem cold, self-centered, and utilitarian, those sacrifices shine all the more brilliantly.

Like the parishioner who often gets to church first on Sunday. When I arrive and see the doors open, the lights on, and the walkway swept, I know there is someone else who couldn’t wait to get to church for Liturgy. Or the one who diligently tends the lamps, changing the wicks and refilling the oil—who, despite his gray hairs, still finds joy in the simple act of lighting a candle. Or the one who knows when running the vacuum cleaner just won’t do, and lugs the carpet shampooer to church during the week. I have seen parishioners spend hours at a time on their hands and knees, working to get candle wax out of the carpet, refusing to yield the job to someone younger. Still others work invisibly, replacing the batteries in smoke alarms, fixing doors that stick, changing lightbulbs, beautifying the temple in small ways—all without anyone noticing.

It’s not about what we give, but whom.

There are others who, by the simple act of bringing wine, water, oil, incense and flour, remind us that these are not just supplies to be ordered but *gifts* to be offered. They rejoice

to go unnoticed. They ever look to barter what they have for an opportunity to spend time in the House of the Lord, alone with Him, while they wait for sunlight to stream through this window, then that one—so they know where to dust next. *How many candles can I light with a single match? Can I make it to church before the priest?* These are the innocent games of the Unsung, the child-like pleasures found even in the Holy of Holies.

If we asked them to speak about their work or the joy they find in it, they would demure. Perhaps they would want us to learn a simple lesson—that stewardship is not about *what* we give but *whom*—before asking us not to *notice so much* next time.

Through the small and imperceptible, the humble and the necessary, they give themselves to the Church. Knowing how easy it is to get caught up in five-year plans and capital campaigns, they trust the Lord to reward them for their labors. To follow their example, we must become small, humble, even invisible. The question can never be, “How much do I need to give?” For our salvation, the question must be, “How can I give myself to the Lord and His Church? How can I join the ranks of the Unsung and trade the perishable for the everlasting?”

Stewardship Facts

Parishes that encourage members to be more generous because it will enhance the Church's mission and create more opportunities for spiritual growth receive **much higher** contributions from parishioners than the parishes asking members to give toward various material needs in the church.

Three characteristics of an Orthodox parish have the strongest positive influence on greater giving. These three characteristics are:

- a) being a parish that cares about and supports members in times of difficulty and need;
- b) being a parish with a participatory and inclusive process of decision making where all members (not only parish leadership) are engaged in discussion, deliberation and actual decisions;
- c) being a parish that is successful in engaging its members in various volunteer positions and tasks.

In both measures of giving (as actual dollar amount or as percentage of the household's income), parishioners who **pledge** (i.e., commit to give a certain amount each year) contribute significantly more to their parishes than those church members who only give to their parishes "spontaneously" and without advance planning.

Taken from "**Highlights of Findings from the Study 'Exploring Orthodox Generosity: Giving in US Orthodox Parishes'**" released by the Assembly of Bishops (<http://bit.ly/1MMpOVp>).



STEWARDSHIP IN THE SAINTS

St Herman of Alaska (Dec. 13) lived a life of complete simplicity. His clothes were the same for winter as for summer. He did not wear a shirt; instead he wore a smock of deer skin, which he did not take off for several years at a time, nor did he change it, so that the fur in it was completely worn away, and the leather became glossy. Then there were his boots or shoes, cassock, an ancient and faded riassa full of patchwork, and his klobuk. He went everywhere in these clothes, and at all times; in the rain, in snowstorms, and during the coldest freezing weather.

The Elder always interceded before the governors in behalf of those who had transgressed. He defended those who had been offended. He helped those who were in need with whatever means he had available. The Aleuts—men, women and children—often visited him. Some asked for advice, others complained of oppression, others sought out defense, and still others desired help. Each one received the greatest possible satisfaction from the Elder. Father Herman especially loved children. He made large quantities of biscuits for them, and he baked cookies for them; and the children were fond of the Elder.

Through fasting, prayer and almsgiving, St Herman grew in godly love for the Alaskan people, and thus remained unattached to material possessions. He gave his entire life to the Lord, and his love for the Aleuts reached the point of self-denial.

Adapted from oca.org

SCRIPTURE AND STEWARDSHIP

Psalms What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord... I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. (115:3-4, 8)

Tobit Do almsgiving based on the quantity of your possessions. If you possess only a few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. You are storing up a good treasure for yourself in the day of necessity. For almsgiving delivers us from death and prevents us from entering into the darkness. Indeed, almsgiving is a good gift for all who do it before the Most High. (4:8-11)

Matthew Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (6:19-21)

Mission Statement

First Fruits is written to encourage everyone in our Diocese to be good stewards of all that God has given them. Please feel free to send comments and suggestions for future articles to Archpriest Gary Breton at gjbreton@gmail.com.