

Catholic

UPDATE

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Catholic Traditions WHAT WE DO AND WHY WE DO IT

How Much Should I Give to My Parish?



Mrs. Jones had faithfully tithed (given ten percent of her income to the church) for decades in her Protestant denomination. When she became a Catholic and joined a parish whose members did not tithe, she dropped the practice. Sometime after resuming it, she gave this enlightening testimony at a parish meeting:

"We Catholics are making a mistake. We should all be tithers. The only time I ever had any trouble balancing my budget was the year I became a Catholic and quit tithing. That taught me a good lesson. I'll never stop tithing again."

What about you? Are you having trouble balancing your budget in these inflationary times? Does it ever occur to you that when one puts giving first, one's money is likely to last longer?

Tithing has turned into a grand adventure for Christians of different denominations. Many who have begun this methodical way of sharing their blessings—time, talent, and treasure—have experienced abundant spiritual and material blessings that have brightened their lives and lightened their burdens.

Biblical Background

Of course, tithing should not be undertaken with a "what will I get out of it?" mentality. However, Scripture does contain God's written guarantee that tithers will not be losers: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, and see if I do not open the floodgates of heaven for you, and pour down upon you blessing without measure!" (Malachi 3:10).

Scripture mentions tithing forty-six times. The first reference is in Genesis. Abram (before the Lord changed Abram's name to Abraham), returning victorious from battle, received the blessing of Melchizedek, priest and king of Salem, and "Abram gave him a tenth of everything" (Genesis 14:20b).

In the section of Deuteronomy that discusses tithing, God ordered the ancient Israelites to offer a tenth of their produce and the firstlings of their flocks. If transporting the offering was difficult, they could sell their tithe and offer the money instead. (See Deuteronomy 14:22–29.)

Not only is tithing encouraged,

but also a spirit of generosity, that is, not begrudgingly offering our tithe. "With a generous spirit pay homage to the Lord, and do not spare your freewill gifts. With each contribution show a cheerful countenance, and pay your tithes in a spirit of joy. Give to the Most High as he has given to you, generously, according to your means. For he is a God who always repays and will give back to you sevenfold" (Sirach 35:10–13).

Generosity is a key theme in the gospel parables, from the story of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) to the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). Clearly, our Lord wants us to be a generous people. Too often, Catholics tend to give out of what's left over (not much) rather than following the scriptural principle of giving from our first fruits.

Jesus affirms this proper spirit when he chides the scribes and Pharisees for the burdens they place on the poor, for tithing without a concern for justice. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity. [But]

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these you should have done, without neglecting the others" (Matthew 23:23). Note that Jesus is not minimizing the importance of generosity but rather encouraging a generous spirit toward others.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit descended on the community on Pentecost and could have provided a generous endowment for the new Church. But the divine plan doesn't work that way, doesn't exempt us from caring for one another. Just as Jesus sent out his apostles and ordered them to rely on the hospitality of others, so those who call themselves disciples of Jesus are called to provide the funds for all that is needed. "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common.... There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need" (Acts 4:32-35).

Later, St. Paul addressed the Christians in Corinth about generosity: "Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). And to the community in Philippi, St. Paul emphasized God's generous response: "My God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

Modern Tithing Practices

Tithing continued after biblical times. Saint Augustine wrote, "It is a duty to pay tithes, and whoever refuses to pay them takes what belongs to another." Saint Thomas Aquinas exhaustively considered tithing in his *Summa Theologiae*, concluding that tithing was right and necessary. Saint Gregory the Great condemned those who cheated on their tithes. Saint Ambrose and many other Fathers of the Church held that tithing was obligatory. The Council of Trent required the payment of tithes.

Tithing is no longer binding in the Catholic Church, nor in most

Protestant denominations, but many Christians have discovered the freedom that comes with tithing. As one new tither explained, "Tithing is a very practical way to meet a Christian requirement, namely, the financial support of the Lord's good works. I am sure this is the best way to solve the

Dollars and Sense

In Old Testament times, the people tithed what they had the most of: oil, corn, wine, cattle, sheep, etc. Over the years, it has been found more convenient to tithe directly from one's pocketbook. Imagine if at next Sunday's



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money worries that plague pastors and people alike."

Another tither admitted that she would be "spiritually bankrupt without the Church, the sacraments, the preaching of the word of God, the fellowship of Sunday worship." She went on to say, "I know it all costs money. I'm partly responsible for the financial upkeep of my parish."

God is the Creator and the ultimate owner of all that exists. God's people are stewards of that creation and, as stewards, we are obligated to manage the resources entrusted to us, as the owner requires. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) explains, when we own property, we are "stewards of providence, with the task of making it fruitful and communicating its benefits to others" (CCC 2404). Our money, our energy, our time, our gifts—they all belong to God. We are called to use these gifts to further God's purposes.

Mass, the collection included jars of jam and peanut butter or half a chicken or a macaroni and cheese casserole. After a few weeks, the Sunday envelope plan would look pretty inviting. Many find that online giving ensures they will donate from their "first fruits."

But isn't salvation free? Isn't heaven available without having to pay an admission fee? Yes, of course. But everything else has a price tag on it. Consider this old story: One day an old country preacher was earnestly exhorting his congregation to increase their offerings. A deacon interrupted him in midsentence: "Parson, you told us salvation is free—as free as the air we breathe and the water in the river. If that's true, then why are you always asking us for money?"

"Brother," the preacher solemnly replied, "You are correct. Salvation is as free as the water you drink. But if you want that water in the kitchen, somebody has to pay for the pump!"

Frequently Asked Questions About Stewardship

What Catholic service agencies do the most good? Our parish is pretty well-off. I'd like to help the economically poor.

Many trustworthy Catholic agencies provide disaster relief, human services, healthcare, and education to poor and underserved peoples in the United States and around the world. For example, **Catholic Relief Services** offers assistance in more than 100 countries. It has an established reputation for allocating donor money to intended programs with only a minimal amount needed for administrative costs. Likewise, highly regarded agencies like **Catholic Charities USA** and the **St. Vincent de Paul Society** offer a wide range of social services. In the true spirit of Catholicism, many parishes who have the wherewithal also share their blessings by "twinning" with a needy parish in the same city, diocese, country, or sponsored mission abroad.

Apostolic charity is what the Church does; it's what we do after we say we believe in Christ, and it essentially helps identify us as his authentic disciples. Christians have a duty to support with almsgiving those who are poor and suffering. According to Canon 222 of the *Code of Canon Law*, "The Christian faithful are obliged to assist with the needs of the Church so that the Church has what is necessary for divine worship, for the works of the apostolate and of charity, and for the decent support of ministers. They are also obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor from their own resources."

Is tithing only about money, or is there a certain amount of time and energy we should dedicate to our parish?

"As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10). Stewardship of our time, talent, and treasure for the overall good of the Church is a way of showing gratitude to God for the gifts we have received. It is a faith response to a loving and generous God. As such, stewardship isn't only about a monetary obligation to support the mission of the Church; it's a way of life.

I want to support my parish financially, but I don't want the money to go to lawyers. How can I give so that my money helps parish programs?

Parishes receive bequests, and often legal assistance is needed to honor the wishes of the deceased. In such a case, the money that "goes to lawyers" does eventually support parish programs. With a growing number of US dioceses declaring bankruptcy and in litigation, legal representation is necessary, and individual parishes are required to contribute to the cost. While unrestricted donations are needed to apply to ordinary expenses of the parish, other donations can be designated for specific programs like the food pantry, the new organ fund, youth faith formation, outreach to the homeless, and so on.

I cannot give ten percent of my income and still pay the mortgage or feed my family. How can I experience the freedom of tithing?

Perhaps you might consider tithing your discretionary income. Most of us make purchases that satisfy our wants more than our needs. What if you put aside ten percent of what you pay for the extra pair of shoes, the shirt you just had to have but didn't really need, the cup of expensive coffee, or the meal in a nice restaurant? This will help support your parish and give you the freedom of the tithing method.

My parents' parish closed last year. They gave a lot of money and time toward the building of their church and school, and now they're heartbroken. How can I give, knowing that may happen?

A parish closing is like a death in the family. There is grief over the loss and sometimes anger, wondering if the closing was due to someone's negligence. It almost never is. Factors such as a decline in church attendance, a shortage of ordained ministers, and demographic changes in a geographical area may force a parish community to operate more from a crisis-management or maintenance mode rather than function as a thriving community of worship engaged in the ongoing mission of the Church. All who grieve the closing of their parish must remember that every child baptized in that parish, every person laid to rest, every expression of love, every prayer prayed, every song sung—these live on. Likewise, the houses we made into homes, the people we cherished, the work to which we gave our energy, our very bodies we fed and clothed—these don't last. Only the faith, the hope, and the love last. "Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14).



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