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ADU 3494

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Liguorian Pamphlets
Redemptorist Fathers
Liguori, Missouri**

Imprimi Potest:

John N. McCormick, C.S.S.R.
Provincial, St. Louis Province,
Redemptorist Fathers
July 1, 1959

Imprimatur:

St. Louis, July 3, 1959
✠ Joseph E. Ritter
Archbishop of St. Louis

Have you ever seriously asked yourself this question? Have you pondered all the angles that are involved in answering it rightly? If not, do so now.



HOW MUCH SHOULD I GIVE IN THE SUNDAY COLLECTION?

D. F. MILLER, C.S.S.R.

The question in the above title has to be answered in the innermost conscience of every individual wage-earning Catholic. There are many who answer it with faith and generosity and a spirit of cheerful sacrifice. There are some whose consciences prove to be uninformed or misinformed by the answer they give, and who need to ponder some of the thoughts presented here. There are some whose consciences are lax, because they answer the question with a shrug or "don't care" smile, and

act as if there were very little or no obligation whatsoever.

It is not our intention in this article to scold or berate any persons for what they are doing or not doing about the Sunday collection. We merely want to offer some reasonable considerations to all Catholics, on the basis of which they may judge themselves and decide on their own plan of conduct. We shall present our thoughts under three heads: 1. Why you should give to the Church at all. 2. How you should give. 3. How much you should give.

1. Why You Should Give

Many pages could be written on this subject, but all the reasons underlying your obligation to give to your parish church may be reduced to three.

A. *Scriptural reasons.* All through history God has wanted temples to be

built in which His people might honor and offer sacrifice to Him, and has chosen priests to serve those temples and to be supported by the people.

In the Old Testament God designated the kind of temple He wanted built, set up a lineage of priests to represent the people in offering sacrifice, and even directed that one-tenth of the material income of all His subjects be set aside for the worship of God in the temple.

In the New Testament, Christ established a religion that would require priests to represent Him, churches in which the Mass and the sacraments might be fittingly enacted, schools in which His command, "Teach all nations," might be fulfilled. Obviously He intended that the support of priests, churches and schools should come from the people who believed in Him and the religion He had founded for them. St. Paul speaks clearly of the necessary collections

that must be taken up among the faithful, and of the support due to priests who serve the altar.

B. *Reasons of obedience to the authority of Christ's Church.* The Church clearly commands all loyal Catholics to contribute to the support of their pastors, which means support not only of the priest himself, but of the church, rectory, school and convent that are under the jurisdiction of the pastor.

It is hardly possible for anyone to call himself a good Catholic if, having any income whatsoever, he completely flouts this definite law of the Catholic Church whereby he is commanded to contribute to the support of his parish. One can also make himself undeserving of the title of good Catholic by the smallness of his contributions in proportion to his means.

C. *Reasons of common sense.* To the understanding Catholic, the par-

ish is his link with the whole Mystical Body of Christ; it is a home for his soul, because there His soul is born into grace, healed of the disease of sin, educated and fortified for his battle with the world, fed, daily if he wishes, on the Body and Blood of Christ Himself. It is the place where he gives the kind of adoration to God that God has asked for through the sacrifice of the Mass.

Therefore, just as he loves the home in which he lives with his family, so he loves the home where he and his family find immediate access to God. If he loves God and seeks God's glory, he wants God to be loved and honored not only by his words, but by the very appearance of the parish plant — the church, school, rectory, convent — that are dedicated to God. With his fellow parishioners he calls these buildings "ours," in the sense that they are the people's gift to God. He calls his priests by the name

“father,” because they have no family in the strict sense other than their people.

He grieves, therefore, if his parish is in debt. He grieves if some of its buildings are inadequate and run down. He knows that he is not responsible alone for paying the debts and putting up the needed buildings. He knows he is one of many who share that responsibility. He knows that none of the sharers need go without plenty of food, or any other of the necessities of life, to do their share. But he does want to do his share. Since it is for God, he knows that he cannot possibly lose by doing his share.

2. How You Should Give

There is only one right answer to this question: You should give ac-

ording to the method officially established in your parish for receiving support from its people.

In most parishes in America today, the official method of accepting church support is through the Sunday envelope system. At the beginning of the year every wage-earner in the parish is given 52 envelopes, one for each Sunday of the year, and sometimes a few extra for the holydays that fall in the week. In most places these are dropped into the collection basket when the usher makes his rounds during Mass. In some places there is a receptacle near each door of the church into which a parishioner may drop his envelope as he enters or leaves the church.

Wherever this is the official system it should be used by every wage-earning Catholic in the parish, because it is blessed by obedience and keeps the parishioner on the active rolls of the

parish. Moreover it is orderly and equitable for all.

However two things must be noted about this system. First, there is scarcely a parish in the land, surely not a single large one, in which all wage-earning parishioners use the designated envelopes for their contributions to the parish. The number of failures ranges from 40 percent in some cases to 20 percent, and in rare cases to ten. Thus 40 or 20 or 10 wage-earning parishioners out of 100 refuse to go along with the authorities in their parish and the majority of their fellow parishioners.

The second thing to be noted is the kind of argument that is used by those who refuse to use the envelopes, either in their own hearts, or sometimes in open self-defense before others. They say: "I prefer to make my offerings secretly, in an open collection of loose money, not in an envelope with my name on it. I don't want

the pastor to know what I'm giving to the parish. I don't want the bother of putting my offering in an envelope every Sunday." Surely it is most difficult not to assume that these persons want to hide, not their generous offerings, but the ungenerousness of their usual offerings.

Some people take an outspoken stand against Sunday envelope collections on the ground that in their parish an annual report is published in which each wage-earning parishioner's name is published with the amount that he gave in his envelopes during the year.

There are, indeed, arguments against this practice. The chief one is that, even if everybody in the parish were doing his share, according to his means, in supporting the parish, the lists would reveal the secret of the comparative incomes of people, a secret that Americans like to hide from their neighbors. But it cannot be said

that all parishioners in every parish do their share. Some cannot give very much, and some refuse to give what they can and should. It is these latter who prefer to have their names appear in the parish annual report with nothing in the way of contribution recorded, rather than with the piddling sum they actually would have given if they had used the envelopes.

The same human respect that a few individuals fall back on as a reason for not using Sunday envelopes, might better be channelled into the cause of inspiring a more loyal fulfillment of their duty to their parish. God never forbade us to permit natural motives to bolster up our spiritual motives. If I know, for example, that my name will be published with what I give to my parish in a year, I may be influenced by the thought of not wanting to appear to be a free-rider, or a non-giver, or a "cheapskate" before my fellow parishioners. But I can always

smother that natural motive with a direct will act and intention whereby I make my offering to God, not merely to gain stature before my fellow men.

A parish is like a family, and it is good that all the members of a family know what each is doing for the good of the family. That is basically the reason for the publication of annual reports in parishes. And we feel sure that there is more pity than anger for the persons whose names appear year after year in the reports with \$.00 after them as their contribution for the year.

Whatever your feelings about all these matters, whatever your personal ideas about Sunday envelope collections, and the good or bad of detailed annual reports, don't be a rebel against authority, an outsider in the midst of your own parish family, a man who, if he cannot call the signals,

refuses to play at all. Use the envelopes every Sunday of the year.

3. How Much You Should Give

This is the hardest question to answer. No one can approach giving an answer to it without knowing that he is going to offend someone. Yet we can think reasonably about it, and perhaps consider angles that have never struck many people at all.

First of all, let's look frankly at some of the responses that people give to the above question, either in words or through the actual decisions they make when they contribute to their parish.

Some say: "*This is my own business. I give what I please to give, and no one has a right to check me on what I choose to give.*"

But it is not quite that simple. There is more than the element of pure charity in the obligation of giv-

ing to one's parish, and something more than the complete freedom argued for here. There is a bond of justice and equity between a man and his parish and also his fellow parishioners. To probe that bond, he has to ask himself questions like these: "What does my parish need? What do I owe to my parish for the spiritual opportunities it gives me? What standard or example should I give to my fellow parishioners, so that taken together all our contributions would provide for the needs of our parish?"

Some say: *"For 25 years I have been giving 50c or \$1.00 a Sunday to my parish. There are many who have done less. I see no need of changing the amount of my contributions now."*

This is an exceedingly unrealistic attitude to take. Everybody knows that everything that can be bought costs twice as much today as it did 25 years ago. A family has to budget more for food, for clothing, for insurance, for

recreation, for taxes — for everything, than it did 25 years ago. Should not this fact be taken into consideration in contributing to one's parish? Especially since incomes have generally gone up even more than the cost of living?

Some say: "*I give just as much as many of my fellow parishioners give.*"

The trouble with this standard is that anyone, in any parish, can pick out a number of fellow parishioners who give the least and make that his standard. A man with an income of \$25,000 a year can say that he need give no more than the \$4,000 a year factory workers in his parish. A man with no children to support on \$5,000 a year can say he need give no more than the man with eight children to support on \$5,000 a year.

Some say: "*I'm disgusted with all the talk about money in my parish*"

and my reaction is to give less than I probably could."

This means letting one's feelings, even baser feelings, rule over reason. The feeling of resentment should be recognized as a temptation, not a cause for action. If a pastor is guilty of imprudence in the manner and frequency with which he talks about the parochial need for support, a parishioner certainly does not please God or help the cause in any way by adding to the pastor's imprudence his own neglect of duty. If he is doing his duty, he should pray for those who are not, and who are causing the worried pastor to seem over-concerned about money.

All these are incorrect or wrong ways of facing up to the question of how much should be given in the Sunday collection. It is equally incorrect to take the position that, as long as one does not have a high enough income to provide all that he would

like to provide for his family, he need give very little to his parish. The right attitude is that giving to parish support should be an essential part of every Catholic budget, even when the budget is small.

What percentage of a Catholic's weekly income should be given to the support of his parish? Let's put it in terms of minimums and maximums.

The basic minimum should be two percent of a weekly income. Thus even a graduate from high school, starting out in a new job at \$50 a week, should not consider giving anything less than a dollar a Sunday to his parish. Thus a father of a family, making \$100 a week, but with many pressing obligations, should not even consider that he can spiritually afford to give less than \$2.00 a week to his parish collection. This minimum should be part of his budget for his family, just as food, clothing, insur-

ance and recreation are provided for in his budget.

We have before us several parish financial reports. In every one of them it is clear that many wage-earning parishioners are not giving this minimum of two percent of their income. Fifty dollars and less are a too frequent total of a year's contributions from many persons who earn much more than fifty dollars a week.

What is the maximum? What is the ideal? Certainly we can do no better than take a clue from the Bible itself, in which God demanded at time ten percent of their material income from all His chosen people. There are Protestant sects that will accept no less than this Biblical standard from their members, and who get it not only from the rich, but also from low income groups. It seems rather shameful that this Biblical ideal, still followed by some who possess only the partial truth about Christ, can hardly

be brought up in Catholic circles without the risk of scorn from those listening.

While youthful wage-earners on low salaries and fathers of families working for average factory salaries of \$80 to \$90 a week may be said to be doing their share by giving the minimum of two percent, there are innumerable Catholics who could and should establish their level of giving at closer to five percent than two. Tax laws favor such a standard, so that a man earning \$10,000 a year should find it no great hardship and consider it part duty and part privilege to give \$10 a Sunday to the support of his parish. His five percent a week would add up to about \$500 a year, a figure not very often seen after the names of even well-to-do Catholics on parish rolls.

If something near these standards could be approached in all Catholic

parishes, then the presently overwhelming problem of providing new parishes and new schools for an expanding population would turn out to be no problem at all. Money would scarcely ever be mentioned from pulpits, and Catholics would find themselves growing rapidly in spiritual stature as a result of the graces their generosity to God would earn.

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