

ENTRE AMIGOS - Opinion Column
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We are building the Church, come and help!

Por Mar Muñoz-Visoso

To a Catholic deacon in the United States who was laid off from his information technology day-job, stewardship meant trusting in God's providence and keeping up his commitment to give a certain percentage of his household income to the Church, even when, for months, the family only had his wife's part-time job salary to make ends meet. It also meant not cutting back in his donation of time and talent to his parish community.

For a young priest in Colombia and his *feligreses* (parishioners), the good administration of the goods God has given to the Church meant he had no money for a badly needed parish building in the midst of an impoverished neighborhood, but his parishioners had other riches, gifts and talents he was determined to use.

And so, to continue to give in the face of hardship was a purifying moment of grace for the deacon's family; and the Colombian community had its 'small but decent' *parroquia* built with donations from local construction companies, the labor of many parishioners, and the cooking of the parish women who offered nourishment and encouragement to the laborers daily.

These two beautiful experiences of stewardship, however, seem to collide at times in our U.S. parishes, especially in communities where the large influx of new immigrants and the dwindling of the "traditional" parishioners translate into a drop in the collection box.

The understanding of stewardship is really not all that different in both cases; it's just where they put the emphasis. At the heart of the misunderstandings is a different experience of what the parish is, how it works, and of the material needs of the parish.

I grew up in a parish in Spain where the only one who received a modest salary was the priest. The rest of us were all volunteers. There was no paid youth minister or director of religious education, only a few very committed parishioners and then the rest of us, although we were quite organized. In that particular context, the system worked well, yet it had its advantages and disadvantages.

Our parish was regarded as a very active one in spite of being located in a poor, working-class neighborhood. Special collections or appeals always revolved around specific projects. The people were usually generous on those occasions and those who could not give monetarily always found other ways to contribute.

The weekly collection was a different thing. Aside from utilities, our parish ran on a very low budget. There was no real awareness of where the priest's salary came from. Somehow the diocese, then still subsidized by the government, would take care of that, we thought.

My experience is not different from that of many Latin American Catholics for whom the parish refers more to its people than to a building or territory; who are alien to the idea of paid staff or the envelope, and are often unaware of the cost of running a parish.

Even for immigrants who have enjoyed for some time the benefits of parish staff and facilities in "the North," it takes a while to understand to what extent the parish needs their contribution. Beyond the day-to-day experience that the parish here works differently, there needs to be a process of education of why it is so and how it benefits the community. First of all, there needs to be a sense of being welcome.

Parishioners in the receiving communities also need to remember that it probably took a while to get to the level of commitment and comfort they enjoyed until very recently, that communities change with its people, and that many parishes in the U.S. were built in the same way than our Colombian friends built theirs.

Much as in a family, a new member always requires adjustments and adaptation. The newcomer needs to learn the ways of the people he or she is now tied into. In turn, the family-community must help him discover his gifts, nurture them and teach him, but also demand his contribution in the form of time, talent and treasure. In the process of giving and receiving they are all transformed.

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