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Most Reverend John R. Gaydos
Bishop of Jefferson City

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Associate Chancellor
Archdiocese of Vancouver

Seasons of the Spirit

Reflections on Finding God in Daily Life

E. Jane Rutter



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We are blessed to live where one season leads to the next, assured that spring will turn to summer, summer to fall, fall to winter, and winter to spring. Tree branches awaken and flower, shed their leaves, and lay dormant until they bloom again. Our church parallels nature; its seasons never falter.

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ADVENT



1 *All Is New*

This weekend, we open the door to a new month, a new year, and a renewed commitment to our faith. As we turn our calendars to the month of December, we also enter into the church's new liturgical year, marked by the first week of Advent.

And what a wonderful reading we begin with at Mass, the prophet Isaiah telling us of his vision of the future of Judah and Jerusalem! His words inspire us to look up, to set our eyes and our efforts on that which is above.

"In days to come / the mountain of the Lord's house / shall be established as the highest of the mountains, / and shall be raised above the hills" (Isa 2:2). His words speak to people of every age, reminding us that our purpose is to reach the peak, the Lord's house, where our hearts reside. Isaiah's imagery is of God looking down on us from the mountain, our instructor, judge, and arbitrator, perhaps invoking in us a God that is distant and removed from our lives.

But, no, we needn't limit ourselves so. Isaiah invites us to "go up to the mountain of the Lord, / to the house of the God of Jacob; / that he may teach us his ways / and that we may walk

in his paths" (Isa 2:3). We are invited to walk together to God's house—peoples of all nations. It is in God's house that we will find our commonality through love. We will desist from fighting to accept God's way of peace.

Each step we climb up the mountain we put sin behind us and grow ever stronger in the purity of love that is God. We recommit to our faith with wiser eyes and loving hearts.

Simply stated, Isaiah's prophecy is a fantastic purpose statement for our walk on this earth that we can renew every year! Next year, I will

1. lift my eyes in prayer to God;
2. go to the house of the Lord;
3. embrace learning;
4. invite others to walk with me;
5. open my heart to peace;
6. grow in love.

And so I pray: Dear Lord, help me walk up the mountain to your house, that I may always live in you.



2 *Conference Planning*

I spent two days in Chicago this week serving on the conference planning committee for the International Catholic Stewardship Council. Gathered together with forty colleagues—stewardship directors and priests from the United States and Canada—volunteering their gifts to set the program sessions that people worldwide will flock to for instruction and inspiration on living in Christ.

In the unlikely setting of a meeting room this first week of Advent, I find myself walking up the mountain to God's home with people of all nations (Isa 2:2-3). To be a part of this group is humbling, energizing, and spiritually uplifting. For they are people who love God, coming together with a single focus: to proclaim Christ to others.

At Mass this second week of Advent, we will hear the words of justice and peace, and harmony and praise. We will be challenged to produce good fruit. I will think of the young man sitting beside me on the El train, immersed in his Bible. Wanting to make that Christian connection, I asked him what verse he was reading in Proverbs. He looked up and responded to me

with a gentleness in his eyes and voice that didn't correspond to his stained teeth or haggard-looking face. Again, I met Christ in the unlikely setting of the El as it clattered above the hotels, neighborhoods, and industrial sections of the city.

And so I pray: Dear Lord, let this Advent be one of open eyes and hearts, that I may see your face in unlikely settings and proclaim your love in truth.



3 *Club Stewardship vs. Church Stewardship*

There are times when I entertain the thought that our parishes and diocese should start a "club stewardship." We could host weekly games and shows so members would give us their time, use volunteer help so members would give us their talent, and operate the club on dues so our financial needs would always be met. Club stewardship would be a self-supporting, fun, and personally profitable place to go!

While operating a club has these stated benefits, church stewardship's foundation and premise are inherently different than that of club stewardship:

- Club stewardship is a social gathering where one goes to have fun, but also to be seen by others of equal or greater status. Church stewardship invites everyone in on equal footing as children of God, regardless of status, membership, financial portfolio, race, age, gender, or even attitude.

- Club stewardship relies on volunteers who often give their time in return for meeting contacts with whom they can do business in other settings. Church stewardship is filled with stewards who give their time to serve others as Christ did, not for personal gain.
- Club stewardship selects its members by their financial ability. Church stewardship serves the poor and wealthy alike.

Clubs have their place of value in our lives. We do have fun watching sports competitions, playing games, meeting business associates, and generally enjoying ourselves. However, we cannot mistake the temporal pleasures or business gains we experience at clubs as substitutes for the true sense of stewardship that only a relationship with God offers. It is through church stewardship that we gain a deep sense of God's love, peace, and community that is everlasting.

Most important, church stewardship is founded on the Gospel values of recognizing that everything we have comes from God, and, in our gratefulness, we return the firstfruits of our labor to God—through our time, talent, and treasure.

Church stewardship requires a conversion of heart. A Christian steward is defined by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as "one who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them in justice and love with others, and returns them with increase to the Lord" (Stewardship: A Disciple's Response, V).

Advent is a time of waiting for Christ and can be a fitting time to examine our personal stewardship by reflecting on the following seven questions:

1. Is our primary time spent in jobs or social arenas where we are uncomfortable practicing or expressing our faith?
2. Do we spend time with our children, family, and friends in ways that honor God?
3. Do we serve others less fortunate than ourselves?
4. Do we teach our children, and are we learning about the rich catechism, history, and traditions of Catholicism?
5. Do we use our talents to their fullest capacity?
6. Are we allocating our financial resources to support the needs of our church in thanksgiving to God's gifts to us?
7. Are we inviting and guiding others to the eucharistic table?

To actively engage in this reflection process, consider scheduling individual time or holding a family meeting within the next few weeks to explore these seven questions. Develop a personal plan of action for yourself and/or your family, defining steps you can take to enrich your stewardship. You may choose a simple format such as the following:

- read an individual question;
- ask each individual to write down his/her thoughts regarding that question;
- share your thoughts openly with each other;
- develop an action plan by asking, "What can we do to respond to God?" and writing down specific actions you will take.

A conversion of our hearts to stewardship enhances our realization and acceptance of God's presence and guidance in every aspect of our lives. Simply stated, as joyful stewards, we act out of gratitude for God's love.



4 *Unfailing Support*

Halloween is past, Thanksgiving is past, and Christmas is already here. On my way home from work every evening, I pass by plastic Santas and red-colored lights twinkling at me from front yards. I weed out the ad inserts from the newspaper, throwing them into the trash can before I bring the paper into the house to read. Number one—Christmas isn't remotely here yet. Number two—what I don't see, I won't be tempted to buy. Number three—I keep trying to switch my focus from "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" to "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The gift I love to receive is time with my family. It is a goal I seek throughout the seasons, and one my mother and siblings recognize as important to me. Call it the desire to give "unfailing support of one another." We offer that petition at Mass, recognizing we are a family, a community of faith, built on the cross of Christ and the foundation of Peter.

Jesus, however, claimed to come with a sword that would split families apart. As we approach the holiday season, we witness families lost in past bitterness and blame. Somewhere on the path, they shut down their spiritual connections and quit

reaching out to one another. They lost their ability to see the good and to nurture Christ in one another.

Without Jesus, Thanksgiving and Christmas become the season of "unmet expectations." Nothing we receive is quite what we wanted, the people we party with seem stale, we wrangle with irritating crowds in the stores to get the first crack at this year's new and glittery whatever. Nothing completely satisfies the emptiness within.



5 *Comfort*

"Comfort, give comfort to my people, / says your God," Isaiah shares with us (Isa 40:1, NABRE).

What a great message for us to embrace. We need comfort from fear of the financial recession and its impact on us, comfort from dire news messages that we subliminally inhale, comfort in this time of change within our political landscape.

As a nation we are consumed in a knee-jerk reaction of fearing what we cannot control, anticipating the worst, and publicly scattering seeds of blame that grow like thorns. The same reactions have held true in every nation long before Christ's coming as man.

Isaiah counters this age-old doom with God's words of comfort.

We may think it naive or Pollyannaish to walk lightly and spread any good news (much less the Good News) in the midst of uncertainty. But, as Christians, we are called, even chosen, for this mission. Isaiah ends this beautiful psalm with the following balm:

> They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength,
> they will soar on eagles' wings;
> They will run and not grow weary,
> walk and not grow faint. (40:31, NABRE)

As believers in and followers of Christ, we are gifted with spirits of faith to go out and give comfort. All need the comfort of the Word, some the comfort of food and shelter, others the comfort of work and family.

This spirit of selflessness reigns in and among all our communities. Flowing from the Eucharist, it is evidenced in our relationships with one another, the sacrificial sharing of our material goods, the desire to give rather than receive, knowing the latter is the greater gift.

Herein we experience the joy that bubbles out from deep within us, regardless of the world's current state of affairs. Suffering comes and goes in our life. Joy is always within us, coming to the surface whenever we forget ourselves and, as Christ, reach out to others.

Don't let us forget we belong to God. This holy season let's celebrate the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Meet our brother, sister, mother, and Father at Mass. Cloak us in the Eucharist. Place our church's needs at the forefront of giving from what we have.

And so I pray: Dear God, stay with us, ever present within our hearts and leading our actions. Help us find our joy in abandoning our comfort for others.



6 *Gratitude*

To be overcome by gratitude is a marvelous feeling. Taking personal inventory of our year, I bet the good things outweigh the bad; the glass is half full; God gave us the strength to handle our circumstances, and the grace to look for the silver lining.

That grace is so important. For if at first our inventory list seems filled with rain, when we sincerely open ourselves to God, asking to understand the lessons our experiences hold for us, and how we are to use these insights in his service, we can only be humbled and strengthened. Gratitude doesn't mean the sun will shine for us every day.

There are times we may feel isolated from love and community and think we have been shortchanged. We forget how to love; we feel lost and in need of step-by-step instructions to finally learn to love the right way. God the parent smiles in affection, unveiling the answer in simplicity. "I gave you my son, Jesus." Oh yes, we blush in humble remembrance: look to Jesus.

Expressing our gratitude for the gift of his Son is what this season of Advent is about. It is a time to opt for loving to serve and serving to love, to admit our failings and so be freed from them, to put aside petty jealousies and positioning, to release our anxieties.

Prior to our final response to the Our Father at Mass, we hear the priest pray, "Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, / graciously grant peace in our days, / that, by the help of your mercy, / we may be always free from sin / and safe from all distress, / as we await the blessed hope / and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ."

To accept peace and protection from anxiety, we must also accept that by opening the door to a relationship with our Creator, we are never alone. Psalm 139 affirms this. "For it was you who formed my inward parts; / you knit me together in my mother's womb. / I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (vv. 13-14). This Advent finally accept that you are a beloved son or daughter of God.

Saint Teresa of Avila confirms the experiences of the psalmist, telling us in *The Way of Perfection*, "He refuses to force our will. He takes what we give Him but does not give Himself wholly until He sees that we are giving ourselves entirely to Him."[1] We only truly serve in God's name when we are strong enough in faith to believe in ourselves wholly as gifts of God, and have an overwhelming desire to give the gift of God to others. Service is a glorious gift God has graced us with.

And so I pray: Lord, we have much for which to be grateful. This Advent let us be invigorated by your love, dear Lord. Renew our service in your fold.

Note

1. Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, ed. Henry L. Carrigan Jr. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2000), 124–25.



7 *Painting*

Perhaps because they happen infrequently, I savor snow days. The fifteen-inch pileup that surrounded us the first week of Advent gave me the rare gift of four days to sleep in, pad around in my slippers, bake bread, hang out with David and Laura, and . . . *paint*.

Family coming for Christmas served as our incentive to delve into repainting most rooms, installing a tile shower, and wallpapering.

As with everything, the task of painting involves ritual. There is the donning of comfortable sweats that would pass for rags elsewhere than home, making fresh coffee to keep a good supply of caffeine pumping through the veins, and playing *White Christmas* with the volume on the television set blasting so the sounds of Rosemary Clooney and Bing Crosby reverberate through the house.

With the mood set, the rhythm of painting takes over. It is an elegant symmetry between the repetitive movement of brush in hand and the mind emptying to invite God in. Time and schedules are replaced with the color and thoughts that I paint on my canvas wall.

I think of my husband, children, and the rest of our family. My children are always at the forefront of my prayers. As a mother, I look to Mary, asking her to hold them in her arms and lead them to her son, Jesus the Christ. Long ago, I realized the only prayer that matters to mothers is for their children to accept God. There is an incredible peace in knowing that whatever else happens in their lives—the joys and sorrows—bears little import against our children's acceptance to discipleship.

We begin this Advent season called to be on guard for the coming of Christ, assured that he will fill us with joy and laughter. Sitting on the floor painting the trim, I am overcome with the sensation of being blessed. Sharing Christmas with my family gathered in body and spirit is a gift that, like snow days, happens too infrequently. Our love is like Christ's, given freely and with open heart. Though we share the similarity of blood and background, our paths vary widely. Not all have accepted Christ, and that longing and hope stay with me.

Picking up a wet cloth, I wipe paint speckles off my hands and look around the room. I hear Rosemary and Bing sing, "May your days be merry and bright," while opening the doors of inn's stage to reveal snow falling. In the fields of Vermont and my home, everything looks fresh, clean, and inviting.

And so I pray: May our home serve as praise to you, dear Lord, its comfort and warmth inviting all to come to you. Fill this home with your love and spirit.



8 *Skipping Christmas*

I am years behind on reading John Grisham's *Skipping Christmas*, but I was captured by its title in the book section of Gerbes while frantically grocery shopping Sunday night among a passel of college students. There is a wonderful allure to the thought of skipping Christmas with its hyper-frenzied overindulging state of shopping, cooking, spending, cleaning, eating, and partying. Already tired from the fullness of fall's schedule, it is rest from all that fills my dreams.

Having just begun the book, I won't speculate on how the story ends, but instead give some thought on how to keep the season in line with the goal to follow Christ more nearly:

> Realize how much we have: The refrigerator is stocked, the house is warm, and we are well clothed. Not only are we comfortable, but richer than peoples of many other nations. We are blessed with a loving family and friends, jobs, and a life of freedom.
>
> Embrace the concept of less is better: Down to one credit card, we pay the charges off monthly. We've forewarned

> our local banker to look toward the next generation for business as our only goal is to pay off our mortgage. We are saving cash for a new-to-us car, hoping the Toyota will last another year beyond its current 200,000 miles.
>
> Keep less and give more: We don't miss what we give and certainly are not sacrificing. We've chosen to tithe to our parish and diocese automatically through our checking account. Giving up possessing a new car or toys or vacations cannot be called sacrifice, so we make an effort not to relate one to the other. We desire plenty, but need little.
>
> Focus on Advent at home and church: We light the wreath at the dinner table, pray as a family, put up the manger, and attend reconciliation services and Mass. We're teaching our children the traditions of our faith through its practice.

As Advent approaches, I think of the ways I have failed this year. Face-to-face with my own unworthiness, I need to ask for and receive forgiveness—to be cleansed in the birth of Christ. It is so humbling to be loved without reservation.

We will put up a tree and buy presents and bake cookies. We will celebrate. However, as the years go by and we try to follow Christ more nearly, the celebration gains in depth and in the realization of what an awesome gift God has given us in Christ and each other.

Please let me know how you are "skipping Christmas," but don't tell me how the book ends.



9 *Mary's Walk*

It is the Sabbath and we have paused on our journey to Bethlehem. Sheltered by the mountains, as evening sets we sit by the campfire letting its warmth seep through our tired bones. The baby in my womb is gentle as if sensing the time to rest is come. We will reach our destination soon enough. Thus settled, I return to the thoughts that bind me ever closer to the prophets of the Lord who foretold of this time.

I think of David the shepherd king marveling, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (2 Sam 7:18). From the depths of age, his words are planted in my heart and on my lips! For now I walk the path that God bequeathed to David, a servant in his house called to fulfill the Master's plan.

I bow low to the ground beneath me, breathing in the sweet earth God has created. I look up to the cedars, humbled by their might. Beyond, the stars and moon lift the darkness of night in glory to the greatness of the Lord. This is the house of David, the ancestor of Joseph. God claimed him long before he walked these hills and slept under this sky.

Just as he claimed me: "The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Isa 7:14). When the angel came to me, how could I respond other than to say yes? For he has filled me with grace, the gift to bear the son on whose shoulders authority rests. The "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, / Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6).

I wrap my cloak around me, chilled as I ponder the prophet's words: "His authority shall grow continually, / and there shall be endless peace / for the throne of David and his kingdom. / He will establish and uphold it / with justice and with righteousness / from this time onward and forevermore" (Isa 9:7).

Indeed, Joseph and I speak with great joy of the task that lies ahead of us, tending to this child who will grow to claim his predestined throne. How we shall present him at the temple, and raise him according to the traditional laws of Moses. And he shall bring peace and justice and righteousness to our people. How long we have waited, O Lord, for your reign to come!

You have brought us from the familiarity of our homes to a journey we scarcely understand to serve you in a manner we are most unworthy of. We are awed and filled with a grace we can hardly contain. Surely it shines out of our pores to light up the path.

Tomorrow we shall rise and continue our walk to Bethlehem. We end tonight in prayer: Give joy to your servant, O Lord, for to you I lift up my soul (Ps 89:1-37).



10 *Best Friends*

This morning I was thinking about best friends, considering all those whom I love. I have my husband, mother, siblings, children, and friends, but with whom do I share my deepest self? Of course, any Christian knows the Sunday school answer: Jesus/God is my best friend. Thinking this train of thought through, I realize that the exclusive best friend relationship we have with God is not meant to supplant our human relations, but serves as the model, the basis, for our friendships with others.

We rely on our friends much like we rely on God. We expect them to agree with us no matter what, to take our side, to always be here when we need them. But, there's a big difference between our relationship with God and our human friends. God will never let us down.

Whether right or wrong, God is always *by* our side, but not necessarily *on* our side. He will, in no uncertain terms, let us know when we are wrong and give us the action to correct that wrong. Which is to say, God is more than friend—he is parent. Today, it seems more parents opt for friendship with their kids rather than taking on the role of parenting. Parenting does not always make us act or feel warm and fuzzy.

David and I just took our kids to see Bill Cosby and we all laughed at the stories he told about his childhood. Clearly, his parents were the authority in his home. They were the guides and disciplinarians, set the rules, all with the goal of raising their children to become adults—by the time they could vote, no less!

"Eighteen and you're set to fly, kid" seems to have been the expectation in past generations. That's not to imply that parents of yesteryear didn't love or didn't have great relationships with their children; rather, it's more to say that the line between parent and friend wasn't blurred the way it so often is now. Parents were parents and friends were people your own age.

An example Cosby gave was that at home he was expected to get up and go to church regardless. There was no thought of sleeping in or playing games instead of attending church. Parents led their children to the house of the Lord—no excuse.

When I was young, I always thought I'd be the perfect parent. Older and wiser now, I can look back and say that if I had it to do over again, I think I'd be tougher on and more loving with my kids.

One thing I've learned is that it isn't enough for us to confide solely in God. God expects us to reach out to one another with open hearts. His love gives us the courage to love. His love covers us in joy. His love connects us and makes us want to be one—brothers and sisters and family of God. We need parents and we need friends.

After all, in relationship with God we become one in the body of Christ.



11 *Ice and Candlelight*

This week's ice storm downed trees and power lines, made for slick roads and cold homes, and disrupted school sessions and holiday shopping. The sound of the trees cracking and splintering as they crashed to the ground was intimidating enough to keep even the most adventurous inside.

We've marked time the last three days at home by the hours with power and those without. The times without were the best. Our granddaughter Gabbi spent Saturday night with us. Frightened by the lightning and thunder that signaled the storm's beginning, she sought solace in Aunt Laura's bed. Waking up to no power on Sunday, the adventure of staying warm began and with it came time to enjoy each other by playing games, talking, and laughing. David's eyes gleamed with the challenge of an icy wonderland as he headed outdoors to get cars started and the firebox filled.

Laura took pictures of the heavy tree branches that knocked over the grill and littered the backyard. She took pictures of our dog Sweetie chasing a white-tailed deer over the pond dam and the sturdy cedars so heavy with ice they bowed over the driveway.

We will send this evidence of cold times at home to Jake in the barracks of Baghdad so he can feel winter beside us.

Hard times bring out the best in us. Those without power find comfort in hotels or with family whose power is unaffected. Neighbors share hot meals with the less fortunate on their block, and bring them steaming cocoa to warm them. The able-bodied shovel ice from the widows' driveways and with their chainsaws clear trees from the road so that when all is said and done we can travel back and forth safely.

Today, I sit at work and look out at the dark sky that percolates with snow. The power is off again at home. And yet I am filled with a lightness and sense of gratitude for all God's gifts. For David, who tends to our needs. For Corey, whose love for his daughter Gabrielle shines on his face. For Laura, with whom I can discuss the inane and the prophetic. For Jake and his platoon, who defend us. For homemade bread and Christmas cookies ardently baked before the power shuts down again. For the Advent candles that light up our waiting for Jesus the Christ to be born.

During Advent, James invites us to "be patient" and "make [our] hearts firm" until "the coming of the Lord" (Jas 5:8, NABRE). Most of us experience little of the hardship the prophets endured, but merely the inconvenience of ice and candlelight now and again.

And so I pray: Dear Lord, keep me in the knowledge that all I endure is a blessing in your name. Let me always see the generosity in others and be grateful for all that you give me.



12 *My Granddaughter*

Gabbi spent the night with us on Saturday. An inquisitive soon-to-be five-year-old, she wants a play-by-play outline of our time together. I think she's preparing for a career in event planning. Can we color? Will you read to me before bedtime? Can I sleep with you? Do we have to go to church?

Invariably, the "yes" answer to the latter question brings another round of questions, ones that I never tire of answering, for they come from a child open to learning about God.

The conversation we share simply happens when we are hanging out free from deadlines, projects, or her attempts to schedule our time. This weekend she seemed concerned about good and bad people and our exchange meandered along these lines:

"Do you think God loves bad people?" Gabbi asked me.

"Yes, God loves everyone, but is sad when people choose to be bad."

"Does God love me when I do something bad?"

"Yes, God loves you just like your mom and dad do. They are disappointed in you when you choose to do bad things, but that doesn't change their love for you. That's why, when you do bad things, it's important to be sorry and apologize."

"Does God know when I'm sorry?"

"Yes, by praying you can tell God you are sorry, just like you tell anyone else."

"Is God the boss of us? Do I have to do everything he tells me?"

"God is your heavenly Father. He does not make you do what he wants, but gives you the choice to do what is good or bad."

"How can I hear God talking to me?"

"God doesn't talk to you with his voice, like you and I are talking. You know God hears you because your heart feels lighter."

With a thoughtful expression on her face, Gabbi seemed to be considering this information. Meanwhile, I, thinking this special teaching moment was at a close, started to move on mentally. What happened next amazed me. Gabbi asked me to show her how to tell God if she was sorry for something. We clasped our hands together and she repeated the few simple words I spoke that became our prayer.

What I had failed to see was that all this time, Gabbi wanted more than talk. She wanted to learn how to pray, to hear God, to know God's peace. I thought of all the Sundays spent in line for "confession," and realized that the few minutes we share with our children help form their foundation for receiving God in the sacraments. Gabbi witnessed several truths to me about sacramental preparation:

- Children thrive on routine and ritual. They may not choose going to church on their own, but quickly accept routines as part of the norm.

- Children are spiritually hungry. As little sponges, children absorb what they are taught, and do comprehend the difference between good and bad.
- Children are open to understanding. God makes sense to them in the context of a loving parent who wants us to choose good.
- Children are eager disciples. They are action-oriented, wanting practice and results. I could watch Gabbi as she tried to feel her heart being lighter after praying to God.
- Children need guidance. As parents we are blessed with the task to give our children our time, attention, wisdom, and modeling.

Therein lies the simple truth of why we practice our Catholic faith.



13 *Gifts and Talents*

Scouting out talent is the hot trend on reality television today. The viewing audience can vote for up-and-coming dancers, comedians, rock singers, and even Broadway stars, and, with text messaging, have the chance to win $10,000 for participating. At the end of the season, one new star is born, crowned, and headed for the big lights and big money.

The purpose of discovering talent at church is a bit different than on television. Christian stewardship is all about our need to give back to God for the gifts he has blessed us with. In light of this, as church leaders, our goal is to help members identify their gifts/talents, encourage their development, and use their gifts.

When we use our talents in service and praise to God, his light shines through for others to see and model. We are at our best when giving out of our strengths.

At every Mass the priest prays over the gifts that are brought to the altar. One of the prayers is, "Accept, we pray, O Lord, these offerings we make, / gathered from among your gifts to us, / and may what you grant us to celebrate devoutly here below / gain for us the prize of eternal redemption. / Through Christ our Lord."

The prayer establishes three relationships: (1) we offer our gifts to God, (2) God receives them, and (3) we seek holiness and salvation through Christ. The prayer is a communal one, embracing each of us individually and collectively. Through offertory, we are called to accept the gifts of others just as we ask Christ to accept our offerings.

Parishes that make room for members to use their gifts are welcoming and vibrant parishes. Listed below are some thoughts and recommendations on best practices from a survey of clergy, parish, and diocesan staff members and parish leaders by Parish Growth Partners:

- Parishes that scout out talents and gifts of individual parishioners and match individual interests to specific ministries are more successful.
- With active involvement comes a stronger commitment to the life of the parish and increased generosity.
- Parishes that openly and personally welcome new members and support current members see more involvement of individuals in parish activities. This is especially important in young and growing parishes.
- Initiate or renew a plan for regular recruitment of ministry volunteers.
- Initiate or renew a ministry volunteer recognition event.
- Start or reenergize a welcoming committee.
- Provide more personalized information and a direct invitation to serve.[1]

Developing and using our gifts and talents for the service and praise of God may not make us superstars, but it will make us super disciples.

Note

1. Gibson and White, *Survey of Best Practices for Parishes* (Winchester, MA: Parish Growth Partners Inc., 2006).