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"Stewardship, Synodality, and Transformational Giving"

(Remarks as prepared)

Good morning. I hope you slept well and are looking forward to three days of inspiration and encouragement in your work as stewards of the Good News of God's love. I will do my best to get us off to a good start today, but I recommend that you take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the diverse conference agenda to learn more about the spirituality of stewardship and how you can help your parish, diocese, or other Catholic organization teach the joy of giving.

Before I begin my formal presentation, I want to acknowledge a special occasion that will take place later this week about 700 miles upriver from us. On Thursday, September 24, in St. Louis, Pope Leo XIV's personal representative Cardinal Luis Tagle, will beatify Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. This will be an inspiring, historic moment for the Church in the United States, and the Universal Church, because it will give appropriate recognition to a beloved holy man, a missionary disciple of Jesus Christ, who truly was what Pope Francis called a "Spirit-filled evangelizer." Archbishop Sheen was a philosopher, a humorist, a media personality, and a diocesan bishop, but his beatification and his future claim to sainthood do not result from any of these qualities or accomplishments. The Church invites us to call Fulton J. Sheen "blessed" because he was a man of prayer whose public life and ministry offered millions of people here in the United States and throughout the world a chance to see Jesus Christ reflected in his words and actions.

To my knowledge, Fulton Sheen rarely (if ever) used the word "stewardship," but he talked about it all the time—in his books and essays, in his radio and television programs, and in his ministry as a priest and a bishop. Soon-to-be-Blessed Fulton J. Sheen constantly spoke about the Christian principles which are the very heart of stewardship: gratitude, accountability, generosity, and giving back to the Lord with increase. Sheen's stewardship message was communicated using his own words.

Here is an example (and I quote):

> "*Love is the key to the mystery of life. Love by its very nature is not selfish, but generous. It seeks not its own, but the good of others. The measure of love is not the pleasure it gives us—that is the way the world judges it—but the joy and peace that love can give to others*."

During this conference, as we reflect on the spirituality of stewardship, and as we explore both new and traditional methods of inviting members of the Catholic community to make generous, sacrificial gifts to their parishes, dioceses, and other Church ministries, let's ask Archbishop Sheen to intercede for us and to encourage us to be faithful stewards in spreading the joy of the Gospel to all our sisters and brothers in Christ.

My formal reflections this morning discuss three concepts that would strike many Catholics as unfamiliar, or at least unrelated to each other. The terms "stewardship," "synodality," and "transformational giving" are not household words, but they are each vitally important for successfully carrying out the Church's mission in ways that are consistent with the Gospel. What's more, I believe that these three concepts are essentially interconnected.
Let's look at each term individually. Then we can discuss how they are interrelated.

As you know, in December 1992, the American bishops published a pastoral letter on stewardship entitled, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*. In it they describe a Christian steward as: "One who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them generously with others, and returns them to the Lord with increase."

I mentioned these four characteristics of a Christian steward in connection with the extraordinary witness of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, but the pastoral letter on stewardship tells us that all of us are called to be grateful, accountable, generous and willing to give back to the Lord with increase as an integral part of our baptismal responsibility as missionary disciples of Jesus Christ.

Gratitude comes first. We cannot be good stewards if we are bitter, resentful, or constantly complaining about the wrongs done to us or all of the things we don't have. Saying "thank you" changes our perspective. It improves our attitude. It invites us to see the glass as half-full rather than half empty. When we are feeling sad, or depressed, or unhappy, we should consider all the people and things we are grateful for. This change in attitude or perspective frees us from slavery to our grievances. It creates the opportunity for us to experience true joy.

Accountability comes next. A good steward accepts responsibility for taking care of the gifts he or she has been given. Accountability is an active virtue. It means nurturing, developing and using the gifts that God has given us. It requires honesty, integrity, and the willingness to be transparent about what we have done, or failed to do, with all our material and spiritual gifts.

Generosity flows from gratitude and accountability. If we are truly grateful, we will want to share our gifts with others. If we are really taking responsibility for our thoughts, beliefs, and actions as Christians, we won't want to selfishly hold back anything. What's ours is not really ours. It belongs to God, and God has given these material and spiritual gifts to us to take care of them, and to share them generously with others. As Archbishop Sheen says: "Love by its very nature is not selfish, but generous."

Giving back to the Lord with increase is the fourth characteristic of Christian stewardship. We weren't given God's gifts to bury them. We are supposed to grow them, to give back to God more than we were given to begin with. God gave us brains to develop and use. We also received emotions, talents, and skills that can either be neglected and ignored or matured for our own good and the good of others. When we stand before the Lord at the gates of heaven his question will be: "What did you do with all the gifts I gave you?" Can we honestly say that we took the gifts we were given, developed them, and shared them gratefully and generously with others?

The term that best describes the journey that we "Pilgrims of Hope" are traveling together now is "synodality." This term is often misunderstood today, but it is an ancient concept dating back to the earliest days of Christian history. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit, who empowered Jesus' fearful disciples, gathered the leaders of the young Church together in prayer, attentive listening, and dialogue to discern God's will and to make important decisions about who they were, what they believed, and what God was calling them to be and do as missionary disciples of the risen Lord.

Pope Francis frequently reminded us that synodality is not about changing Church teaching. It is, first and foremost, a way of living the Gospel. Synodality is a style of pastoral leadership that is open and responsive to the needs of people today. Synodal leadership affirms the fact that every baptized person has the right and the responsibility to participate in the Church's life and ministry. It recognizes that we are all members of the one Body of Christ and that every one of us is called to conversion and to missionary discipleship in Jesus' name.

The same is true of our ecclesial structures—our parishes, schools, and all our Catholic institutions and ministries. As Pope Francis said in *The Joy of the Gospel*, "We cannot leave things as they presently are." We must allow the Holy Spirit to renew us, as individuals and as communities, so that we can effectively carry the joy of the Gospel to others here at home and to the ends of the earth. Our current Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, has affirmed the importance of synodality in the life of the Church today and always. He defines synodality as "a style, an attitude that helps us to be Church by promoting authentic experiences of participation and communion."

Synodality urges us to reject the individualism and rigid ideologies that are so prevalent in our culture today and to embrace the communion that exists among all living and deceased members of Christ's Body. We are all one in Christ, and we travel together as sisters and brothers in the one family of God. This fact demands that we respect one another regardless of our differences, that we listen to each other despite our disagreements, and that we work together to build up the Kingdom of God here and now.

The final document, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,* which was approved by Pope Francis at the conclusion of the Synod in Rome in October 2024, makes this powerful observation:

> "*The Church exists to bear witness in the world to the most decisive moment in history: the Resurrection of Jesus. The Risen Christ brings peace to the world and gives us the gift of His Spirit. The living Christ is the source of true freedom, the foundation for a hope that does not disappoint, the revelation of the true face of God and humanity's ultimate destiny (#14).*"

We are Christ's witnesses. We exist to bring His peace to a world at war.

As missionary disciples, we are called to be co-responsible leaders who bring the living Christ, the source of all freedom and hope, to our sisters and brothers who have abandoned hope. We are compelled to bear witness to the lost and the lonely among us, and we believe that Jesus Christ is "the face of God and humanity's ultimate destiny." Through Him, with Him, and in Him, we experience genuine hope. Our Redeemer travels with us, so we never have to be lonely or afraid on our synodal journey.

"Transformational giving" is a term used by philanthropic organizations to address the root causes of societal problems rather than just symptoms, or to receive large gifts that enable significant, long-term change in their capacity and mission. In the language of Christian stewardship, this term suggests giving from substance, not merely from surplus, in order to effect a significant change—in society, in the organization receiving the gift, and in the life of the donors.

Transformational giving involves deep relationships between donors and organizations, often rooted in a shared vision, to fund systemic solutions, launch new initiatives, expand services, or create endowments. Consistent with the concept of synodality, donors are recognized as active partners in creating a better future, moving beyond transactional giving to a genuine transformation of the charitable organization that receives their gifts of substance.

Transformational giving is what the Church and the donor experience when the gift that is given substantially "transforms" or changes either or both parties. In transformational giving, the donor is a co-responsible partner in the mission and ministries of the Church that seek to build a better future; the donor's gift is seen as being significant enough to help make that future happen.

In the Gospel story of the Widow's Mite (cf. Lk 21:1–4), we learn about giving from substance. In response to a poor widow's meager contribution to the Temple fund, Jesus says, "I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood." Her gift may not have been large enough to change the Temple or its sacrificial offerings, but it certainly impacted the donor's life, and it provided a powerful witness to the meaning of stewardship as a generous act of love.

As you well know, most gifts to the Church, and to other nonprofit organizations, are transactional. They respond to a perceived need, or they fulfill a religious or charitable obligation which the donor feels. Most of these gifts are given from disposable income (what the Gospel calls "surplus wealth"). These gifts are important — to donors and to the organizations they support. They should be gratefully acknowledged as the lifeblood of every religious, educational, and charitable organization. Saying "thank you" to all donors regardless of the size of their gifts, and being responsible and accountable stewards of their generosity, is essential to the advancement of every nonprofit organization's mission, but it is particularly important for those of us who seek to teach the spirituality of Christian stewardship and encourage transformational giving.

We do not disparage transactional gifts, but we should work toward transforming them into gifts of substance. How can we change the deeply ingrained attitudes and practices of Catholics who are used to giving the minimum amount required as members of their parish, diocese, school, or other Catholic organization?

This is where the concept of synodality is so important. Too often, Catholics have been given the impression that they are merely passive recipients of the Church's ministries whether religious, educational, or charitable. In order to achieve a more active level of participation (which is the *sine qua non* of transformational giving), we Church leaders must work together to create opportunities for people's involvement in the life of the Church.

Transformational giving requires listening, active engagement, and the willingness to see members of the Catholic community as co-responsible partners in the Church's life and ministry. In transformational giving, the one who is asking for the gift takes the time to listen, and to learn what is important to the donor. This is not a one-sided monologue about the Church's financial needs, and it is rarely accomplished by mail, social media, or even stirring homilies delivered during in-pew solicitations. Transformational giving occurs when donors are thanked repeatedly, as personally as possible, are recognized for their support, and are given regular feedback and reports about how their generosity is making a real difference in the Church community, and in the lives of the people who are being served.

In transformational giving, the gift is the beginning (or strengthening) of the synodal relationship between the Church and its donors. Giving is not an end in itself; it is a means to deeper engagement between donors and the Church whose mission they share.

Stewardship, synodality, and transformational giving are hard work. They require careful planning and prayer, and they demand an extraordinary amount of personal (one-on-one) interaction and relationship building. In a Catholic diocese or parish, the role of the bishop or pastor is critical to success. Many aspects of the process can, and should, be shared with others, but the primary responsibility for teaching the spirituality of stewardship, ensuring that all decision-making is synodal, and inviting transformational gifts, rests with the chief teacher and pastor in every Church community.

I first learned this lesson when I was a young priest working in parishes staffed by Redemptorists in Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis. I will never forget the experience that members of one of my parish's leadership team and I had meeting with Monsignor Thomas McGread, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Parish in the Diocese of Wichita. What we learned from this charismatic pastor was that stewardship is about conversion—the personal encounter with Jesus Christ—and that generous giving flows from the active engagement of parishioners in the life of their parish.

Monsignor McGread didn't use the term "synodality," but what he described to us was a synodal process that invited every parishioner to be respected, involved, and co-responsible as leaders of the Church's mission. The result was an unprecedented degree of transformational giving that gave witness to what the spirituality of stewardship truly means.

Church leaders who wish to teach stewardship as a way of life, to implement pastoral leadership styles that are truly synodal, and to make transformational giving possible in their parishes, dioceses, and other Catholic organizations will have many questions about how to best accomplish these objectives. To help answer some of these important questions, allow me to conclude with three guiding principles:

First, make teaching the spirituality of stewardship (as outlined in the bishops' pastoral letter) a real priority. Form stewardship committees responsible for implementing programs at the parish and diocesan levels. This stewardship emphasis should include the active participation of the pastor and key parish leaders to ensure their understanding. All too often, we Catholics (including bishops and priests) hear the word "stewardship" and think "money."

Secondly, review current giving programs (such as the annual appeal, capital campaigns, and planned giving) to determine how effectively donors are engaged as co-responsible partners in the Church's mission at the parish and diocesan levels. Make sure that significant opportunities are provided for developing and sustaining personal relationships with the people who support the Church's mission, including both major donors and ordinary givers. With this in mind, major and planned gifts should definitely be an area of focus for our dioceses, parishes, and Catholic schools.

Finally, we must Listen, Engage, Discern, and Pray. It is not enough to tell Catholics what the Church needs. Or how much we think they should give. Let's involve them in discovering for themselves how to best carry out the Church's mission at the parish and diocesan levels. Let's help them to experience the joy of giving in ways that will transform them, and their parish, diocese, school, and other Catholic organizations, from transactional givers to fully engaged, Spirit-filled evangelizers and transformational donors. And let's explore how we can incorporate stewardship, synodality, and transformational giving in a consistent and comprehensive manner, in our parishes and dioceses.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you this morning. I am deeply grateful for your stewardship witness, and I promise to pray for the continued success of ICSC and all its members internationally. Please pray for me as well.

May Christ the Redeemer bless you in His work.