

# *Sample Witness Talks*

## *For Financial Stewardship Renewal*

*By Michael J. Cook, St. Gerard Majella, Pt. Jefferson Station*

### **That's it! I quit!**

If you asked someone who knows me well, to describe me to them, they could come up with many descriptions...but they would never call me a quitter. But, believe it or not, several years ago I quit St. Gerard's...almost. That's right, I quit church. I didn't quit because I turned my back on God, or because my faith had changed. I quit because I stopped believing in the way the church was doing things.

Seven or eight weeks in a row, I walked into church with my family, and sitting on my seat was a brochure with income charts and a financial commitment form. In addition to that were televisions playing movies about giving money, and worst of all...parishioners talking about how their lives had changed as a result of giving more money to the church. Give me a break already. This was getting completely out of control.

I hate to compare the church to the dirty game of politics. But you no doubt have noticed political candidates, who basically support abortion, using the words "Pro-Choice"? It sounds so unthreatening when they say it that way, it even sounds like they are doing something good. "Pro" is a very positive word. They'll do or say anything to avoid that nasty little word...abortion.

Is the church acting any differently? Taking every creative measure to say anything but that nasty little "M" word - MONEY. It seems they try to disguise the whole concept into buzzwords. Phrases like: "Stewardship of Treasure", "Taking A Step", "Time Talent and Treasure" and that old beauty, "Tithing". What are they really saying? They want money! That's what they are saying.

What was I coming to church for anyway? I was hoping to pray with my family and friends - in our church community. Listen to the scriptures and the Word of God. Perhaps, catch a good sermon that would give some insight as to how I should be living my life. Did I have to be subject to these incessant requests for money? Besides, I didn't have any. I gave what I could each week. Why won't they leave us alone already?

I warned my wife on the way to mass the eighth week. If those brochures are there, if there is a television in the church, if they give one more homily or one more talk about money - I'm through! Ten minutes later, there I was...sitting on top of a brochure. As the mass began my blood pressure kept rising until I finally snapped. I marched right down the aisle, in the middle of mass, threw the brochure on the ground and stormed out of church. That's it - I quit!

I stood in the back of the church looking out into the parking lot. Wondering what the protocol was for storming out of church. Do I hang out in the lobby till my family comes out? Or do I sit in my car like a kid who just took his toys and went home? Then a hand grabbed me on the shoulder. Ugh! It was Fr. Bill! "What's Up Michael?" I don't think he'll forget that day too quickly. I let him have it.

In a nervous voice, I began blurting out my disgust for the church. I told him about the last eight weeks, I told him about my grandfather. My grandfather believed that the church was welcome to anything he had in his pockets. Five dollars - it's yours, 25 cents - it's yours too. I subscribed to the same

theory as he. What's the matter, giving you every dime out of my pockets is not good enough? He seemed speechless at my ignorance.

I wanted to tell Fr. Bill that I would give him all of my bills to pay, and my paycheck. Whatever was left over in the end, he was welcome to keep for the church. I often thought, 'if someday God wanted to make me rich, I'd be happy to give part of it back to the church. First, let's see God make me rich, then I'll give him money.'

By the time I was through, Mass was just about over. I'll show them. Not only am I walking out of church, but I'm writing our Pastors a letter. If I don't get them to stop this nonsense, I'll write to the Bishop, then the Pope. I was on a personal crusade.

In recounting those moments, I, for the life of me couldn't stop laughing when the church asked me to speak about the "Stewardship of Treasure". They wanted me to talk about giving money.

I wrote my letter, got one back from the Pastors, then started visiting other churches - where, as you may have guessed, they talked about the importance of us giving our treasures too the church and to charities.

Several years ago, I reached a time of my life when everything seemed dismal. As lay in bed, crying myself to sleep each night, I kept praying that things would get better. I was out of work, out of money, my mortgage payments and bills kept coming, and I was struggling to provide for my family's basic needs. I literally, didn't have much else to lose. I felt as if I had absolutely no control over my life. I finally cracked.

It dawned upon me that my prayers were "Give me this! Or "Send me that", me always needing something to get my life back on course I was so desperate, I needed a different approach. I decided that I would admit to God that my life was in His control, not mine. It was obvious that I had no control over it. I told God that I would do whatever he wanted, if he would only show me the way.

I soon realized that I was missing the 'big picture'. The focus of my life was misdirected. Here I was worrying about the day-to-day details of my life (my worries, bills, appointments, etc) and I wasn't focusing on the only thing that really matters. My relationship with God, and my quest for salvation. After all, in another fifty or sixty years, who is going to care about Michael's bills and all the trivial things I concentrated on each day? If I died tomorrow, what would I have done to prepare myself to enter into the Kingdom of God? That would be pretty lame if I had to say, "I was going to concentrate on you Lord, just as soon as I got back on my feet financially."

From here on in, I will make a conscious effort to focus my energy on the true goal, doing what God has asked us to do here on earth. Be his Ambassadors, evangelize and spread the word of God.

These events shaped the way I felt about money and the church. I was aware that the things I owned, however great or small, were parts of my responsibility. Putting God in control of my life was only the start. I needed to give of myself fully. So from the miniscule amount of money I was receiving at the time from unemployment checks, I decided to give a portion of it

to the church. Hoping that what I had always heard was true. That God will provide.

From that day on - my life has changed. I would look for Him to show me how to get through everything, and how to live my life. He always responds. I now believe that we can only fully receive from God when we turn our lives completely over to him. I regularly increase my gifts to charity and to the church, and belong to several ministries in the church. These are by far, the most fulfilling parts of my life.

From that sorrow filled time when I realized that with God - all things are possible. Things have gotten progressively better each and every day, I have never been more focused. Each passing day I feel more and more blessed. Sure I have small setbacks every once and awhile, I need to keep reminding myself that I am not in control of my life, God is. Throughout my life attending mass, throughout Catholic grammar school and Catholic High School, I have heard the Words "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." I understand it now -completely.

Last Lent I decided to increase my offering to the church with money that I put aside each week. Several months went by when I realized I forgot to stop when Lent ended. You know what - I never missed the money and just kept on giving. Instead of giving a dollar or two each week out of my pocket change, I changed my life by putting God above all else. He no longer is the last bill I pay, but the first. Because He will provide. I am proof.

Last weekend I heard a radio show from a pastor in Bayshore. He said this..."If you are tithing - and you do it out of faith in Almighty God - the next time things don't add up and there's a bill that comes in that you can't pay - Just remind him Lord, I put you first, now I am wrapped up in your reputation, I want to be able to go out and say I've worked the hardest, I've tithed the most out of worship, and God is faithful to meet all the needs of His people."

Believe me, God will provide. Surprisingly, in abundance.

The most significant part of what I would like to share is this: I am not "one of the chosen ones", nor was it a mere coincidence that I was "fortunate enough to receive Gods blessings" around the time I started giving some of my meager monetary possessions to the church. I am just like you -if you can be open enough to receive Gods graces in your life.

In reflecting on these experiences over the past several weeks. Several thoughts come to mind. One of the beautiful gifts I have received is the ability to see God work through other people. I am always on guard, watching for signs -through others, that God is revealing himself to me in my life. He is everywhere! I tried to figure out how could I as an Ambassador of God, evangelizing - as God has called us all to do, talk to other people about understanding the big picture, the prioritization and our quest for salvation. How could I convince them that God provides to those who give completely of themselves to Him, including the monetary possessions that isolate us from Him. How could we possibly get the message out?

Well, perhaps the Pastors could speak about it at mass. Maybe parishioners who have been blessed by God's graces can share their experiences with others. Perhaps providing parishioners with printed materials would make it easy for someone to visualize their goals.

Maybe the church wasn't so far off after all.

## *By Anne Carter, St. Kilian's Parish, Farmingdale*

Good evening. My name is Anne Carter and I'm a parishioner here at St. Kilian. I've lived in Farmingdale for 30 years. I'm a registered nurse and I have two daughters. I've never spoken in front of a group this large before and I'm a little nervous about it but I asked to have the chance to speak with you about Stewardship and why it is important to me.

For the past few weeks, we've been reading about Stewardship in the bulletin and hearing about it from the pulpit. I first learned about it this past summer when Msgr. Swiger held an informational meeting. I went to the meeting because I really had no idea what Stewardship was but I suspected that it had something to do with money. Other words that I associated with Stewardship were "caretaker and custodian."

I learned that Stewardship did have something to do with money but that the heart of Stewardship really had to do with how I share myself as a disciple of Jesus. How good a caretaker was I of God's many gifts to me? How did I use my time and talents to make God's kingdom a living reality now? The meeting affirmed that Stewardship is a way of life. It's the way we take care of ourselves, our neighbors, our world and our resources. We use the Stewardship way of life at home and in the workplace. It's an attitude, *not a church program*. And it's done in thankfulness because we recognize that all we have been given is God's gift to us.

Five years ago when my husband died, I wasn't sure what direction my life was going to take. But I was fortunate enough to belong to a parish that takes its mission to serve very seriously. I was able to find the spiritual nourishment I needed to help me grow. I found RENEW, which is a faith-sharing small group community; I could avail myself of parish missions and scripture study; eventually I enrolled and completed a program in adult formation run by our diocese. When I look back on these past years, I'm awed by the generosity of this God. His greatest gifts to me are the people He puts into my life. In time I've been able to use my own gifts by becoming active in our parish's Nurse Ministry and Bereavement Ministry and I've learned to be thankful for what I *do* have rather than focus on what I don't have. Ordinary activities can be sacred when I look at each day as a gift.

Since I support myself my TREASURE is very important to me and I try to treat it responsibly. Until very recently I believed that the money I contributed to church and charities should be based on what's "safe" for me to give (after all I have my old age to think about!)

I've now come to understand that my treasure is just as much a gift as my talents. I can show my gratitude to God by using it to help bring about God's kingdom. The Gospel of Luke tells us that a group of women followed Jesus and supported him "from their resources." They obviously felt that he and his message were important. Well,... if I say that *I* believe that Jesus and his message are important today, then I also need to support him from *my* resources. I'm still not able to give at the suggested levels but I'm working on it and my attitude toward charitable giving is changing. I'm becoming more conscious of its importance and I don't want my giving to be an after thought. It was a real shift in my thinking when I began to see my treasure as the "first fruits of my harvest" which I should offer back to God in gratitude.

In a few minutes we'll be asked to take a step toward how we manage the part of the treasure we contribute to St. Kilian parish. For some of us it might mean putting more in the collection basket and for others of us it might mean taking a step toward seeing our treasure with new eyes, thinking about it differently.

I know that all of us here tonight have our own stories of God's generosity toward us. I invite you to think about your own gifts. Thank you for listening. Have a good evening and a great weekend.

## *By Toni and Ken Chebat, St. Sylvester's Parish, Medford*

**Toni:** Hi, we're Toni & Ken Chebat and we've been asked to talk today about how Stewardship is part of our lives. When we were asked to do this, both of us immediately thought "I can't do that," but to us part of Stewardship means saying "yes" to God, so here we are.

Ken and I have been coming to St. Sylvester's for about 11 years. Before that time we were away from Church, for reasons that are no longer important. But, about 11 years ago our youngest daughter started to ask a lot of questions about God and Religion and we agreed that it was important that we give our children the opportunity to learn about our Faith. So, we came to St. Sylvester's and asked what we could do. We learned about RCIA and our daughters then began their faith journey. We came to church every week and contributed to the collection. However, looking back, I realize that at first we were really just observers and not participants in our Faith.

This changed gradually. We were welcomed by so many of the people in this faith community. We were encouraged to discover and use our gifts and talents. Eventually we joined several ministries that seemed to fit us. I became a Lector and helped with the Altar Servers schedule and RCIA and Ken became an Usher (you can probably tell he's much more comfortable being in the back of the Church than up here) and helps out with painting and "fixing up" around the Church. This made us feel good as we felt for the first time that we were truly living our religion and doing it together as a couple made our marriage stronger.

Then, one Sunday, there was a couple who spoke at Mass about Tithing, and how they embraced it as part of their commitment to God. They spoke about the importance of returning to God 10% of what they earned, which was really a gift from God. This concept intrigued (and frightened) me. I thought about the idea of "putting God first" in my budget and Ken and I discussed it. We decided this was the right thing to do, but we couldn't do 10% -- not at first. But we took a first step and began to regard our contribution to the Church as the first bill we paid every week. Our other bills are paid from what's leftover. It isn't easy, as you all know when you have children there are a million things they need or just want. We don't always have enough to pay all the bills, but the creditors can wait.

Then one summer we took the kids to Washington DC. Our youngest daughter, through

her journey with RCIA had developed a social conscience. When we were walking around Washington, passing people begging at every corner, she said to me in a disappointed voice “Mommy, you just passed by 5 people you could have helped”. I didn’t have an answer for her then, but later that evening we discussed how we could help those people. I explained that we couldn’t help everyone but we worked out a budget of how much we could give to help people each day for our remaining time in Washington and made her in charge of deciding who to help and giving out the money. I think that’s when I realized that God was telling us that giving to the Church isn’t enough -- we also needed to plan for giving in other ways to help all our brothers and sisters. Once again, we were led by a child.

**Ken:** We have a small group of friends with whom we used to exchange gifts on Birthdays, Anniversaries and Christmas. We got together one year and decided that instead of doing this we’d pool the money we would have spent and make a donation to a worthy charity at Christmas. Each year, we take turns choosing the charity and get together for dinner to discuss it and write our checks. We don’t spend any more than we used to, but now we are able to give a substantial amount to help others. We all agree that this practice has given us far more pleasure than those gifts that we don’t even miss. We’ve gained so much from our journey in Stewardship -- of sharing our gifts from God of time, talent and treasure. At this time of year, we review the level of our commitment of Treasure as compared to the gifts God continues to give us freely. We continue to “take steps” towards the 10% goal of 5% to the Church and 5% to other charities.

A favorite author of ours, Robert Fulgrum, wrote that all we need to know in life is the simple lessons learned in Kindergarten -- clean up after yourself, no hitting allowed, and share. We hope you’ll decide to “take-a-step” up with us as you review your personal commitment to share your gifts with God. It will bring you joy.

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