

# Stewardship: No Magic Pills

by Fr. Mark Sietsema

Traveling as I have so much over the last three months, and being one who sleeps poorly in hotel rooms, I have seen lately more than my share of television at what I call the “Magic Pill Hour.” You might know yourself, those wee hours of the morning when you can flip channels and find infomercial after infomercial touting the miracle solution to every problem in our American life. There is a magic pill to help you stop smoking, a magic pill to help you have clearer skin, and above all, there are magic pills to make you lose weight. You don’t need prescription drugs, you don’t need will-power, you don’t need the slow, steady work of diet and exercise. You only need three easy payments of \$19.95 ... if you call right now, operators are standing by.

Are there really that many gullible people out there? I would like to think that we as a society are a little more educated, a little more sophisticated, a little less sleep-deprived than to fall for that. But apparently I’m wrong. There’s a real market for magic pills ... and not just for matters of health.

We don’t want to sweat. We don’t want to strive. We don’t want to wait patiently for results. We want results in six weeks or less. Wars should last a month. Coach hasn’t won the World Series in seven years? Find a new guy who will win it this year! We are a society that is addicted to quick fixes.

But quick fixes are rarely good fixes. We had a meeting recently of parish youth leaders to talk about what we could do to keep our children in the church as they moved into the college years and beyond, for that is ultimately the goal of our youth ministries. I did some research on the subject: what programs work best? What style of ministry proves effective? Do you know what I learned? There is no magic pill.

There are groups that have done scientific surveys on these issues. Do you know what they showed? The prescription for growing young people who are actively involved in church in their adulthood is this: you raise them in a family where the parents love each other and where the father and the mother are weekly church-goers, all four seasons of the year. There is no program, no sports league, no summer camp, no retreat, no revival that can match this combination for making lifelong church-goers out of our kids.

Listen to this again, the first part is important. You put kids in a family where the father loves the mother and the mother loves the father. This is key:

***“Church exists for one reason and one reason only. To bring you to salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

in a family where there is not love between the parents, any religion will seem to the kids to be an exercise in hypocrisy, and they will reject it in adulthood. But in a

family ruled by love, where not just mom, and not just dad, but mom and dad together attend church weekly, winter, spring, summer, and fall, this is a family that produces children who grow up to be adults faithful to the church. There is no other magic pill. Nothing else comes close in yielding results. Only slow, patient, diligent, unwearrying commitment gets the job done.

Today I have been asked to speak to you about stewardship. Stewardship of our church is really one of those areas where we have indulged the fantasy of magic pills. Why do we have this community, with this building and this staff and these activities? In a word, salvation. This whole business of church—and it behooves us to use the word “business” in this discussion—this whole business of church exists for one reason and one reason only. To bring you to salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord. You are here because you understand yourself to be perishing and you seek from God the salvation that you need.

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Now, who should pay for your salvation? You? Or someone else? The costs associated with spiritual development: who should bear them? You? Or some non-parishioners with a taste for souvlaki and baklava? Churches have budgets: too often churches try to meet that budget in ways that involve other people's money.

There is a church of our archdiocese that is close to bankruptcy. Why? Because twenty years ago the captains of industry and masters of the universe thought they had found the magic pill for funding a parish. Build a big social hall, make it the biggest and the best, rent it out, and watch the shekels pour in. The hall will pay for itself, pay for the church mortgage, pay for the operational budget, pay for the future unto the ages of ages.

Well, the captains of industry were wrong. The magic pill didn't work. They forgot about "location, location, location." The hall didn't get much business. Instead of keeping the parish afloat, the hall started to drag the church under. And then after months of not sending in the mortgage check, the bank sent a foreclosure notice. The plan to get salvation and to have someone else pay for it didn't work. And they usually don't. Because even when the fund-raising ideas work, they fail, because they give the parishioners a sense that the working out of their salvation falls to a third party and not utterly on themselves.

There is no magic pill to replace stewardship. Only dedicated, regular, sacrificial giving of your treasures, proportional to the blessings you receive—only this in the long run serves to fund churches adequately.

It's a lot to ask. And the church wouldn't ask it of you, except it's the only way. Nothing else works. Like diet plans that call for no carbs or no meat or only salads before 3 pm, quick fixes don't work for very long. If you want to lose weight, the only proven approach is the slow steady lifetime approach of diet and exercise, of sweat and self-discipline.

If you want to have a church, a community with a building to house its worship and its activities, you have to ante up. You have to give, and give a lot.

And you have to give up things you might otherwise like. You have to make your church the top priority in your charitable giving, and not number two or three on the list. There are lots of other worthy causes out there—Ele's Place, the Wharton Center, Doctors without Borders— but spiritual health starts with a healthy local church. No other organization in history has been the seedbed for human compassion like the Christian Church. It is the soil in which most other humanitarian movements have sprouted.

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And to be a good steward, you also have to balance your spending on creature comforts. You have to weigh the pleasures of life against the good of your soul. It is problematic when a Christian spends more in a year on the country club than he gives to his church, or spends more on concert tickets, or sports tickets, or cable TV, or... what's my vice?... hiking boots, than he gives to his church. There is a problem there, a profound problem of spiritual wellness.

Here's the bottom line: good stewardship is hard. We fool ourselves when we fail to say that out loud. It's really a burden to keep a church going, a burden on the families

that hope to find salvation through the church. A lot of churches advertise stewardship like something fun and easy. It isn't. It won't be. And if it is, then whatever you're doing isn't really stewardship.

There is no magic pill.

And yet ... there is. If you really do commit yourself to the hard work of good stewardship, you will find that your sacrificial giving is itself the magic pill.

Faithful, sacrificial stewardship is the amoxicillin that helps clear up the infection of materialism. Faithful, sacrificial stewardship is the Motrin that relieves the pain and swelling of selfishness and hedonism.

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Faithful, sacrificial stewardship is the Ritalin that helps us stay focused on the Kingdom of God.

It is the Xanax that relieves us of the worries that we have about the moral future of our children and grandchildren in contemporary society.

Stewardship is the Valtrex that suppresses outbreaks of covetousness.

It is the Celebrex that helps us breathe freely the air of joyful, grateful living.

It is the Prozac that alleviates the depression of feeling like our lives aren't making a difference in the world, because as faithful members of the church we become part of God's inexorable plan to redeem the entire universe.

***“What will you choose? The magic pill of wishful thinking? Or the miraculous medicine of true stewardship—of giving back to God according to the measure with which He has blessed you?”***

When we give up on looking for magic pills to solve our church's financial problems, paradoxically, we discover God's miraculous medicine for so many of our spiritual ills: namely, faithful, meaningful, generous, committed, proportional, regular sacrificial stewardship.

The time has come to adjust your meds for the year to come. I come to you like Morpheus before Neo: with two pills. What will you choose? The magic pill of wishful thinking? Or the miraculous medicine of true stewardship—of giving back to God according to the measure with which He has blessed you?

May our one true God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, enlighten you as you declare your commitment to the Lord in your act of stewardship.

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## The Greatest Gifts...

*A Reflection*

May we break down boundaries, tear down walls, and build on the foundation of the goodness inside each of us.

May we look past differences, gain understanding, and embrace acceptance.

May we reach out to each other, rather than resist.

May we be better stewards of the earth, protecting, nurturing and replenishing the beauties of nature.

May we practice gratitude for all we have, rather than complain about our needs.

May we seek cures for the sick, help for the hungry, and love for the lonely.

May we share our talents, give our time, and teach our children.

May we hold hope for the future very tenderly in our hearts and do all we can to build for bright tomorrows.

And may we love with our whole hearts, for that's the only way to love.

From a "Portfolio" card



*The Greatest gift cannot be wrapped and are beautiful without a bow...*