

The readings today mention a couple of widows who didn't have much, and yet they still gave what little they had. So Jesus rightly points out that that kind of giving is truly impressive, because in the end, that kind of giving comes from the heart, that kind of giving is suggestive of a radical openness, trust and yearning for God.

So if this is what Jesus is presenting to us as a way of being, then inevitably the subject comes up concerning what should people should donate to church and charity. Many Christian leaders are pretty forthright about what people should be giving. When I finished college and started working full time, I registered myself at the local parish in my neighborhood, like you are supposed to do, and I felt pretty good about this because most people in their 20s don't do this, but I did. And of course, because I registered, I got my weekly envelopes with my name on them, sent to me in the mail. But I didn't use my envelopes, I just put cash in the collection on Sundays. Six months later, I got a rather nasty letter in the mail from the pastor stating that they have no records of me giving any money to the church. Now some people would have been offended by that letter, but in reality, I was not, and I'll tell you why. Part of it was of course out of obedience to the pastor. He tells me I need to use my envelopes, there really isn't a good reason for me not to. I felt that if my pastor is asking me to do something, then I ought to try to do it.

But as I thought about it some more, I began to understand where my pastor was coming from. I realized that besides the fact that using church envelopes with people's names on them is a way of keeping track for tax purposes in the United States, it is also a way of the church being able to keep track of who is coming to church. The pastor has a right to know if some of the flock are missing, that affords you the opportunity to be proactive. It is an expectation that as a Christian, you come to church every week. And last of all, the pastor was also in effect saying that it is your responsibility to donate to the church, so use the envelopes so that we know that you are doing it, and that you are coming. And I realized that he is right about that because the church isn't simply the pastor's church, this is our church. Just like you have a home and you have bills to pay which is your responsibility, the church has those same bills to pay as well, in addition to salaries for those here who are providing ministry to you. Therefore, because this is not my church, it is our church, the bills are our bills to pay. After all, you wouldn't rent an apartment with a bunch of other people and then expect the others to cover your fair share of the rent.

But then the next question came up, if it is an expectation that I give, then how much? What would be considered to be a generous gift? Because I don't want to be cheap or stingy right? Well again, some Christian leaders will boldly proclaim that you ought to tithe 10% of your income, and that at least half of that should go to your church, and the rest to charities of your choice. But I am not going to stand up here and tell you that you have to tithe 10%, although,

that is the ideal, that is a goal worth shooting for. I am at the same time, also willing to concede that maybe not everyone is in a position to do that. While some people may give even more than 10%, I do realize that if you start talking about everybody giving that much, you know you are going to be tuned out by many people. So what do you do? What is the answer? What should you give? Well to find the answer you have to go to what is really the heart of the matter. What is the essence of giving? Well, here it is: You would be doing very well if you follow this simple principle - Give until it matters. Give a gift to the church that truly means something to you. The bare minimum should be to give the amount where you start to miss what you are giving.

I can't tell you how many times when I am counting the collection that you pull out a crinkled up one dollar bill out of the collection bag, like this. And when you pull it out, it looks almost as if they were trying to throw it in the waste paper basket. And when you see this you say, "Hmm now there is a gift that clearly came from the bottom of the heart. There's a gift that they had to think long and hard about letting go of." You never see a one hundred dollar bill looking that way. One time I pulled out a wad of one dollar bills out of the collection. There were four of them folded together, and from the middle of those one dollar bills fell a receipt from Calypso Grill for \$150. I felt bad about taking the money because I had to wonder if maybe that was supposed to be the waitresses' tip.

You know, the thing is this, if that one dollar bill really does mean something to you, if you are scraping to get by, and every dollar is precious to you, then God Bless you, thank you for the donation, I sincerely mean that. But let's be honest, most people can spend a couple of one dollar bills or five bucks without even thinking about it or missing it whatsoever. So when it comes to giving to the church, all I ask is that when considering what to give, that you give an amount that is valuable to you, because the thing is this, if we can't give from the heart, if we can't give back to God something that really matters to us, then we can't even begin to practice true charity in our lives. So I am saying this, not only for the church's sake, but for your sake as well. Because this is part of how we learn how to be giving people, this how we learn how to be more loving by being able to give of ourselves even to the point of sacrificing some things. If we don't develop that ability, then we become stunted or limited in our ability to give of ourselves completely in our relationships with family, with our spouses, and our relationship with God. And that is sad because that limits how much we can love. That limits our ability to engage in happy healthy relationships with other people. And of course as Christians, this is what we are meant to do - is to love, and to love deeply. That is what this is really about, that our willingness to give is a part of how we love and it is a part of how we are to relate to God.

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