

Summary Document No 9

Stewardship

Stewardship is a term and concept which should be central to the forthcoming Plenary Council.

A steward is someone who administers anything as the agent of another.¹ Stewardship refers to fulfilling responsibilities to another and on behalf of that other, acting in the place of that person. All of the Church's authority is exercised on behalf of God and therefore requires the steward to strive to act in accordance with God's will. Authority within the Church can only be properly exercised in accordance with the teachings of Jesus.

The origin of stewardship is recorded in the Book of Genesis where God tells the man and woman to "have dominion" over the earth and to "cultivate and take care of it" (*Gen* 1:28; 2:15).

The Acts of the Apostles also speaks of stewardship in the early Church, highlighting the key characteristics of Christian community life: devotion to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, care of the needy, and prayer. All Christian communities, including parishes and dioceses, have been built on the same foundations which have given them their vision and the impulse for mission.

Vatican II, recalling God's mandate to have dominion over the earth, states that "the greater man's power becomes, the farther his individual and community responsibility extends" and the more he is bound to look to the welfare of others.²

In his 2015 Encyclical Letter on Ecology and Climate, *Laudato Si'* addressed to 'all people of good will', Pope Francis states that "our 'dominion' of the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship" (n. 116), and that "the Eucharist is a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation" (n. 236).³

Discernment Papers

Surprisingly, the 6 Discernment Papers prepared for the Plenary Council contain few references to stewardship. Apart from each acknowledging the "sacrifice and stewardship" of the land by the First Peoples, only the *Missionary and Evangelising* paper speaks of "promoting biblical and theological teaching and action on responsible stewardship for creation and intergenerational justice" (p. 14), while the *Inclusive, Participatory & Synodal* paper urges Church leaders to collaborate with Catholic

¹ Macquarie Dictionary

² Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes – Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World*, 1965, n. 34

³ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si', on Care for our Common Home*, 2015. See also *Love for Creation. An Asian Response to the Ecological Crisis*, Declaration of the Colloquium sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Tagatay, 31 January - 5 February 1993), n.3.3.2

health, education and social providers in a spirit of shared stewardship; and that shared stewardship of Catholic faith [should] manifest itself in joint announcements on key issues” (pp. 15-16).⁴

Stewardship: a principle for governance

The report *The Light from the Southern Cross* states that stewardship is a key principle of good church governance, ‘integral to the Church’s mission’ and a ‘fundamental tenet of its spirituality’.⁵ It is a concept clearly applicable to the governance environment of parishes and dioceses where those entrusted have a stewardship responsibility to respect the baptismal dignity and rights of the faithful committed to their care.

Stewardship is not about ‘ownership’, but being responsible stewards of God’s world: caring not only for the physical environment, but above all, showing mutual respect for others, especially the poor and vulnerable. When people are impacted adversely by economic, technological and environmental forces, dioceses, parishes and church agencies must give them preference. In all circumstances they have a duty to act in accordance with the teachings of Jesus.

Stewards of the Church’s assets must always act with financial propriety for the benefit of those who have an interest in its life and well-being. Transparent, accountable, and responsible financial stewardship is at the heart of good governance, and must be guided by fiduciary standards, including secular standards. Church leaders, both clerical and lay, must meet basic financial reporting requirements of both civic authorities and canon law, and render full accounting to the parish or diocesan community. Stewardship agreements, which clarify ownership and management of assets, are also necessary, as are public annual financial reports.

Stewards do not deal on their own authority or with their own property. They deal with the Lord’s estate given by him for the good of his people. Secrecy, favouritism, nepotism and discrimination in its administration are anathema.

Good stewardship of the mission and assets of the Church cannot be achieved without the people of God accepting their share of responsibility in decision-making in parishes and dioceses. Their talents, skills and gifts of the Holy Spirit have to be recognised and utilised well in decision making. Now, in Australia, when the continued financial support of the people of God is vulnerable, there has to be a new relationship of trust between the faithful and their leaders, built on transparency, accountability and inclusion. There must be a determined commitment by those appointed as official stewards to exercise their authority in full accord with Christ’s teachings.

⁴ A footnote refers to the ACBC, *Faithful Stewards of God’s Grace: Lay Pastoral Ministers in the Church in Australia* (July 2018): <http://www.apmn.org.au/assets/lay-pastoral-ministry-2018-faithful-stewards-of-god-s-grace.pdf>

⁵ Implementation Advisory Group and Governance Review Project Team: *The Light From the Southern Cross; Promoting Co-responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia. A Report and Recommendations on the Governance and Management of Dioceses and Parishes in the Catholic Church in Australia*, August 2020. It recommends that the key principles of collegiality, synodality, subsidiarity, stewardship, dialogue, discernment, participation and good leadership be reflected in the governance structures and decision-making processes of dioceses, parishes and church agencies (5.4.4 and 6.2.2).