Six Reasons Why Parishioners are Motivated to Give Generously

Why people give is a subject of intense study in the philanthropic community. There are even institutes dedicated to the subject publishing extensive papers on the results of their research, e.g. The Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College, Paul G. Schervish, Executive Director and The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University-Purdue University, Patrick M. Rooney, Executive Director.

Within the Orthodox milieu, there may be some distinctive features associated with giving, but there are perhaps more important universal motivations that all humans feel and express. Unique features of Orthodox giving might pertain to newer immigrants, not steeped in the distinctive American tradition of philanthropy. They may arrive on American shores poor and uneducated, hungry to achieve the dubious promise of the American Dream of earthly success. They quickly embrace the accumulate, accumulate, accumulate mode of life – sometimes pursuing this goal their entire life long. Of course, anyone may be smitten with “affluenza”, not just impoverished new immigrants.

Orthodox motivation might also be skewed by the nature of the Orthodox donor community. It is a faith community, informed by the teachings of the gospel. This is in contradistinction to donors who give mainly to secular causes and institutions. Leaders of the Orthodox Church – bishops, priests and laity – should give thanks that most Orthodox also give beyond the canonically defined borders of the Church to causes and institutions that move their hearts or to which they feel indebted, such as their alma mater. These causes and institutions are often teaching our people to give, when we have failed to do so!

The earliest examples of human compassionate giving may be seen in the work of archaeologists who excavate burial sites where valuable objects are interred with loved ones. A few years ago, scientists claimed to have discovered the oldest known burial site that included a valuable object. It is in northern Spain and estimated to be 350,000 years old. Compassionate giving seems to have been with us for a very long time. Christian anthropologists and theologians would not be surprised by this, inasmuch as the first Giver, the only true Giver, the One who is always giving is God and human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. So compassionate giving would be deemed intrinsic to our nature, though somewhere along the line God-denying self-centeredness tragically glommed on to our DNA.

This brief reflection on parishioner motivation to give does not allow a review of the entire history of human philanthropy, though it is a fascinating and moving study, both biblical and extra-biblical.

One of the researchers mentioned above identified 22 factors that motivate generous giving. These will vary from person to person and will rise and fall in importance throughout one’s life. Six of the most commonly identified motives for people to give are listed below.
1. Parishioners are personally asked to give generously (so simple it boggles the imagination!) This, of course, raises questions concerning how they are asked to give, by whom are they asked to give, for what are they asked to give, how much are they asked to give and when are they asked to give.

2. Parishioners identify with the mission of the Church as expressed in the mission of the parish. They feel it is also their personal mission – an extension of their own personal values, values that they wish to see extended in the world, transmitted to their children and perpetuated after their passing. Here, we must ask ourselves other questions: “How well do parishioners understand the mission of the parish? How effectively have we communicated this? In what ways have we created opportunities for parishioners to feel the mission of the parish “in their guts”, as it were?

3. Parishioners were taught by their parents to give as children, as an essential aspect of living the Orthodox Christian life. If this statement was posed as a question on some gigantic and universal quiz to Orthodox Church leadership and to Orthodox general membership we would almost universally fail. The author of this reflection was not taught by the Southern Baptist pastor of his youth to give meaningfully, though there were occasional rousing sermons on the subject. He was taught personally by his father, who explained this to him, exemplified it in his own life and assiduously verified that each of his four sons had their tithe in their offering envelope ready in their coat pocket before going to church on Sundays.

4. Parishioners are motivated to give generously because they feel grateful and trust that whatever happens God is taking care of them. G.K. Chesterton wrote, “Gratitude is the origin of theology.” If we are not appreciative and thankful for the countless blessings of God how can we ever expect to feel the overwhelming sense of abundance that allows generous giving? Consider suggesting to parishioners that they keep a ten item “Gratitude List” that is updated regularly. This helps people to move emotionally from a feeling of destitution and deprivation to one of profound gratitude. Many people of great wealth continue to live feeling deprived. This is one of the keys to unlock the mystery of why apparently very wealthy people give meagerly.

5. Parishioners are motivated to give if the parish is perceived as well-managed, accomplishing much good by means of the resources entrusted to it and has a compelling plan to increase or improve upon this going forward. Every donor is limited in their capacity to give. Consequently, each generous donor wants to feel that where they give makes a real difference in people’s lives. People are changed and people are saved as a result of the programs, services and activities of the parish. Our task is to inform them of this and to help them feel a part of it.

6. Parishioners are often motivated to give because they like the priest or a staff member or the person who is asking them for the gift. In fund raising parlance, this is called “linkage”. We may wish that giving was less subjective, that people would give purely because they feel grateful or because they deeply identify with the mission of the Church irrespective of who is standing at the altar. We know we should be larger than personalities. If this does not resonate with the reader, however, try conducting a capital campaign in a parish where the priest is disliked or unpopular. Even if the project is
essential to the future of the parish, a percentage of people simply will not give meaningfully because they do not wish to contribute to the apparent success of someone they dislike. Petty, I know. Deal with it. It’s the human condition. It does beg the question, however, when a major fund raising effort is very much needed should the priest actually be out soliciting with the team? Perhaps his role is putting out fires and mending fences. Perhaps someone other than the priest should ask certain disgruntled parishioners for their gift.