

There are many reasons why people give to a church. Some give out of guilt; they see everybody else putting in, so they figure they'd better too. Some give out of obligation; they learned in their catechism that supporting the church is one of the six precepts, along with such things as attending Mass on Sundays and receiving communion at least once a year. Some give because it's like membership dues to a club; they belong to and support a parish because they derive some benefit, whether it's school, a popular organization, or the right to wear one of our jaunty St. Regis sweatshirts. Some give because of a particular event; perhaps the church offered a funeral or a wedding for the family. These are not bad reasons to give, and God knows we gratefully receive any gift whatever the motive.

However, today's first reading describes another reason to give to the church. I believe it is a sublime reason. If this story sounds like your reason for giving to the church, pat yourselves on the back, because you understand the economics of religion.

The Book of Deuteronomy concludes the long story of the promised land. Back in the Book of Genesis, God promised Abraham and Sara that if they worshipped him, he would grant them two gifts: descendants and land. Now, Abraham and Sara were barren, elderly nomads. Miraculously God gave them children, some of whom migrated to Egypt, where they were enslaved. Because of their prayer, God appointed Moses to deliver them, set them on a desert road, and bring them to the promised land. These people were poor, slaves, and few in number. But God fulfilled both promises: descendants and land. Today's reading describes what Israel agreed to do after the harvest in the promised land. They took a large basket, plucked the first fruits of the harvest, placed them in the basket and brought them to their place of worship as an offering to God, a tithe. What was their reason for giving? Very simply, it was faith. They believed that God gave them what they owned, so they returned a portion to God.

You may wonder, what did God do with all that food? The religious leaders shared that food with foreigners, orphans, and widows. God provided again for the people he loved. God's generosity cannot be outdone.

There are many reasons to give to the church. Some people give out of faith. They know they're better off than their parents were. They know they're better off than the homeless of their city. They know God has placed them in a promised land and given them an education, a home, and a country where they are free to do anything, even to admire Newt Gingrich. Filled with faith, they return a portion to God through their parish.

You may wonder, what does God do with all that money? Your parish leaders still share that money with the needy. We support a food pantry for the poor, we provide recreational facilities for children, we counsel the bereaved, we bring hope to the sick, we're here when you fall in love and wed a spouse, we're here when that spouse dies. Most importantly we are here Sunday after Sunday (and Saturday night after Saturday night), to gather together and praise God.

If you feel guilty, then give. If you feel obliged, then give. If you realize that these benefits outshine those of any other club you belong to, then give. If you've budgeted thousands of dollars for the wedding dress and \$30 for the church, then give a little more. Or if your faith says simply, "God has given to me; I want to give to God," then give.

We recommend 5% of your income to the parish. Some give less. Some give more. If you can give more, please do. We really need it. If you do not pledge or do not give, change your behavior today. Let's all fill out our pledge cards and bring them next weekend, when we will fill a basket pledging the first fruits of our harvest to God.