

Why Clergy Should Know What People Pledge

People can have a hard time differentiating between shame and guilt.

Shame is about who one is. Guilt is about what one has or has not done. Our culture has a lot of *both* shame *and* guilt about money, and this makes it such a complicated subject for church communities. If we add fear to the mix, good discussions become almost impossible. We underestimate the fear, shame, and guilt that are woven into the subject of money in family histories, in homes, and in hearts at the peril of our pastoral ministry and our church management.



Let me be clear. I completely understand the position of those clergy who choose not to know what their parishioners pledge. We have a poor culture of discussing money in the Church, and we do not equip clergy and other leaders to be able to approach the subject of money both at the congregational level, as well as in their interactions with individual parishioners. Not knowing helps us avoid all kinds of awkwardness and potential difficulty. And then there are the cases of Vestries and finance committees, or a powerful treasurer or parish matriarch, who keep matters financial, including pledges, “private” from the parish priest. So to the fear, guilt and shame that often attend the subject of money, we can add secrecy and the anxiety of the priest. What a tangled web we weave for ourselves!

Some clergy may feel they would treat parishioners differently if they knew what their flock pledge or when and how they pay the pledges they have made. Some vestry or lay leaders may feel that they have the kind of a clergyperson who would treat people differently with such knowledge. “What would Father Joe think if he knew I pledged 0.7% of my income?” “What would happen to my ability to make speeches in vestry meetings about how we spend church money if people knew what I pledged?!” “What would Reverend Mary think if she knew I just bought a second home or new car and was not pledging.” What indeed.

I understand that reasoning. I understand it even when your clergy avert their eyes from filthy lucre^[1] because they fear their knowledge might change their treatment of their people. Really, it is perfectly OK for clergy to separate themselves from pledges.

It is ok, that is, as long as the clergy are fired for dereliction of pastoral duty and leadership.

When I say this at church meetings, some clergy and bishops get really angry. I get that. But I am not trying to make anyone angry or defensive. The Church is often tempted to protect its interests from within – church history and family systems theory tell that story. But the truth is that there are plenty of other clergy who are non-anxious about money, and whose appropriate self-understanding of intimacy, pastoral care, ecclesial and relational courage, prophetic calling and managerial responsibility is still intact. They will do the job better than those who are not prepared to do the work and take the risk. Let the clergy who are spiritually grounded, able leaders have these jobs.

Clergy and a few trustworthy lay leaders must know what their fellow Christians pledge and when and how they pay their pledges so that these leaders can do their jobs – of which there are at least four tasks in particular with respect to the subject of pledges.

Clergy Task 1 - Teaching. When money has power over us, especially when we keep so much money talk in the realm of the “secret,” we face a fundamental theological and spiritual challenge to the well-being of individuals and communities. Proper confidentiality is one thing, and quite appropriate; but secrecy in the life of the community ought always to raise red flags, whether it is secrecy about bad behavior, secrecy about money, or secrecy about anything. It is the secrecy and the conspiracy that secrecy always brings that is the problem, not the money itself.

Clergy Task 2 - Basic Integrity. The clergy and a few trusted lay leaders should know what people pledge so that they do not place in leadership, people who are not contributing along the lines of their capacity to do so. Money is one indicator of spiritual depth and so is an essential indicator for the good pastor’s care of their flock. The vestry member who rants and raves about congregants raising their pledges to fund the budget, but whose personal, annual pledge of \$400 comes out of their \$40,000 salary (a pledge of 1% of their income), should not be placed in a position of leadership until their formation around money, community life and leadership has made some obvious progress.

Clergy Task 3- Pastoral Care. It is the responsibility of the clergy to know what is going on in the lives of their flock. Money is not a subject matter which is sequestered and set aside. If a parishioner drops their pledge dramatically or stops pledging (or stops paying a pledge) there may be pastoral or relational reasons behind that behavior which the clergy should know and be able to consider. Leadership is about making prayerfully discerned choices in response to changing issues. The knowledge of what people pledge is part of the pastoral job, just as noticing if a parishioner is “acting out” in other ways is indicative of a need of spiritual counsel, administrative action or additional formation. I would be in favor of all Bishops knowing what their clergy pledge to their parish. Bishops should know that too.

Clergy Task 4 -Leadership and Accountability. The clergyperson is held responsible for designing, managing and successfully balancing a budget. How can they be held responsible to that work if they have been barred from - or have barred themselves from - knowing how the budget is funded at its source? Not knowing, in detail, how the budget is funded is a dereliction of duty and could even be considered a failure of pastoral or leadership responsibility under new Title Four Canons[2].

Does the CEO of a local seed company need to know which farmers in town are buying the seed and who is (or is not) paying their bills? How can the Board of the company hold the CEO responsible for the expenses but then block the CEO's knowledge about sources of income? The notion in real-world management is preposterous. And thinking the church is any different or "more spiritual" than other organizations amounts to Gnosticism[3] – which we have long-since determined to be a heresy.

In the end, knowing what people pledge is simply a function of doing a job well. I have given up hoping for holy clergy. But kind, effective clergy are still a great expectation.

By the Rev'd Charles LaFond

[1] "Filthy Lucre" is how the King James' version of the Bible occasionally refers to money!

[2] Title Four Canons include church laws about disciplinary action against clergy who do not provide pastoral care of their congregants.

[3] Gnosticism promotes, among other ideas, the idea that the planet is dirty and evil but that the spiritual realm is good. There still exist today various carry-overs from that ideology. The heresy inclined believers towards thinking of money as evil rather than as a benign tool. Seeing pledges and money as "worldly" and therefore "beneath" the lofty spiritual musings of clergy lends itself to the old adage "These hands were made for chalices, not callouses."