

## **Stewardship Message**

**Peter Stephanos**

**October 24, 2004**

Thank you, Father and good morning. I am pleased and honored to have the opportunity to speak to you today as part of our annual Stewardship messages. For those of you that don't know me, my name is Peter Stephanos. I'm a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Greek-American from the Washington, D.C. area. I grew up an avid Redskins fan but don't hold that against me as I have grown to love the Ravens as well. I actually cheered for both when they played each other this year. My wife, Ann, is seated in the back of the church with our youngest child, Will, who seems to always let everyone know that he is here during the Gospel reading. Ann and I also have two other children, Alex and Ben that are now in our Sunday School program.

We started coming to St. Demetrios about 4 years ago when our oldest son was reaching Sunday School age. I have to admit that, like many Greek Americans, I seemed to lose touch with the Greek Orthodox Church while I was in college and for several years after as a young adult. Things began to change, however, when I met Ann and she decided to convert to the Greek Orthodox faith just before we were married in 1992. Ann, the oldest of 7 children, grew up in a strong Catholic family, attended Catholic school through college and was active in her church as a young adult. When Ann converted to the Greek Orthodox faith I quickly realized that she knew a lot more about the faith than I ever did even though I attended Church regularly and participated in many Church Life programs. I was very impressed with her commitment to join the Greek Orthodox community, especially considering her commitment to the Catholic Church for so many years – all I can say is that I sure am glad that “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” didn't come out back in 1992 or we would never have been married!

The decision to raise our children under the Greek Orthodox faith was an easy one – at least it was for me. Fortunately, Ann was eager to share our life together in the Greek Orthodox Church as well. Raising our family as Greek Orthodox did bring an additional plus as we knew that we would expose our children to the Greek cultures and traditions that have always been a part of my life. I wanted to share this part of my life with Ann and with our children as they grow up. I have fond memories of spending long Sunday afternoons with my brothers and sister and countless cousins attending church, eating tons of food and sharing experiences together in a fun and loving environment. It seemed like we were always together as a family. However, as I grew older it became more of a challenge to stay close to the Greek culture and the close family environment that I grew up with. My parents have retired and moved to Ocean City, my brothers and sister have also moved away and we ended up moving ourselves to the Baltimore area.

When we first moved I sure did miss the memories of my childhood growing up with so many relatives nearby. It seemed like everyone lived so far away. After we got settled in Howard County, Ann and I would attend the Annunciation Cathedral services on Sundays off and on as it seemed to fit our schedule. Then one Sunday we decided to try out this other Church that I had visited a few times as a young adult out of college out in the suburbs. Our first visit to St. Demetrios was wonderful. We didn't know anyone in the Church. As you can imagine it can be a bit intimidating entering a Greek Church as a stranger where so many families frequent. I can remember Andy Markopolous and Herman Gallardo going out of their way to introduce themselves making us feel right at home. Also, on that Sunday Fr. Lou talked to the Sunday School in Church – growing up in St. Sophia our priest, Father John, would do the same thing. I remember it fondly as my Mom used to tell us that the children's sermon was the only one she could ever understand. When we looked at all of the excited and eager faces of the children that day I knew that St. Demetrios was the right place for us.

So we decided to join St. Demetrios. It seemed like the perfect Church to raise our young family and to share in the beautiful Greek Orthodox faith. I asked how to join the Church and we received a nice package of materials with a Stewardship pledge card. I have to admit that the concept of Stewardship was foreign to me. We had been members of St. Sophia in Washington where we paid dues and then when we moved to Baltimore we had not joined a Church so I really didn't know how much to give. I read the information in the package and read that Stewardship was the giving of our Time our Talents and our Treasures. We knew that we would be ready and willing to give our time as we were excited to get involved in the community. We also knew that we would have plenty of opportunities to offer our talents when called on. However, I was stuck on the giving of our treasures. Don't get me wrong. We were ready and willing to give financially to support the Church. But how much?? So I did what I usually do when I can't make a decision... I called my Dad. My parents are very active in the St. George's community in Ocean City so I figured that he would fill me in. Well, he really didn't help that much – he just told me to give what I felt was a reasonable amount. So I pulled out my check book and wrote out what I thought was an adequate sum and sent off a check to St. Demetrios. The following year I realized that I certainly did not give enough of our treasures to the Church. Stewardship messages like the one I am giving today convinced me of that fact.

I realized that the income I receive isn't mine. I was always told that God is the creator of everything that exists but I guess I never really paid much attention to that simple fact. My time at St. Demetrios has made me realize that God owns everything and we are simply stewards of what we have been entrusted with – we are truly blessed.

Shortly after we joined St. Demetrios I read the history of the parish written by Demetri Makres in the Consecration album. I was moved by the commitment of the members of St. Demetrios to build and support this Church. This was surely a great example of Stewardship at its finest.

I am proud to say that Ann and I have increased our Stewardship commitment but I'm still ashamed that we don't give enough. For a long time we lived a lifestyle that was comfortable for us – if we had money available we usually spent it on something nice for us or invested it – we simply weren't good stewards of what had been given to us by Christ. But we are trying and continue to improve every year (certainly having children has made us think twice before spending any money!). I can say now that I truly understand what Stewardship is and what Stewardship means.

So how much do we need to give anyway as Stewards? The bible tells us to give back 10% of what we have. I'll be the first to admit that 10% is a lot of money. In 2003, the average commitment of 594 Stewards in St. Demetrios was \$564/year. I would venture to guess that this is closer to 1% of what we have rather than 10%. With increased expenses at home it's no surprise that giving at any level is a challenge. Young families today are faced with:

- Sky rocketing housing costs
- Sizeable daycare expenses
- Increased health care expenses
- Requirements to contribute more to retirement funds
- Increased education costs
- Increased taxes
- And a host of other expenses that we need to manage

So I'll ask the same question – how much should we give? Sophia Vendelis and the Stewardship Committee have done an excellent job of giving us plenty of information to help us in making the

decision of how much to give. I hope you noticed that the latest Stewardship pledge card challenging us to try and give a fair share of \$849 per Steward (actually it was noted 4 times on the card – Excellent job Sophia!). I was surprised to find out that less than 20% of the Stewards commit at least this level each year. I know in my heart that we can certainly do better.

St. Demetrios has grown tremendously over the last three decades. Over this time the number of weddings has doubled and the number of baptisms has tripled averaging over two a month. It seems like we have 40 day blessings weekly, the pre-k Sunday School program is busting at the seams and our Joy-Hope program is packed. Last year we were over capacity for both our Vacation Bible School program and the CYC camp. I think we all agree that we have a tremendous program for our youth. We need to do everything we can to make sure that this beautiful Church continues to grow to provide the right environment for our children to be introduced to our faith and to follow in Christ's teachings as they enter into adulthood.

The budget for St. Demetrios is over half a million dollars a year and it needs to grow as our community grows. Currently, this budget is primarily made up of operating expenses to:

- maintain our facilities,
- provide for staff resources, and
- fund other administrative related expenses.

In fact, less than 15% of the revenue we generate is spent on Church Life expenses such as our Joy-Hope program, our children's choir and religious education. As we grow, we will need to add a second priest, add to our religious education programs, expand our church, add staff resources and commit more to our youth. With the growth of our church our Stewardship giving levels will need to increase as well. In fact, our Stewardship levels should increase by at least \$500 per Steward or nearly double to support our growth.

I have had the pleasure of serving on the Parish Council this year for the first time. One of the joys of serving on the Council is that I have been exposed to the tremendous contributions given by our community. I can't tell you how many times Helen has told us that an expense that we thought we were going to have to cover was picked up by an anonymous donor. I am constantly amazed at the time and energy given by the community in St. Demetrios. Just think of the commitment so many people make to this Church.

- We found out a couple of weeks ago at the General Assembly meeting that the materials and services to tint the Church windows will be provided free of charge.
- Jenny Kagle has given her time, talents and treasures to develop the most beautiful children's choir that I have ever heard.
- Demetri Makres spends evening after evening giving of himself to support the Church.
- Basil Lambros has put in countless hours at the Church to better organize our finances.
- Demi-Ann Lomis and the Pre-school committee have put in many late nights committing their time and resources to build our wonderful Pre-School.
- The Palakaria have put in countless hours to maintain our beautiful facilities.
- The outpouring of generous donations to fund the beautiful icons in the Church was tremendous.

The list goes on and on. I could spend all morning simply listing the many commitments made by the tremendous Stewards within the St. Demetrios community.

We can all learn to be better Stewards by these fine examples, so:

- Volunteer more,

- give an extra dollar at the Pangari each Sunday,
- provide a donation at each Joy-Hope event,
- mentor a young adult,
- have your children tithe 10% of their allowance, and
- do whatever you can do to support our beautiful Church.

I love this Church and this community. Ann and I truly feel like we have become part of a new family and cherish the thought of raising our children in this wonderful environment. This morning I sat down and put down my commitment for 2005. I have it here with me today. I still don't feel like I am giving as much as I should but we are doing our best and will strive to continue to give more.

When I was putting down my commitment this morning I couldn't help but think how truly blessed I am. God has provided me with

- a comfortable home,
- a good job,
- a tremendous Church community,
- a loving and caring wife,
- and three beautiful children.

It is time for me to give back and I intend to.

Thank you for listening to me this morning. I hope that you have a wonderful day and think hard this year when you are filling out those commitment cards.