

MAINTENANCE

OR

Mission



BECAUSE VIBRANT
CHURCHES MATTER



THE PARISH: MAINTENANCE OR MISSION

| A MISSION-FOCUSED APPROACH TO STEWARDSHIP

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language, and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.

—Pope Francis (Evangelii Gaudium, 27)

Pope Francis is calling on all of us, as Church, to focus on mission, rather than maintenance (or self-preservation), in everything we do. And when it comes to stewardship, I want to reaffirm Pope Francis’ call, from my own perch as a sociologist, by acquainting you with recent social science research, detailing how a mission-focused approach to stewardship can help unleash Catholic generosity within the United States.

First, some basic information regarding my research: I conducted it with Christian Smith at

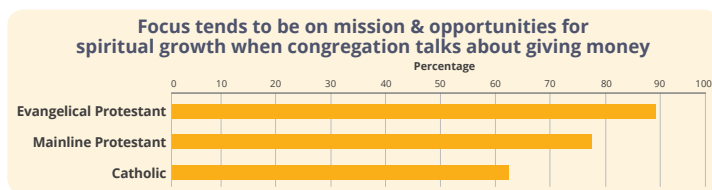
the University of Notre Dame (under the auspices of the Institute for Church Life and the Center for the Study of Religion and Society). We used nationally representative survey data, gathered in 2010, to explore religious giving among U.S. Catholics. Importantly, we compared Catholics with members of other faiths in the U.S. and asked questions about how money is discussed within congregations, allowing us to examine the impact that mission-focused discussions of money in parishes and congregations have on religious giving. Put simply, we find that greater generosity flourishes in mission-focused parishes. Unfortunately, too many Catholic parishes currently focus on parish maintenance, rather than mission.

THE CATHOLIC GIVING GAP

Let me start by revealing a troubling overall lack of generosity among U.S. Catholics. In our data, American Catholics are less likely than the rest

of the population to report giving money to the Church, with fewer than one in five self-identified Catholics indicating that they gave to a solely religious cause in the past 12 months. Catholics are also less likely to report giving 10% or more of their income as voluntary contributions to good causes (tithing). Indeed, the terrible truth is that a full 40% of Catholics surveyed failed to donate to any charitable cause, religious or otherwise, in the previous year. Let me repeat that: 40% of self-identified Catholics failed to donate to any charitable cause in the previous year, and fewer than one in five self-identified Catholics reported giving directly to the Church.

How big is this giving gap when we compare ourselves to other Christians? The following graph depicts it visually. Catholics are only about half as likely as Evangelical Protestants to give to the Church.



Catholics not only give less often but, on average, give far less money than members of other religious groups in the U.S. When examining those who actively give to religious and/or non-religious charities, the average amount given to charities in the previous 12 months by Catholics was a mere \$501 a year. This is the total amount given to all charities, both religious and otherwise, in the past 12 months. For a household with an income of \$50,000, that constitutes just 1% of income—and notice, these analyses exclude completely the 40% of Catholics who do not give to charity at all, which would depress these figures further. If we analyze Mainline Protestants in our data in a similar fashion, we find their average total giving is \$923/year—almost twice as much as Catholics—and for Evangelical Protestants, it is \$1,437/year—almost three times the average for Catholics. These differences in charitable giving between Catholics and other Christians in the U.S. are what I term the “Catholic Giving Gap.”

This Catholic gap in giving is not new. In the 1990s, Villanova researcher Chuck Zech wrote a book

entitled *“Why Catholics Don’t Give ... And What Can Be Done About It.”* Even earlier, in the 1980s, sociologist and priest Andrew Greeley wrote a book with Bishop William McManus entitled *“Catholic Contributions,”* which detailed the relative decline in giving among Catholics as compared to Protestants from the 1960s to the 1980s. Our current research reiterates the existence of this Catholic giving gap, but it also finds that the discrepancy between Catholics and Protestants in religious giving appears to be growing, rather than receding, over time in the U.S. In order to explain this gap, we need to explore how parishes discuss money and how this shapes giving cultures within parishes. As I will show, differing congregational cultures are crucial for understanding the giving gap (and in reducing it).

“PAYING THE BILLS” VS. “LIVING THE MISSION”

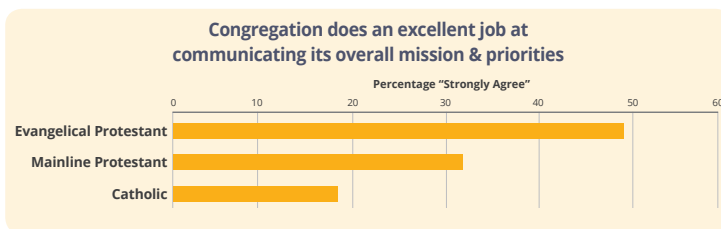
Survey respondents actively involved in a parish (or congregation) were asked questions about how their parish discussed money. They answered with regard to their own parish or congregation. Our survey revealed two distinct ways that parishes and Christian congregations tend to discuss money. We called these two approaches “Paying the Bills” and “Living the Mission.”

“Paying the Bills” means that a parish tends to focus on budgetary items identified by need or scarcity, with a consistent emphasis on parishioners’ responsibility to pay the congregation’s bills. It is focused on parish maintenance. We argue that this approach has the tendency to separate discussions of money from the spiritual mission of the Church.

On the other hand, members of “Living the Mission” parishes report very different discussions of money. Rather than a focus on parish maintenance, they are asked to fund the mission and vision of the parish in which they are spiritually invested. This approach opens people’s eyes to opportunities for spiritual growth and for world transformation. It requires pastors and parish leaders to successfully communicate the mission of the parish to its members. It is also associated with a more participatory parish culture and can lead to greater engagement with the surrounding community.

When we compare Catholics to other Christians in the U.S., we find Catholics are less likely than other Christians to report a “live the mission” approach to discussions of money in their parish, and instead describe a greater focus on “paying the bills.” For instance, we asked, “When your religious congregation talks about giving money, does it tend to talk about people’s responsibility to help pay the congregation’s bills, or does it focus on opportunities for spiritual growth and vision for the religious congregation’s mission?” Whereas almost nine in ten Evangelicals and eight in ten Mainline Protestants indicate that mission and spiritual growth are emphasized in discussions of giving money, only about six in ten Catholics similarly indicate this. The remaining Catholics (almost four out of every ten) report a focus on their responsibility to “pay the bills” within their own parish.

This lack of focus on mission is further substantiated when we explore specific questions on communication and planning regarding mission and vision. For example, only 18% of parish-connected Catholics strongly agree that their parish does an excellent job of communicating its mission, as compared to 32% of Mainline Protestants and 49% of Evangelical Protestants who strongly agree with the same statement.



We found additional items illustrating Catholic parishes’ lack of success in engaging and collaborating with parishioners when it comes to mission, as Catholics are less likely than other Christians in the U.S. to agree with statements such as:

- **I personally feel part of the planning of the vision and mission of my religious congregation.**
- **I feel a lot of personal “ownership” of the process of developing the priorities, vision, and mission of my religious congregation.**

Obviously, other Christian groups are doing a better job than Catholics of creating cultures that successfully communicate their mission and of encouraging adherents to participate in it.

Today, many U.S. Catholics do not feel like full and active participants in the mission of the Church. Moreover, many parishes are failing to successfully communicate their mission and priorities. As a result, many Catholics feel their church is focused on “Paying the Bills” (parish maintenance, or self-preservation) rather than on “Living the Mission.”

If we, as Catholics, want to affirmatively respond to Pope Francis’ invitation to live in a “missionary key,” our data suggests that we have plenty of work to do ... there is plenty of transformation in language and structures still required in our parishes and in our lives to be true missionaries.

BUT DOES OUR LACK OF FOCUS ON MISSION MATTER?

Yes, a lack of focus on mission matters. I strongly suspect it matters in many varied and important ways. But since our study explored religious giving, I can say for certain that it matters in terms of whether or not people give to the Church. Whereas 60% of respondents who strongly agreed that mission and priorities were communicated in excellent fashion by their congregation and gave to their church in the previous year, only 17% of those who strongly disagreed did so.

Similarly, over 70% of those who strongly agreed that they felt a part of the planning of the vision and mission of their congregation gave to their church in the past year, as compared to 22% of those who strongly disagreed. Our inability to successfully communicate and engage parishioners in mission is linked to their lack of generosity to the Catholic Church.

WHY DOES MISSION MATTER?

When parishes focus on mission, they inspire their parishioners to grow. They see the Church as a body not just looking out for itself but going forth and giving of itself. They see a Church willing to venture outside of itself, outside of its comfort zone, in order to grow.

"I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out in the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."

—Pope Francis (Evangelii Gaudium, 49)

As I have explained elsewhere, the single biggest factor explaining the Catholic giving gap is the fact that Catholics often separate money from religion, failing to recognize how the two are connected. Rather than linking their use of money to their relationship with God, Catholics tend to consider money and material possessions as having little or no connection to spiritual or religious issues. When, however, Catholics begin to see their money as ultimately God's money—as a gift from God—and begin to see their use of money and material possessions for God's purposes as a part of their spiritual life—as their gift to God—Catholics become just as generous as other Christians.

One of the most important reasons that mission matters is because it forces the Church to give of itself. Ideally, our Church is, at its core, an ongoing

elaboration of that original self-gift on the cross by which Christ created the Church. When the Church embodies this ideal, it becomes a model of spiritual growth for its members. People are inspired by ideals, not merely by needs.

Unfortunately, as Pope Francis rightly emphasizes, when we as a Church become focused on self-preservation, on merely "paying the bills," we become spiritually sick. Indeed, I have begun to imagine the Catholic giving gap as a sort of indicator, or underlying symptom, of this spiritual sickness within the Catholic Church in the U.S. When we engage in mission, and give materially of our collectives ourselves, then we grow spiritually as a Church.

My research shows that as parish members (in a true style of discipleship) mimic this form of spiritual growth, we will all begin to see an amazing amount of generosity unleashed on this world. This is the truth that Pope Francis has been proclaiming boldly and joyfully in his papacy.

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