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Ownership, authority seen as donation keys

By Lee Strong Staff writer

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hen Judy Nichols gives presentations on charitable contributions, she sometimes asks people in attendance to figure how much money they spent the last time they went to a movie.

Nichols, the author of Changing Demographics: Fundraising in the 1990s, then asks them to determine how many times they go to the movies each year, and to calculate how much they spend at their local theaters annually.

Finally, she tells them to compare that figure with how much they annually give to charities.

"I ask them to think, 'Is XYZ charity more important than going to the movies, just as important, or less important?" Nichols said.

If many Catholics were to ask themselves the same question about their contributions to the church, they might find the disparity surprising.

According to a number of studies on the giving patterns of mainline Christian churches in the United States, Catholics give a smaller percentage of their incomes to the church than do their Protestant brothers and sisters.

Perhaps the most dramatic presentation of the situation was cited in Catholic Contributions: Sociology and Policy, by sociol-Father ogist Father An-Greeley drew Greeley and compiled Bishop William information McManus. from six sep-In the arate studies 1987 the first conbook, ed in 1960 and the most recent in

Those studies showed that in the early 1960s, both Catholics and Protestants contributed approximately 2.2 percent of their annual incomes to their respective churches.

By 1984, Protestants were still contributing approximately the same percentage of their incomes. But for Catholics, the figure had dropped to 1.1 percent. The actual amount given by Catholics had increased in terms of dollars over that span, but Father Greeley estimated that the drop in per-

centage was costing the Catholic Church approximately \$6 billion every year.

On average, the typical Protestant was giving \$580 annually to his or her church in 1984, while the typical Catholic was putting approximately \$320 into the collection plate each year up from \$164 in 1963.

Father Greeley pointed out that if Catholics had continued to give at the same rate as they did in the early 1960s, the typical contribution would have been \$605, since Catholics by 1984 had a higher average annual income than did Protestants.

If Catholics were to give at the higher level, Father Greeley further asserted in the book, the church would be able to maintain its inner-city schools; pay its employees just wages; open new schools in suburban parishes; contribute more to the support of the church and the poor in other nations; and undertake serious research into some of the problems confronted the church in the United States — including the drop in vocations to the priesthood.

sing the data as a guide, Father Greeley then attempted to explain why Catholics began giving less of their income to the church. He noted that between 1963 and 1974, Catholic contributions had decreased from 2.2 percent to 1.6 percent. He attributed that drop in part to a younger population (accounting for 15 percent of the decline) and decreasing Mass attendance (14 percent) — a trend that stopped in 1975 and thus could not account for any significant portion of the drop between 1974 and 1984, he noted.

Fifty percent of the decrease, Father Greeley suggested, was due to a combination of changing attitudes on papal authority and to disagreements with the church's teaching concerning sexual ethics — particularly those concerning birth control, divorce and premarital sex.

Father Greeley was not available for an interview, but he did relay through his office at the National

Opinion Research Center that subsequent studies have supported the data contained in the book, and indeed showed a continued erosion in the level of giving by Catholics.

he question is, how accurate are Father Greeley's data — and his conclusions?

"I think in general his findings are on target," noted Mark Seeberg, the Diocese of Rochester's director of development.

Seeberg added, however, that he questions Father Greeley's assertion that the church's sexual teachings — particularly on artificial birth control — are largely responsible for the decline in church contributions.

The differences over sexual issues are "symbolic of a larger problem with church authority," he said. "To me, that is the central issue." Lay people, he explained, need to know why they are being asked to give money and to feel that they have some say in how their contributions are spent. They also need to actually see where the money goes, Seeberg said.

A nationally recognized advocate of the concepts of stewardship and sacrificial giving, Monsignor Joseph Champlin of the Syracuse diocese likewise both agreed and disagreed with Father Greeley's observations.

"I think his analysis of the data is extremely useful," Monsignor Champlin observed. "But I found his analysis for the decline was not helpful at all."

One of the big reasons for people not contributing, Monsignor Champlin asserted, oftentimes is that people simply have not been asked to give. "Our experience is that when people have been presented with a spirituality of stewardship, then they will be more inclined to give."

George Holloway, executive director of the National Catholic Development Conference, also took exception to some of Father Greeley's conclusions. "I don't agree with what (Father) Greeley put forth," he said. "My feeling is that people give because they are asked to do so."

How people are asked to give then becomes a key factor in the situation, Nichols observed.

"A lot of these fundraisers are still looking backwards," Nichols said. "They target the audience

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Notorious

The Catholic Courier's annual Education Supplement takes a look at some of the 'unsung heroes' of Catholic education. The supplement begins after page 8.



Irish insights

A journey to Ireland leads a Rochester sister to reflect on her own Irish heritage, and on the tradition of storytelling. Pages 8 and 9.

