

How much should I give?

One of the questions people often ask is “How much should I give?” This challenging question is too often avoided, deflected, or left unanswered.

In the church, we are often vague on the topic of “how much.” This is in contrast with other charity appeals we all receive, which are usually very specific and often include amounts the charity is challenging us to consider.

People don’t ask how much they should give to be difficult. They ask this when we haven’t communicated expectations or haven’t spent enough time teaching about giving, generosity, and gratitude. They genuinely hope for guidance.

How do we learn what we are expected to give?

Sunday after Sunday, the offering plate is passed. It collects coins, bills—\$5s and \$10s and even greater—envelopes with undisclosed amounts, and PAR cards as proxies for gifts. Some people put something on it and others don’t. If this is the only way we learn what is expected, what are we asking of people?

It might be more helpful to open up a conversation to help and encourage people to make an informed and intentional decision about how they will give to support the ministry of your parish.

Lately, the pattern in the church has been to not ask for gifts at all. Or the answer has been either “Give what you can” (huh?) or the biblical expectation of the tithe: 10 percent (gasp!). For a new person, neither of these may be very helpful. And for people who have been members for a long time, these answers don’t encourage regular reflection on their practice of giving and generosity or toward determining what they are called to give.

“What should I give?” is an honest question that deserves to be explored. As leaders of this giving program, you will want to consider how you will respond to it.

How you might answer the question

Always begin with thanks. Be personal and sincere in your gratitude. Mention how, specifically, the person or family gives in many ways, including money. It may also be appropriate to acknowledge that they might be at their limit of generosity at this time for any number of reasons.

Acknowledge that there is biblical teaching, of giving 10 percent to God from your “first fruits” (and that in these Scripture passages, this tithing is regarded as the beginning of giving, not the end). However, times have changed, and there are now many ways we “give” to accomplish what the Bible expects. We pay taxes, for example, which in turn pay for health care. We support other worthy organizations as well as the church.

Give until it feels good. Suggest that whatever the decision, they need to feel comfortable or ideally, cheerful with it. Remind them that their decision isn’t permanent: the amount of their gift can change—in either direction—should their circumstances change.

Share what the impact of generosity is for the parish. In doing so, talk about what the money will accomplish (feeding the hungry), not what it will pay for (heating the parish hall).

Share your story of how you go about making the giving decision, and even how much!

Offer decision-making tools to help people make an informed and intentional choice based on concrete information.

Be bold and give a suggestion

There are many ways to do this. You could share how you make your own decision: “We give 5 percent to our church and then give another 2 percent to other charities.”

Or you could describe your own experience in decision-making about giving: “We started out giving a fixed amount. Then we decided to figure out what percentage that was of our total income. It was lower than we thought, so now we are on a path to increase it by X percent a year.”

Other suggestions:

- Start with the equivalent of an hour’s salary in a week or a day’s salary in a month.
- Give what you would normally spend on (coffee, fast food, etc.) a week. (“Try that out and see how it feels.”)

In each of these cases, the result is a mindful and intentional decision about what to give. That in itself is a great first step.