

TITHES AND FIRSTFRUITS CONT.

Likewise, one of the earliest witnesses to Holy Tradition, The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (sometimes called The Didache), applies the firstfruits to the Church. “Every firstfruit of the produce of the wine-vat and of the threshing-floor, of cattle and flocks, you will take and give as the firstfruit to your prophets; for they are your chief priests... If you prepare food, take and give the firstfruit according to the commandment. Likewise, when you open a jar of wine or oil, take and give the firstfruit to the prophets. Take also the firstfruit of money and clothing and every possession, as it may seem right to you, and give according to the commandment.” Saint Irenaeus, writing toward the end of the second century, notes that Christ Himself “gave directions to His disciples to offer the firstfruits of His own created things not as if He stood in need of them, but that they might be themselves neither unfruitful nor ungrateful.” Saint John Chrysostom contends that the tithe is more binding on us than on the Jews. In one of his sermons, he notes that under the Old Testament tithing was the norm. Among Christians, however, it has become a cause for amazement; we exclaim in wonder, “Why so-and-so tithes!” Saint John finds this a sad reflection on our piety and ends with the warning, “If it was a danger to neglect the tithe then, imagine how serious it must be now!” As we said, the Old Testament saints did not see the tithe merely as a way for organizing fundraising for the Temple and clergy, but as part of their relationship with God. Similarly, we cannot regard our giving merely as providing for our parish’s material needs. We must appreciate the spiritual importance of tithing, as the return to the Lord of a portion of His blessings through which we sanctify the remainder for our own use. Thus we acknowledge the Lord’s claim upon the whole of our life and affirm that the focus of our existence is not this world but the Kingdom to come. The tithe, one-tenth, is the ideal of stewardship set forth in Scripture in the Old Testament tithe, and in Tradition, represented by The Didache, Saint Irenaeus, and Saint John Chrysostom. At first, for those not used to the idea of tithing, this amount may seem staggering. The best way to begin is to adopt a lower percentage and then increase it over time. First, we should accept the underlying principle behind tithing: That we should not give an arbitrary amount, but that our contribution should represent a proportion, a percentage, of our income. Once we establish a certain percentage (for example 3-5%) as our starting point, we can then increase it by one percent a year until we reach the tithe. From the beginning, however, we must adopt the idea that we give a percentage of our treasure; we cannot base it on impulse, giving “a little something” from what we “have left over.” Instead, our offering should represent “the firstfruits of our produce” offered because we feel the need to “honor the Lord with our substance,” because we want to show our gratitude to Him for His blessings, and because we acknowledge our part in His work of redeeming the world.

THE TIME TO TITHE IS NOW: IT IS A SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE

You will never be in a better position to tithe than you are today. Whether you can tithe has relatively little to do with the amount of your income or the number of your financial obligations. The person who says, “After I pay all my bills, I can’t afford to tithe,” is telling the truth. He or she simply has the cart before the horse. None of us could afford to tithe with what’s left. Tithing (10% giving) is a matter of putting first things first, taking our tithe out first, and then wisely managing the rest of our income in a way in which we still pay our bills.