



Catholic Fundraising at a Crossroads



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Catholic Church fundraising can sometimes seem like a daunting and challenging task for those responsible for doing it. If you agree, know that you are not alone. There are no two ways about it. Catholic parishes across the U.S. are facing difficulty and Catholic fundraising is at a crossroads.

Mass attendance has been trending downward for decades and shows no sign of letting up anytime soon. The pews are growing emptier, and weekly offertories are trending downward. At the same time, the expenses of running a modern parish are steadily increasing.

According to a [study by gallup](#), though [Church giving](#) still accounts for the largest share of overall philanthropic donations, it is down more than 50% since 1990. Churches report that [giving has further decreased](#) by 29% since COVID-19. There are more than a few theories as to why Catholic parishes might be experiencing this decline, but the most commonly cited is the decline in Mass attendance and the fact that so many Catholics are leaving the Church.

This is a spiritual as well as a financial crisis. When you add in the church scandals that increasingly draw media attention, many parishioners have lost that crucial sense of purpose and belonging.

Alexander Guin from Philanthropy Daily states in his [fundraising article](#) that to both reinvigorate parishes spiritually *and* help them thrive financially, something must change. The better solution is straightforward: implement the best fundraising principles of **successful nonprofits**. A new approach to fundraising—one modeled on successful nonprofits—would effectively address the financial concerns of parishes, and over time, have the added benefits of strengthening parishioners' connection with their parish community, removing barriers between parishioner and pastor, and rekindling a sense of belonging and purpose.



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Assessing Parish Fundraising

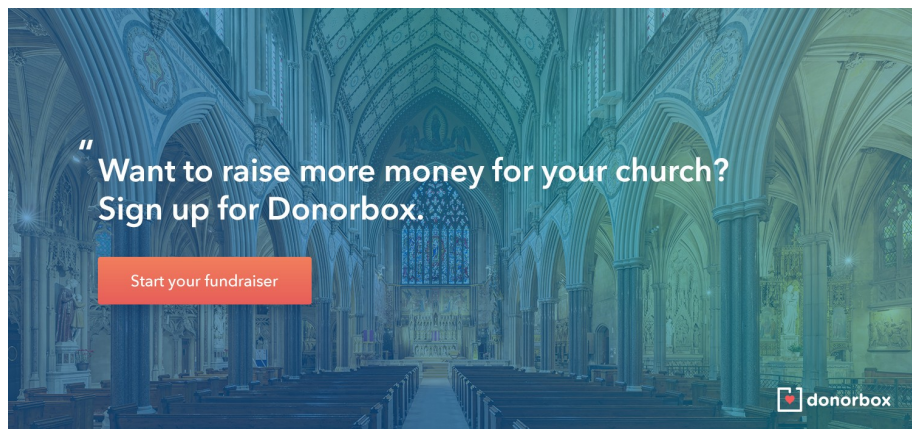
Guin writes that for most parishes, fundraising tactics include:

- Sending a box of giving envelopes to homes every month
- Reporting on weekly offerings in the Sunday Bulletin
- Making appeals from the pulpit
- Online giving sometimes available, with occasional appeals for membership
- Special [events like charity galas](#)
- Increased offertory initiatives

These methods of fundraising, which dominate the Catholic Church, have undoubtedly accomplished much. At the same time, they appear to be losing steam at best, even doing more harm than good. Statistics on the [level of giving by Catholics](#) has remained low (in comparison to Protestant denominations) and stagnant for several decades, and there appear to be no signs of any increase on the horizon.

The mentality of parishioners' obligation to give is changing.

Parishioners rightly view constant appeals from the pulpit as a disruption to the sanctity of the mass. Most genuinely want to support and give to Catholic causes, but may feel like a cash machine, rather than a person. And people are getting tired of over-emotional appeals of neediness.



Trends in Catholic Fundraising

- According to [Gallup](#), Catholic Church attendance has fallen from 75% in 1955 to 45% in 2005-2008 to just 21% in 2020.
- According to the [Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate](#), mass attendance post covid era is projected at just 12%.
- Church giving has dropped more than 50% since 1990 and a further 29% since Covid-19.
- 43% of churches [reported](#) a decrease in giving on March 22, 2020.
- Almost 70% of Catholics who donate money give between 2-5% of their income
- According to [Philanthropy Roundtable](#), 95% of Catholics give money to their parish.
- Church charity statistics show that about 49% of all donating to churches comes from credit cards according to [Nonprofit Source](#).
- 26% of Catholics in the US prefer acts of service to money donations. (U.S. Catholic)

- 26% of people who attend mass weekly donated money online. ([USCCB](#))
- Most working-age Catholics donate money online 2-11 times a year according to USCCB.
- More than half of Catholics, 53% to be precise, would give money if asked by their pastor at mass.

A Better Approach to Parish Fundraising

As Guin states, “better approach to fundraising” doesn’t require anything fancy or innovative—just the adoption of what other nonprofits do in order to be successful. Successful nonprofits actively work to bring donors into the life of the organization and cultivate a sense of belonging. They:

- Thank donors for their gifts personally
- Build relationships with donors through calls and meetings
- Dedicate personal time & [resources to fundraising](#)
- Regularly communicate with supporters by phone, mail, and email
- Offer planned giving opportunities (estate gifts/bequests)
- Recognize the most committed supporters [through clubs](#), societies, etc.
- Reach out to grantmaking foundations in a systematic way
- Build relationships with and solicit business/corporate givers.

Parishes could do well to learn from successful nonprofits and adopt these practices. At the end of the day, it’s about thanking your parishioners and strengthening that important relationship. After all, a strong, sound church community is so important to the success of a parish!



I. Learn from the donor stewardship model



Previously, fundraisers could easily ask for donations from Catholics who sat in the pews during Mass. It was a simple, effortless process without much pushback.

Nowadays, it’s a different story. Catholics today are not so easily convinced or swayed. There are many more options out there that they can give to. In the past, it was the fundraiser’s market. Now, it’s the donor’s market. If a Catholic doesn’t like the fundraising approach, they are less willing to give.

How do you respond to this shift?

The first step is to steward people’s donations properly—actively communicate in an informative and helpful manner so they understand how their money is being spent. Next, ask people how they would like to give and respond appropriately. If they don’t like to give during Mass, find alternatives. In this case, do the majority of your fundraising during the week, instead of on Sundays. You can do this if you have the right approach and the right technology.

II. Leverage technology

Many Catholic charities still focus on more traditional fundraising or marketing methods. These organizations spend enormous efforts to run direct mail campaigns, distribute paper leaflets and speak at Sunday Masses. Not only are these traditional methods outdated and costly, but they also produce waste as everything is printed, posted and then filed away out of sight.



With information technology, these tasks have become significantly easier to manage. They also cost next to nothing. Today, you can run an entire fundraising campaign without interrupting Mass or spending hundreds on physical mail.

- With a simple website and optimized [online giving software](#) like Donorbox, you can accept donations through your website. People can give online whenever they like, even from just their phones.
- With donor relationship management software, you can track and maintain all your donor relationships throughout the year in real-time.
- With email and marketing software like Mailchimp, you can communicate regularly with donors and parishioners in a personalized way.
- With [Text-to-Give Fundraising](#), you can make giving fast and convenient for your donors. Get Started with [Donorbox Text to Give](#).

There will be an upfront set-up and learning curve, but your results will be exponentially better. You will find that when you take the time to explain what you are doing, people want to give more. They see your vision and want to support it.

Before, waiting for someone to respond to a leaflet or letter could take over a week. Now, you can send communications and organize meetings in a matter of minutes. [Technology](#) offers you more options and the capability to fundraise faster than ever, while significantly reducing your costs. The cherry on top? Many software companies offer reduced or even free packages for charitable organizations.

III. Personalize your messages

In the past, fundraisers would send the same message out to thousands of people. Today, with the help of technology, you can easily tailor your outreach messages. This means that you can personalize all your communications, offering a more intimate relationship with each donor.

Using a donor relationship management system or database, you can also quickly identify your best prospects with a couple clicks. You can then organize one-to-one meetings with the greatest potential of generating new donations. No need to shout 'donate' from the church pulpit in hopes that a few in the audience will give! Instead, you can focus your valuable time connecting directly with those who are interested in hearing what you have to say.

By individualizing your messages, you can ask for donations from people most interested in giving. With those who aren't ready to give but would be interested in learning what you do, you can share more about your organization, potentially encouraging them to donate in the future. If someone is already giving, you can share with them the good news about how their money has made a difference, rather than asking them for more.

IV. Adjust your fundraising mindset

Parish leaders can often feel apprehensive about how to approach fundraising interactions with potential donors. The entire process can feel daunting, uncomfortable, or even awkward. But remember—fundraising is a ministry. Developing a positive mindset about your reason for undertaking this ministry may seem challenging, but it's helpful to understand how the message of the Catholic Church relates to philanthropy. In his message below, Father Henri Nouwen, a twentieth-century Dutch Catholic priest and professor, describes the spiritual dimension of church fundraising:

“ “Fundraising is proclaiming what we believe in such a way that we offer other people an opportunity to participate with us in our vision and mission. Fundraising is precisely the opposite of begging. When we seek to raise funds we are not saying, ‘Please, could you help us out because lately it’s been hard.’ Rather, we are declaring, ‘We have a vision that is amazing and exciting. We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources that God has given you—your energy, your prayers, and your money—in this work to which God has called us.’ Our invitation is clear and confident because we trust that our vision and mission are like ‘trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither’ (Ps. 1:3).”

Through open and honest conversations, you’re able to gain your donors’ trust while spreading your message and sharing your goals. Your donors will also better understand the role they can play in both making these goals a reality and helping the Church and others in the community.

10 Commandments of Catholic Fundraising

Fundraising can be hard sometimes. Here are 10 practical steps every catholic should follow to attract donors, raise funds, and move their mission forward:

1. **Pray** – Fundraising can be quite challenging which is why a consistent prayer life will keep you motivated and help you raise more. Get together with your fundraising team and pray. Praying together, attending mass together and following the Divine Office is a wonderful way for you to work together as a team. When fundraising gets tough, just remember that you are not alone and that with the help of the Lord, anything is possible.
2. **Thank People** – Gratitude is powerful and can be transformational. Don’t just thank your donors after they donate, do it more often and regularly. Consider thanking your donors on feast days such as Easter and [Christmas](#). You will notice that people will donate more generously after being touched by your approach.
3. **Connect with People** – Fundraising has a strong network effect. How much you receive is directly proportional to the number of people you meet. Go out, meet more people. Keep track of whom you meet at events and the conversations you have with them. Identify people who resonate with your message and mission and ask them for donations.
4. **Create a Dream List** – Create a dream list of people who can take your mission forward. Include spiritual leaders who can pray for your work, specialists and experts to work with, connectors who’ll help you meet new

people, [volunteers](#), significant donors, and your faithful supporters.

5. **Hold one-to-one meetings** – Donations are highly personal. People give because of the personal connection they’ve made with you and with your mission. Therefore, it is important that you spend time making as many personal connections as possible. Hold one-to-one meetings with your donors to retain them for the long term.
6. **Increase your Community** – Pope Paul VI in his 1976 Apostolic Exhortation ‘Evangelization in the Modern World’ points out that: “The evangelical message should reach vast numbers of people, but with the capacity of piercing the conscience of each.” You should aim to increase your community and spread the message of the Lord by first, clarifying your message, sharing it, and then amplifying your message. Focus on making connections because devoted followers have a higher chance of becoming long-term, dedicated donors.
7. **Clean your contact Database** – Clean your contact database to ensure that people’s details have been entered correctly. Every week, or at least once a month, spend 30 minutes to an hour reviewing and cleaning the names and contact information in your database.
8. **Distribute Free Content** – Saint Francis of Assisi says “for it is in giving that we receive.” Create content that you can distribute for free among your audience. This way your donors will recognize your mission as one who gives before they ask. As a result, Catholics will be more open to donating to your cause.
9. **Attend Other People’s Events** – Reach out and connect to people at events. Attend more and more events. This way, people will engage with you and learn more about your cause. You become the key influencer of your mission. Attend conferences, seminars or events that are focused on your organization’s kind of work.
10. **Ask People for Donations** – “Ask, and you shall receive”. Asking for donations can get awkward sometimes, but it is the most important part of fundraising. Understand why your donors give and modify your vocabulary accordingly. Follow the above steps to ease the process of asking for donations. Make genuine connections with your donors and ask for donations from people you know well.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, it’s about treating parishioners like people. Thank them for their contributions and gifts so you can develop and strengthen those relationships. Leverage technology to fundraise more efficiently. Tailor regular communications to the individual who is giving to provide a personal touch.

Guin from Philanthropy Daily eloquently sums up how parishes could benefit from these fundraising strategies:

“ Adopting [the practices of successful nonprofits] would not only be financially profitable, but would also make parish fundraising more faithfully *Catholic*, in that it would proceed from the perspective of *communio*, honoring parishioners as members of the Body of Christ, strengthening the bonds between them, and cultivating love for Christ and His Church.

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