

MASS OFFERINGS

A Commentary on the Diocesan Regulation
(Episcopal Regulation No. 11 – Document 42.300)

For some time now questions have been raised about Mass offerings. We are asked why Mass intentions could not be combined to accommodate persons wishing to have a Mass celebrated on a specific date. Due to the shortage of priests, it is not possible, in some communities, to respond to the requests, and so people would like to know why a Mass cannot be celebrated for a number of intentions. Moreover, inasmuch as the financial situation of several parishes is precarious, we are asked why the proportion allowed to parishes for funeral masses may not be increased. It is in response to these inquiries that I propose the following reflections to complement the explanations already provided in the “Handbook for the Administration of Fabriques”.

The Meaning of Mass offerings

Since apostolic times the faithful have brought their offerings to Eucharistic celebrations. First it was bread and wine, then to support the celebrants and the poor. In time, this custom of presenting the offerings was adapted to the cultures of the country and the times. Now it is most commonly done by a gift of money. But the offering presented always remains the sign of the union of the faithful with the offering of Christ to his Father. The most basic offering is therefore the offering of oneself, the communion with the offering of Christ. On the other hand, the celebration of the Mass, in the mind of Christ and of the Church, is above all “for the glory of God and the salvation of the world”. Even therefore if a Mass is celebrated for a particular intention, this intention does not exclude the offering of this celebration for the intention of all the faithful, in particular for those who are participating in it. The intention proposed by an individual still allows the assembled congregation to pray for this intention and the participation of the faithful, notably of the person proposing the intention, enables the Eucharistic event to bear more fruit. The offering itself is an act of charity. The offering rendered by one person for a particular intention thus retains its full value.

The Reasons for a Regulation Concerning Mass Offerings

It is because of the sacred nature of the Eucharist that the Church does not wish this Sacrament par excellence, to be associated with any intentions which would appear to place emphasis on monetary value; nor should the Church lay itself open to criticism due to any appearance whatsoever of profit, simony, commercial gain or trade.

Offerings and not Stipends

It is undoubtedly in this perspective that the “Code of Canon Law” of 1983 modified the expression used in the Code of 1917 by speaking of Mass offerings rather than Mass stipends. This change enables us to see that the offering is not a remuneration for a service rendered or a payment in exchange for the celebration for the intention of the donor. It is purely a matter of a gift, of an offering. And it is to avoid regarding this offering as a remuneration that the priest may receive only one offering a day, even if he celebrates more than one.

For the Support of the Priest

Mass offerings are also not a disguised source of revenue for the parish. They are traditionally designed for the support of the priests. Priests do have a salary, but it is a modest salary. They are responsible for providing their own liturgical vestments, and the instruments necessary or useful for the preparation of the celebrations, and for their continuing education.

To Help the Parish Cover Services Performed by the Priest

When, during the week, a portion of the offering for an announced Mass (\$8) is allocated to the parish, it is to help the parish to cover the costs of the cult (wine, hosts, candles, decorations, choir, hymnals) and even of part of the salaries of pastoral staff and of the premium for their pension plan. It is the same with the portion of the collection taken at funerals. The Sunday collection, the parish dues and the voluntary contributions are for other expenses of a parish: salaries, building maintenance, etc. It is by these latter contributions, and not by Mass offerings, that the financing of a parish has to be assured.

To Help the Diocese to Assume the Costs Pertaining to the Support and to the Retirement of Priests

We are asked why a portion of the offering is allocated to the diocese (\$2 from an announced Mass during the week and \$10 from a Sunday Mass). We have to keep in mind that the diocese, through its compensation fund for priests, has had to cover the actuarial deficits of the pension plan for priests to the sum of

approximately \$ 300,000 in the course of the last eight years, This year, in June, it will have to allocate \$ 500,000 to cover this deficit by virtue of a decision by the Order of Actuaries that has fixed the rate of interest at 4.2 % on the capital required to guarantee the sum of \$ 400 a month for retired Priests. The portion of offerings for announced Masses that is allocated to the diocese is about \$ 80,000 a year. This is not sufficient to cover the actuarial deficits that we have to absorb. The compensation fund and the Bishop's Works are therefore covering the deficit.

The Prohibition of Collective Intentions and Offerings

As a result of the decreasing number of priests and consequently of Mass celebrations, it is sometimes becoming difficult to respond to all the requests, in a given parish, to celebrate for specific intentions, and especially on the dates requested. Why, then, may Mass not be celebrated for a number of intentions.

Ecclesiastical law is clear on this subject: "Separate Masses are to be designated for the intentions of each of those persons for whom an offering, however moderate it may be, has been given and accepted." (Canon 948).

What is the reason for this requirement? The commentary in the "Code of Canon Law" tells us : "Although the offering is in no way a kind of payment in consideration of the intention of the Mass (. . .), once the priest has committed himself, by accepting the offering, to celebrating for the intention of the donor, a bond of justice is created through which the believer acquires a right to have this Mass celebrated for his intention, according to the conditions indicated (. . .) The priest may (. . .) not accept the offering, but once it is accepted, the claim of justice upon which this connection rests comes not from the offering but from its acceptance."

Celebrations for a Collective Intention: Various Possibilities

It is worth recalling, in the first place, that the Bishop, for the whole of the diocese (canon 388), and the pastor or the moderator, for his parish or for the totality of the parishes that are entrusted to him (canon 534), is required to designate the Mass for the intentions of the faithful on every Sunday and day of obligation. In this case the faithful may not make a particular offering. It is what is known as the Mass "pro populo".

When it is not possible to cover all the intentions requested, it is nevertheless possible, for example, to celebrate in the parish one Mass per month for all deceased persons. "The Handbook for the Administration of Fabriques" indicates how to proceed. No offering may be solicited for such a Mass.

The final possibility consists in celebrating a Mass for an intention described as "collective", for which offerings are received. Until now we have not believed that we should have recourse to this option. As an experiment, however, two parishes

have been authorized to propose to their people this method of offering a Mass for an intention that is “collective”. Its use depends on precise conditions that are also described in the “The Handbook for the Administration of Fabriques”. After an evaluation we shall be able to decide whether this possibility can be extended to other parishes.

Conclusion

The Bishop, for the whole of the diocese, and the pastor or the priest moderator, for the parish or the pastoral unit, have the duty and the responsibility to guarantee that the norms concerning the Mass offerings and intentions are rigorously applied. This is in fact a question of justice to the donors and of respect for the sacrament of the Eucharist which may not be associated “even remotely with the appearance of commerce or trade”. (Canon 947.)

I ask, therefore, that priests, diocesan and religious, members of Fabriques, coordinators of parish activities and secretaries observe the regulation in force and explain, if necessary, the reasons to persons who might need clarification in this respect.

Given at Longueuil, this 26th of March, 2007.

† Jacques Berthelet, C.S.V.
Bishop of Saint-Jean-Longueuil

Jean-Pierre Camerlain, priest
Chancellor