What is a Mass Stipend?

All About Mass Stipends - Reprint of a 1950 Article
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A Mass stipend is an offering which a person makes to a priest with the understanding or agreement that the priest will offer a Mass for the intention of the person who makes the offering.

It is not correct to call this offering which is made to the priest a donation. A donation is something which is given to another without any agreement or condition, without any resulting obligation on the part of the person who receives the donation. A Mass stipend is not a donation because a priest, when he accepts it, binds himself by a serious obligation to offer a Mass for the intention of the person who gives the stipend.

The giving and taking of a Mass stipend is not a purchase or exchange. In a purchase or exchange one person gives something that can be measured in terms of value and expects to receive something of equal value. In the case of a Mass stipend, there can be no question of purchase or exchange because the Mass is something spiritual and its value or worth cannot be measured or bought by material things like money.

It is easy for persons who do not understand clearly what a Mass stipend is to use expressions that are not only incorrect but somewhat embarrassing to a priest and misleading to those who are not Catholics. One of the most common expressions is, "How much does a Mass cost?" Another is, "Father how much do you charge for a Mass?" The correct words are, "How much is the stipend for a Mass?"

Now this is not just a matter of choosing the right word for the sake of formality or politeness. It is a matter of using a word that is correct.

To explain this in a practical way, let us suppose that you want to collect a just debt from someone. You take the matter to a court of law. The testimony presented to the court proves beyond a doubt that the money must be paid to you. Would you even think of asking the judge: "How much must I pay you to decide the case in my favor?" Everyone knows that for you to pay the judge would be a criminal offense.

But the judge must live, and he cannot live on air. And he does not receive a salary, which frees him from worry about his living expenses and enables him to devote his time to trying the cases which come before his court and to making decisions according to the law and evidence presented.

Therefore, if I meet a judge on the street and ask him, "Judge, what do you charge for dispensing justice?" I cannot blame him if he answers in a calm, but decidedly firm manner, "I do not charge for dispensing justice. Justice can be neither bought nor sold." But if I should say, "Judge what is your salary?" He would tell me honestly the amount which the city or county or state contributes toward his living or sustenance, so that the citizens may have the benefit of his undivided attention in interpreting the law. It is all a matter of using the correct word or expression. And from the viewpoint of the judge, that is important.

It is just as easy to get the viewpoint of the priest who accepts a Mass stipend with the understanding or agreement that he will offer a Mass for the intention of the one who gives the stipend.
If someone says to the priest, "Father, how much does a Mass cost?" or, "How much do you charge for a Mass?" The person who asks may have the best intentions in his mind, but the words carry a suggestion that the priest is putting a price on the Mass, that he is trying to sell the Mass. That is why a priest will explain on such occasions the proper way of asking such a question.

However, if you say, "Father, what is the stipend for a Mass?" It is the same as saying, "Father, I want you to offer a Mass for my intention. How much must I contribute towards your living or sustenance on that day so that you will be able to devote your time to the celebration of Mass?"

But there is an important note to be made at this point. The person who gives the stipend is not expected to support the priest for the entire day. After attending to the celebration of Mass and all that is connected with it, the priest is free to devote himself to some other work of his ministry. Therefore, the person for whose intention the priest offers the Mass is obliged to provide only in part for that day's sustenance.

A priest has no means of support except through the offerings of those to whom he renders spiritual service. In the early days of the Church, the people would bring to the priest celebrating Mass, bread and other kinds of food. The priest would take what he needed for himself and give the rest to the poor. In some country districts, this practice is still followed. In our day, the priest sometimes receives a fixed salary which also is taken from the contributions of the faithful, and since this salary is so far less than he needs for his support while performing his spiritual work for souls, he must depend also on the offerings made on the occasion of baptisms, marriages and so on, and on the Mass stipends which are offered to him by those who ask him to celebrate Mass for their intentions.

Sometimes when a priest celebrates Mass, he is not permitted to accept a stipend. For example, priests who are pastors in charge of a parish are obliged to offer Mass for the people of the parish every Sunday and on a great many other days of the year. These days are all appointed by the law of the Church, and on these days, a pastor may not accept a stipend for offering his Mass.

If a priest offers more than one Mass on any day, as many priests do on Sundays, he may accept a stipend for only one Mass. The only general exception to the this law occurs on Christmas day when a priest celebrates three Masses and is allowed to accept a stipend for offering each of the three Masses.

If it should happen that, on a certain day, a priest has not received a stipend for offering the Mass for a certain intention, then he is still free, as he is on any day, to celebrate Mass, and he may offer it for any intention he desires. But he is not allowed to offer the Mass for the intention of the next person who will come to him after the celebration of the Mass and offer a stipend. The Mass must be offered for the intention of the donor of the stipend after the stipend has been accepted.

From these observations, it can be seen that the priest is bound by many rules and the laws of the Church in regard to accepting Mass stipends.

He is bound by a special law of the Church to be careful that not even the suggestion of commercialism will appear in his conduct in accepting Mass stipends.

A priest may not take upon himself the obligation of offering so many Masses that he cannot offer them within the time set by Church law which is a year. He may accept stipends in greater number if he is free to arrange the celebration of the Masses by other priests to whom he transfers the stipends. Again, he may accept stipends for Masses if the donor of the stipend states that the Masses may be offered more than a year later. It is permitted also for a priest to arrange, with those
who desire it, for the celebration of an anniversary Mass on a certain day for the next five or ten years.

What is the amount which is to be given as a stipend when asking a priest to offer Mass for your intention? The amount of the stipend is determined by the Church, and it varies in different places. Ordinarily it is the amount determined by the bishop of the diocese, and where such an amount is determined by the bishop, a priest is not allowed to demand a stipend greater than the amount specified by the bishop. If someone offers a greater amount freely and willingly, giving what can be called a "generous stipend," the priest is free to accept it. The priest, of course, may also accept less than the amount determined by the bishop.

For many years, the regular amount of a stipend for a low Mass was one dollar. In many dioceses, the amount now determined by the bishop, which may be asked as a stipend for a low Mass is two dollars. [Editor's note: This was 1951. Today, in 2005, a stipend for a low Mass is usually $10-$15.]

It is very proper, without doubt, to emphasize the point that many priests still receive the same amount as a stipend for a Mass which they received twenty-five years ago or more. If we remember that the Mass stipend is given to provide a part of the sustenance of the priest who offers the Mass and that the cost of living has advanced just as much for a priest as it has for anyone else during the last twenty-five years, then it certainly does not seem unreasonable for a bishop to set the amount that should be offered as a Mass stipend at two dollars.

The amount of a stipend for a High Mass is still generally determined at five dollars. The reason for asking a greater stipend for a High Mass is that the priest takes upon himself the extra task or obligation of singing the Mass and seeing to it that there is an answering organist or choir. Very often part of the stipend for a High Mass helps to pay the salary of the organist.

It is also proper to ask a higher stipend for a Mass to be said at a late hour, or a Mass for which the priest must travel a great distance, or a novena of Masses, or thirty Masses to be said on thirty consecutive days, called the Gregorian Masses. Quite a number of persons will still offer a stipend of nine dollars for a novena of Masses and thirty dollars for a series of thirty Gregorian Masses. If a priest assumes the obligation of offering nine Masses in succession, or thirty Masses on thirty consecutive days, he is placing an extraordinary obligation upon himself, and very often can fulfill these obligations only with difficulty because of complications that arise. During the Novena of Masses or during a Gregorian series of thirty Masses, he must refuse all other stipends, even for more urgent intentions; he cannot accept stipends for High Masses; he cannot offer a funeral Mass or a wedding Mass or the Mass which, if he is a pastor, he must offer for the people of the parish. If he should want to offer these Masses, then he must arrange with another priest to offer the novena or Gregorian Mass, and that is not always easy. These things are mentioned to point out the reasonableness of offering a greater stipend than usual when asking a priest to offer a novena of Masses or a series of thirty Gregorian Masses.

Many times people will ask, "Is it better to have one High Mass offered or several low Masses?" The answer is: the amount of benefit gained from a Mass is something about which we can form no certain judgment. It depends upon the will of God. However, when you have a High Mass offered you will cause the divine services to be carried out with greater solemnity, which is undoubtedly an act deserving high merit, in return for which God will probably give you much greater share of the fruits of the Mass than you would receive otherwise. There are many learned theologians who hold that we probably get as much benefit from one High Mass as from five low Masses--perhaps even more.
Another question asked sometimes is: "Does the necessity of offering a stipend to have a Mass said mean that those who have the money to offer many stipends for Masses for themselves have that much greater chance of salvation and happiness than those who are poor?" We can answer this question rather easily by simply remembering that it is not the number of Masses said for us that matters but the amount of the merits or fruits of the Mass which God chooses to give us.

It is certain that in determining the amount, God will pay far more attention to the individual sacrifice than to the number of dollars. Therefore, it is possible that the rich man may be obliged to have a thousand Masses offered to obtain as much benefit as the poor man gets from one Mass. Some Catholics look on this matter in a rather selfish way; they consider only the personal benefit they might get.

It is true that the person for whose intention the priest offers the Mass derives great personal benefit—it is good and praiseworthy to keep this in mind—but there is another and a far nobler view. It is that of the glory we give to God and the benefits we procure for our fellow-men living and dead. It is God's will that holy Masses, with all their wondrous effects, be offered up continuously. In order to make this possible, the priests who celebrate these Masses must be supported. It is God's will that we all help in this matter, each in proportion to his means, the widow with her mite, the rich man with his treasures. There is no question of buying one's way into heaven. The graces we need to live a good life and die a good death are not set up for sale like remnants on a bargain counter. We cannot haggle with God over the price of salvation. Money helps us to get to heaven just like any of the other natural gifts God has given to us, if we acknowledge that it really belongs to Him and that He has merely loaned it to us, and if we gratefully and generously use it in His service.

One of the ways in which He wants us to use money is in supporting priests so that they can devote their time to the daily celebration of Holy Mass. A genuine test of faith and love of God in any family, parish, or country is the zeal displayed in having Mass said as often as possible. It is not a question of the man with the most money buying the most graces, but a beautiful example of the unity of Christ's Church, where rich and poor, priest and people, contribute, each of the gifts he has received, to further the glory of God, the welfare of the living, and the cleansing of the souls in purgatory by the perpetual celebration of the holy, adorable, and all-powerful Sacrifice of the Mass.

And having a Mass said remains the most effective means of praying for material and spiritual needs, and for the souls of loved ones called by God in death. In sickness, of oneself or of others dear to one, in the need of a job or a home or victory over some temptation, in the desire to reach beyond the grave with charity toward the dead, the good Catholic thinks at once of "having a Mass said" for his special and urgent intention.