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Revised Policy on Mass Intentions

Background

Many centuries ago, in the Western (Roman) Catholic Church, of which we are a part, there arose a pious practice of asking priests to celebrate Mass for specific intentions. In centuries gone by, this was a way for the faithful to participate in Mass when participation was limited because of the use of Latin and the practice of receiving Holy Communion only rarely. Often this intention was for a deceased loved one.

The practice of requesting Mass for a specific intention and accompanying it with a freewill monetary offering—a stipend—to assist the priest in his livelihood has been hotly contested over the centuries. In 1415, for instance, the Council of Constance, a highly controversial ecumenical council, recognized the legitimacy of the practice of requesting Masses for specific intentions. However, even then, there was concern that this practice could be viewed as simony, that is, the selling and buying of the sacraments. In 1562, the Ecumenical Council of Trent affirmed the legitimacy of offering Masses for “the sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities of the faithful who are living” as well as for those who have died and are not yet “fully purified” (*Council of Trent, Session 22, 2*).

Requirements of Canon Law

As you might imagine, the pious practice of requesting Mass intentions and accompanying them monetary stipends has been an area subject to great abuse. For this reason, the current Code of Canon Law (*CIC*) of the Roman Catholic Church, put into effect in 1983 and most recently translated anew into English in 2023, contains thirteen specific legal canons dealing with Mass intentions and their accompanying stipends. Among these canons which we are obliged to observe as Roman Catholics are the following:

- A priest is prohibited from accepting more Mass intentions with stipends than he can offer in one year (*CIC, c. 953*).

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- There is a specific requirement that a priest celebrate a Mass for an intention even if there is no accompanying stipend (*CIC*, c. 945).
- On any specific day, a priest may offer more than one Mass with an intention and stipend, but he may keep the stipend of only one intention (*CIC*, c. 951).
- Separate Masses are to be celebrated for each Mass intention and offering received (*CIC*, c.948).
- Concelebrants (priests who offer Mass along with the celebrating priest) may only accept one Mass intention with stipend per day (*CIC*, c. 951).
- Mass intentions with their accompanying stipends which are not celebrated in a year's time must be handed over for celebration outside of the parish in the way that the local bishop decrees (*CIC*, c. 956).
- Unless donors have expressly indicated otherwise, Mass intentions can be celebrated outside of the parish (*CIC*, c. 954).
- And there is the warning, "Any appearance of trafficking or trading is to be excluded entirely from the offering for Masses" (*CIC*, c. 947).

Current Realities

We are trying to live out these legal canons of the Roman Church in a time when our own parishes are shrinking, both in number and in membership. Also, the number of available priests to celebrate Masses is ebbing. This means there are less Masses available for which to request an intention. These sad realities have led, in some cases, to a lamentable lack of charity and fairness in our own parishes of St. Mary and St. Michael. Therefore, as the pastor of these parishes, I establish the following procedures.

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1. We will only accept Mass intentions which can be celebrated in one year's time. Once this quota of Masses has been filled, we will help you find another way to have your Mass intention offered, but we will be unable to accept it as a parish Mass intention. Our book of Mass intentions will open on August 1 in the year prior to the one in which we are scheduling. That is to say, Masses for January through December of 2026 can be scheduled on or after August 1, 2025.

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2. Although we will try to honor the wishes of those offering Mass intentions, the parish staff and I will ultimately determine exactly when a particular Mass will be celebrated. Insofar as it is possible, the time and location of the celebration will be published in the parish bulletin.
3. According to our Diocesan Bishop's decree, the customary gift or stipend for a Mass intention is \$10 within the territorial parishes of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. This is a freewill offering.
4. I am obliged as the pastor of St. Mary and St. Michael to offer one Sunday Mass each week as well as one holy day of obligation Mass for the intentions of all the living and deceased members of the parishes (*CIC*, c. 534). This is often referred to as a *pro populo*, "for the people," Mass.
5. We will not conjoin Mass intentions with stipends without the specific consent of the Bishop and in accordance with the procedures he has established.
6. The following Masses have specific parish intentions already connected with them and are not available for parishioner intentions: Mass of the Lord's Supper (Holy Thursday), Easter Vigil Mass (Holy Saturday), Easter Sunday Masses, Mother's Day Masses, Father's Day Masses, All Souls Day Masses, Christmas Eve Masses, and Christmas Day Masses.
7. Those who wish to schedule Mass intentions at St. Mary and St. Michael Parishes must permit these Mass intentions to be celebrated outside of the parishes if necessary, in accordance with the Bishop's directives.
8. In order to allow for greater fairness in scheduling Masses and in dealing with the abundance of Masses which often follow funerals, each registered parish household of St. Mary and St. Michael Parishes may schedule up to four Masses per year. Two of these may be weekend Masses if available, and the other two would be daily Masses.
 - a. Registered parish households are those who have a registration form on file at the parish office and who are contributing to the welfare of the parishes (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1971).
 - b. Open times for scheduling Masses are often more than two months in the future, and it is rare for dates to be available within one to two months of the time of scheduling.

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- c. Mass intentions will not be scheduled over the phone.
9. Non-parishioners are welcome to request Mass intentions, but these will be scheduled around already-existing Masses.
 10. Parishioners are welcome to request Mass intentions beyond the four-Mass limit, but these will be treated in the same way as those requested by non-parishioners.
 11. The parish staff and I will determine the specific church building in which Mass intentions will be celebrated.
 12. Requesting that a Mass be celebrated for a living or deceased person is a great act of charity. As such, and because of the Lord Jesus' admonition that we keep our deeds of charity secret (see Mt 6:1-4), the bulletin will list only those for whom the Mass is to be offered, not those requesting the Mass. I invite those who have requested a Mass to see me or any other celebrant before the Mass they have requested so that we can remember the entire family attending Mass in our prayers.
 13. After a funeral, the next-of-kin may designate one additional Mass to be offered in the near future for the deceased loved one. This "Month's Mind" Mass may replace a previously scheduled Mass in some instances. The Month's Mind Mass is not included among the four Mass intentions which parishioners may request.
 14. Any Masses which have been in the Mass book for more than one year may be sent to the retired priests of the diocese, other diocesan parishes seeking Mass intentions, religious communities, the missions, and so on, in keeping with the directives of the Diocesan Bishop.

These procedures regarding Mass intentions will become effective on Sunday, March 23, 2025, the Third Sunday of Lent.



(Very Rev.) Alan E. Thomas, VG
Pastor