

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE DIOCESE OF BETHLEHEM
ON
MASS INTENTIONS AND STIPENDS
(Holy Thursday, 1993)

Dear Catholic Brothers and Sisters in the Diocese of Bethlehem,

During a recent meeting with our priests I was asked to write to you, explaining the meaning of Mass Stipends. The occasion for this request was a review of the amount presently asked for as an offering for Holy Mass.

1. What is the origin of Mass Stipends?

When speaking about the meaning of Mass Stipends, we better look at their origin. As you know, it was the Lord Himself who gave us the Holy Eucharist. We hear it each time at the Consecration of bread and wine during Holy Mass:

‘On the night He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread and gave to His Father thanks and praise.
He broke the bread, gave it to His disciples, and said: Take this, all of you, and eat it. This is my body which will be given up for you’.

After inviting them to also drink from the cup filled with His blood, He said to His disciples: “Do this in memory of me”.

Ever since Holy Mass, as a memorial of Christ’s suffering and death, has been celebrated by generation after generation of Christians. Before our Lord Jesus celebrated the First Holy Mass – the Last Supper – with His apostles, He sent two of them ahead of him to prepare the room where He was going to eat this sacred meal with them. (Lk 1: 8-13). They had to get all that was needed, set the table and light the candles. This is also true of each Holy Mass: Altar bread, wine and candles have to be bought, the altar cloth and the linen used during Holy Mass must be kept clean. Also the priest who offers up Holy Mass has to be assured of a decent living standard.

From earliest times therefore, whenever Christians assembled for celebrating the Eucharist, there was a collection of gifts, which each participant brought along for the purpose. Part of the collected gifts, some bread and wine, was used for the Holy Sacrifice. The remainder was given to the poor and used for the priest’s upkeep. Later on, with a growing money-economy, people gave money rather than gifts in kind during the offertory procession. This is still the case today, although recently in some of the congregations Christians have been encouraged by their priests to bring groceries and other useful articles to the altar, besides their contribution to the money collection. I am very happy about this development, as these gifts in kind often represent a real sacrifice made on the part of their donors, given joyfully for the poor and the needy.

So far we have only seen the origin of our offertory procession, with its collection of money and gifts in kind. Where then do Mass Stipends come from? Let us first be very clear about the meaning of this word ‘Mass Stipend’. It means a fixed amount of money which persons pay to the priest when asking him to celebrate Holy Mass for a

special intention of theirs; for instance for the repose of the soul of a late relative or friend, or for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary or another saint on their behalf. Often people also want the priest to offer up Holy Mass for them in thanksgiving, like when they received a special grace from God, or simply wish to thank Him for His continued blessing.

When this Holy Mass is celebrated by the priest for a person's specific intention, this does not mean that he has 'bought' this Mass to the exclusion of anybody else who is present at this Holy Mass. You just have to listen carefully and you will hear that the priest prays in each Holy Mass for the whole Church, for all her living members and for all who have departed from this life. You cannot buy a Holy Mass and use it just for your own purpose, as you can buy a loaf of bread and eat it without sharing it with others. But this does not say that it is meaningless to ask the priest to offer up Holy Mass for your own special intention. Our Lord has encouraged us to 'ask, to seek, and to knock,' at the same time promising us that we shall receive, that we shall find, and that the door will be opened to us (Mk 6,7f). He has also promised: 'If you ask for anything in my name, I will do it' (Jn 14,14).

In each Holy Mass our Lord Jesus makes His suffering and death present, pleading for us to His Father and Our Father, with hands outstretched on the Cross. It is, therefore, a great reassurance for a person to know that the Holy Eucharist is offered up in his/her particular intention. Naturally, also the priest who offers up Holy Mass in your intention will plead on your behalf with God our Father; and the same is true of your fellow Christians who are attending the Mass which is celebrated for your special intention: their prayer too is joined with yours and the priest's on your behalf, for your special intention.

2. Church rules regarding Mass Stipends

In the course of the Church's long history of nearly 2000 years, the use of Mass Stipends as part of the priests' income has become a firmly established custom in the Church. This is reflected in Canon 946 of the Church's Law Book, the Code of Canon Law, where it says:

'The faithful who make an offering so that Mass can be celebrated for their intention, contribute to the good of the Church, and by that offering they share in the Church's concern for the support of its ministers and its activities'.

However, knowing from long experience about the dangerous attraction money has on people, the next canon in the Book of Canon Law (947) adds immediately: 'Even the semblance of trafficking or trading is to be entirely excluded from Mass offerings'.

What does this mean? It means that no priest is allowed to keep more than one Mass Stipend per day for himself. As a rule, during the week a priest does not celebrate more than one Mass per day. If he celebrates a second or third Holy Mass on the same day, as is often the case on Sundays, he must send the money received as Stipends for such additional Masses to the bishop who assigns its use for the common good of the Church in his diocese.

The fact is that, by and large, Catholics in our diocese do not often ask priests to celebrate the Holy Eucharist for their special intention. Does this mean our priests very seldom receive a Mass Stipend? Fortunately this is not the case, due to the fact that Catholics in other parts of the world so often ask their priests to say holy Mass for a special intention that these often cannot cope. Their bishops, therefore, send the money received as Stipends for Masses, which cannot be celebrated locally to dioceses in the Young Churches, like ours, where as yet not many Mass Stipends are offered by the people. This should be an indication for us how much Catholics in other countries appreciate the tremendous value of the Eucharist. It is my hope that in times to come also we Catholics in this diocese offer Holy Mass more often for a specific intention. This will increase our trust in the power of the Holy Sacrament of the Altar; decrease our fear of evil powers and witchcraft, and at the same time help to ensure the upkeep of our priests who serve God and His people at the Altar.

For a very long time in this diocese the offering asked for as a Mass Stipend has been three Rand. In January the South African Bishops decided together that the Mass Stipend should be increased uniformly throughout South Africa to R10. This takes account of the loss in value our currency has suffered in recent years. R10 today buys as much as R3 was buying in the early 1980's.

I realise that for many of you R10 may still seem a very large amount to be offered as a Mass Stipend. However, you must also admit that most people do not think twice to spend much more than R10 for a party and other festive occasions. Let us be honest: We cannot really 'put a price' on Holy Mass. It is beyond any comparison in value and meaning for our life as Christians.

No priests shall refuse to celebrate Holy Mass for you for your special intention if you ask him to do so for a smaller offering than R10. However, keeping in mind the origin and purpose of Mass Stipends, as I explained in the foregoing, you should make an effort to offer the full amount. One-way to help each other is the following: Several of you can club together, as individuals or families, and raise R10. Then you tell the priest your intention or intentions, which he will announce, at the beginning of Holy Mass.

Let me conclude by telling you something which I believe many of you will hear for the first time: Each priest in charge of a parish is held by Church Law to celebrate one Holy Mass per week for all the people in his parish without accepting a Stipend for that Mass. The same is true of your Bishop. He too is bound to offer up Holy Mass once per week – usually on Sunday – for all the believers in his diocese.

3. Conclusion

I hope that this explanation will have helped you to understand better the origin and significance of the collection during Mass and of Mass Stipends. May it result in a greater grasp of the immense value Holy Mass has for our Christian lives, and bring us nearer to becoming a truly self-supporting Church.

Yours fraternally in the Lord,
+ HUBERT BUCHER
Bishop of Bethlehem.