

On Collective Mass Intentions

In cases where those who make offerings for Masses "have been previously explicitly informed and have freely consented to combining their offerings in a single offering, their intentions can be satisfied with a single Mass celebrated according to a 'collective' intention," states a decree of the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy made public March 22. But the decree distinguishes such situations from a practice by which priests, "indiscriminately gathering the offerings of the faithful which are destined for the celebration of Masses according to particular intentions, accumulate them in a single offering and satisfy them with a single Mass celebrated according to what is called a 'collective' intention." Arguments in favor of this practice are specious and pretentious, the decree says. A concern about Mass intentions is due to the fact that "even the slightest appearance of profit or simony would cause scandal," says the congregation. Noting the dependence of ministers in some places on Mass offerings, the decree warns that if people develop a sense that justice is not being done the practice might eventually be extinguished. A translation by L'Osservatore Romano of the Latin-language decree follows.

It is the church's constant practice, as Paul VI wrote in the *motu proprio Firma in Traditione*, that "the faithful, desiring in a religious and ecclesial spirit to participate more intimately in the eucharistic sacrifice, add to it a form of sacrifice of their own by which they contribute in a particular way to the needs of the church and especially to the sustenance of her ministers" (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* vol. 66 (1974), p. 308).

Formerly this contribution consisted predominantly in gifts in kind; in our day it has become almost exclusively monetary. However, the motive and purpose of the faithful's offerings have remained the same and have also been sanctioned by the new Code of Canon Law (cf. Canons 945.1 and 946).

Because the matter directly affects the most blessed sacrament, even the slightest appearance of profit or simony would cause scandal. Therefore, the Holy See has always followed the evolution of this pious tradition with attention, with opportune interventions to provide for adaptations to the changing social and cultural situations in order to prevent or correct any eventual abuses connected with these adaptations wherever they might occur (cf. Canons

947 and 1385).

In recent times many bishops have appealed to the Holy See for clarification about the celebration of Masses for what are called *collective intentions*, according to a rather recent practice.

It is true that the faithful have always, especially in economically depressed regions, had the practice of giving the priest modest offerings without requesting expressly to have a single Mass celebrated for a particular intention. In such cases it is licit to combine the various offerings in order to celebrate as many Masses as would correspond to the fixed diocesan stipend.

The faithful are also free to combine their intentions and offerings for the celebration of a single Mass for these intentions.

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Quite different, however, is the case of those priests who, indiscriminately gathering the offerings of the faithful which are destined for the celebration of Masses according to particular intentions, *accumulate them in a single offering and satisfy them with a single Mass* celebrated according to what is called a *collective intention*.

The arguments in favor of this new practice are specious and pretentious if not reflecting an erroneous ecclesiology. In any case this use can run the serious risk of not satisfying an obligation of justice toward the donors of the offerings and progressively spread and extinguish in the entire Christian people the awareness and understanding of the motives and purpose of making an offering for the celebration of the

holy sacrifice for particular intentions, therefore depriving the sacred ministers who still live from these offerings of a necessary means of support and depriving many particular churches of the resources for their apostolic activity.

Therefore, to execute a mandate received by the supreme pontiff, the Congregation for the Clergy, which has the jurisdiction for the discipline of this delicate subject, has carried out an extensive consultation on the matter, including the opinions of the conferences of bishops. After careful examination of the responses and the various aspects of the complex problem in collaboration with other interested curial departments, this congregation has established as follows:

Article 1

1. According to Canon 948, "separate Masses are to be applied for the intentions for which an individual offering, even if small, has been made and accepted." Therefore the priest who accepts the offering for a Mass for a particular intention is bound *ex iustitia* to satisfy personally the obligation assumed (cf. Canon 949) or to commit its fulfillment to another priest, according to the conditions established by law (cf. Canons 954-955).

2. Priests who transgress this norm assume the relative moral responsibility if they *indistinctly collect offerings for the celebration of Masses for particular intentions and, combining them in a single offering and, without the knowledge of those who have made the offering, satisfy them with a single Mass celebrated according to an intention which they call "collective."*

Article 2

1. In cases in which the people making the offering *have been previously explicitly informed and have freely consented to combining their offerings in a single offering, their intentions can be satisfied with a single Mass celebrated according to a "collective" intention.*

2. In this case it is necessary that *the place and time for the celebration of this Mass, which is not to be more than twice a week, be made public.*

3. The bishops in whose dioceses these cases occur are to keep in mind that this practice is an exception to the canonical law in effect; wherever the practice spreads excessively, also on the basis of erroneous ideas of the meaning of offerings for Masses, it must be considered an abuse which could progressively lead to the faithful's

discontinuation of the practice of giving offerings for the celebration of Masses for individual intentions, thus causing the loss of a most ancient practice which is salutary for individual souls and the whole church.

Article 3

1. In cases described in Article 2.1, it is licit for the celebrant to keep the amount of the offering established by the diocese (cf. Canon 950).

2. Any amount exceeding this offering shall be consigned to the ordinary as specified in Canon 951.1, who will provide for its destination according to the ends established by law (cf. Canon 946).

Article 4

Especially in shrines or places of pilgrimage which usually receive many offerings for the celebration of Masses the rector, bound in conscience, must attentively see to it that the norms of the universal law on the subject (cf. principally Canons 954-956) and those of this decree are accurately applied.

Article 5

1. Priests who receive a great

number of offerings for particular intentions for Masses, e.g., on the feast of the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls) or on other special occasions, being unable to satisfy them personally within a year's time (cf. Canon 953), rather than refusing them and thus frustrating the devout intention of those making the offering and keeping them from realizing their good purpose, should forward them to other priests (cf. Canon 955) or to their own ordinary (cf. Canon 956).

2. If in these or similar circumstances that which is described in Article 2.1 of this decree takes place, the priests must be attentive to the dispositions of Article 3.

Article 6

To diocesan bishops in particular falls the duty of promptly and clearly making known these norms, which are valid for secular and religious clergy, and seeing to their observance.

Article 7

It is also necessary that the faithful should be instructed in this mat-

ter through a specific catechesis, whose main points are as follows: the deep theological meaning of the offering given to the priest for the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, the goal of which is especially to prevent the danger of scandal through the appearance of buying and selling the sacred; the ascetical importance of almsgiving in Christian life, which Jesus himself taught, of which the offering for the celebration of Masses is an outstanding form; the sharing of goods, through which by their offering for Mass intentions the faithful contribute to the support of the sacred ministers and the fulfillment of the church's apostolic activity.

On Jan. 22, 1991, the supreme pontiff approved the norms of the present decree in their specific form and ordered that they be immediately promulgated and take effect.

From the Vatican, Feb. 22, 1991.

Cardinal Antonio Innocenti
Prefect

Archbishop Gilberto Agustoni
Secretary

Clergy Congregation Secretary

Commentary on Collective Mass Intentions Decree

The following commentary on the Vatican's decree on Mass intentions was written by Archbishop Gilberto Agustoni, secretary of the Congregation for the Clergy. The commentary explains the kind of collective Mass offering the decree criticizes and the reasons for concern, discusses the continued dependence of "the greater part of the world's priests" on Mass offerings and points to the decree's call for a catechesis on the meaning and purpose of Mass offerings. The commentary was made public March 22, along with the decree. A translation by L'Osservatore Romano follows.

The decree published above is the result of consultation with all the bishops' conferences, whose responses were elaborated by an interdepartmental committee of the Roman Curia. The supreme pontiff then approved in its specific form this decree, which goes into effect according to the norm of Canon 8.1 of the Code of Canon Law.

It responds to the repeated requests of many bishops who have asked the Holy See for clarification and directives in regard to the celebration of Masses which are commonly referred to as *multi-intentional* or *collective*.

The decree is divided into two parts: The first part, the introduction, expresses the reasons; the second part contains the dispositions.

First of all, it states the substan-

tial identity of the motives and goals for which the faithful, following an uninterrupted tradition to be honored for its antiquity and meaning, ask the priest to celebrate a Mass for a particular intention, offering them a recompense — which in our day is almost exclusively monetary. In law this recompense is referred to as a *stipend*, but is also commonly called an *offering*. The introduction also contains the salient point on which the practice which is the object of the document deviates from the norm that is in effect.

In fact, canon law stipulates that every priest who accepts the obligation to celebrate a Mass for the donor's intention must do so, under an obligation of justice, in person or by entrusting its fulfillment to another priest, regardless of the amount of the offering.

The anomalous practice consists in accepting or amassing indiscriminately the offerings for the celebration of Masses according to the intention of the donor, accumulating the offerings and intentions, and pretending to satisfy the obligation deriving from them through the celebration of a single Mass for an intention which is really *plurima* or "collective." Nor is it valid to claim that in these cases the intentions of those making the offering are specified during the celebration, because it cannot be seen in what way this procedure satisfies the obligation expressed in Canon 948 of the Code of Canon Law to say as

many Masses as there are intentions.

In order to illustrate more clearly the special nature of this anomaly, the decree makes reference to two cases which are apparently similar to a plurintentional Mass, but which in reality are very different and therefore are morally licit.

In one case it is a question of a practice which dates to time immemorial in certain poor regions where the faithful give the priest modest offerings, sometimes still gifts in kind, not to request the celebration of Masses for their individual, particular intentions, but rather to contribute in general to the church's public worship and the support of the priest himself, knowing quite well that he will then celebrate Mass for their intentions and needs as canon law does in fact prescribe for bishops and priests with the Masses *pro populo* and which is also suggested by sensitivity and priestly charity.

The other case involves the faithful who spontaneously get together and agree to have one or more Masses celebrated for their common or various intentions, which in reality flow together voluntarily into a single intention, and offer the relative amount. No one can fail to see the radical difference between these practices and the "multi-intentional" Mass spoken of above.

The introduction also mentions the arguments given by those who support this new, illicit practice: It calls

these arguments "specious and pretentious if not reflecting an erroneous ecclesiology." In fact, they often say that the eucharistic celebration is an action of the church and is therefore eminently communitarian, and that it would also be alien to the very nature of the Mass to "privatize it," affixing particular intentions, or to seek to channel its benefits for private purposes.

These arguments reveal the doctrinal confusion of a certain ecclesiology about the infinite merits of the one sacrifice of the cross, the celebration of the sacrament of that one sacrifice which Christ entrusted to the church and about the *thesaurus ecclesiae* which the church has at her disposal. Nor can we forget that Catholic doctrine has constantly taught that the fruits of the eucharistic sacrifice can be attributed to various purposes: first of all to those whom the church herself names in the "intercessions" of the eucharistic prayer, then to the celebrating minister (the so-called ministerial fruit), then to those making the offering, etc.

The priests who do not accept the commitment to celebrate Mass for particular intentions are not aware that they are precluding people from an excellent way of participating actively in the celebration of the memorial of the Lord, which Pope Paul VI himself recalled in the *motu proprio Firma in Traditione*, precisely through an offering given to the priest. This is one of the spiritual harms to be avoided which the decree also speaks of (cf. Art. 2.3).

There are also some people who theorize about the new and more adequate systems of clergy support which are in fact sanctioned by the new legislation. According to these people, priests no longer need Mass intentions to satisfy their own material needs. Some of them even hold that the old system offends the dignity of the ministers of the altar.

This is one of the many illusions or utopian ideas that lack reference to reality. In fact, it has been demonstrated that the greater part of the world's priests, in contemporary society too, still draw their own support from Mass offerings. Many other apostolic activities of the church as well — from missions to parishes — are partially or totally

supported from the income of the Mass "stipends" or "offerings." Only those who want to take offense therefore or those who are afflicted with a strange type of puritanism can hold that the ancient traditional custom of using Mass offerings to support the clergy or the church's works is anachronistic or improper.

The decree uses strong words and a severe tone in calling the attention of pastors to the incalculable damage which the practice of the "multi-dimensional" or "collective" Masses can cause in the Christian people under various aspects. The multiplication of such celebrations or a lack of attention to check them or stop their spread could cause the faithful to turn against the custom of requesting the celebration of a Mass for a particular intention, which is also always a witness of a living faith. Rather it would do harm to a spiritually salutary Christian custom of great value: prayer for the deceased. To a large degree, Mass intentions or pious Mass associations — as is well known — are destined in suffrage for the faithful departed. Similarly there is the progressive growth of the Christian peoples' awareness that they participate in the church's life through their Mass offerings, which are destined for the support of the clergy and the church's various activities of worship and charity.

The concern caused by this imprudent practice and even more the danger that it could spread are repeatedly expressed in the decree, particularly in the dispositions. In it, in fact, some clauses or conditions of licitness are established for exceptional recourse to this improper method of celebration (Art. 2). First of all, it requires the *explicit consent* of the person making the offering; currently, however, it is almost universally considered *presumed* or *implicit*, which is morally illicit. It is also necessary to *clearly, publicly* indicate the place, day and hour in which these celebrations take place. And, since *in any case* it involves a practice which is *an exception to the norms in effect*, the supreme legislator has ruled that these celebrations *cannot take place more than twice a week in a given place of worship* (Art. 2.3), in order to contain

this practice as much as possible — even with conditions made to avoid abuses — and to prevent its spread.

The prompt and punctual execution of the decree is entrusted to pastors by the very nature of the dispositions. The seriousness of the commitment is due to the potential damage that this new manner — which must remain an exception — could bring about, particularly on the pastoral level. And since shrines furnish favorable conditions for ignoring the prescriptions of the present decree, a special warning is addressed to the rectors of shrines and sanctuaries making them aware of their responsibility, bound in conscience, for their observance.

It is also necessary to devote due attention to the pastoral content of the decree in that part (Art. 7) which invites us to use the occasion of the promulgation of these norms to promote an appropriate catechesis with the intention of countering some preconceived ideas in this area which, because of ignorance or inaccuracy, recur in a certain pseudoreligious culture.

The last article indicates some of the points for such a catechesis: repropose and explain the true meaning of the offering which the faithful make to the priest for the celebration of Masses for a particular intention; the value of almsgiving in Christian life, because of its great ability to make satisfaction; and last, the effective participation of the faithful in the church's mission through a way of "sharing" represented by the offerings for the celebration of Masses which are distributed throughout the world.

For a proper reflection on this entire delicate topic it is good to recall also the directives given by the Second Vatican Council in the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*: "Priests, just like bishops, are to use moneys acquired by them on the occasion of their exercise of some ecclesiastical office primarily for their own decent support and the fulfillment of the duties of their state. They should be willing to devote whatever is left over to the good of the church or to works of charity" (No. 17). Mass stipends fall into this category. ■