



The Supreme Gift of the Mass: Having a Mass said for the Living and Deceased

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the greatest prayer of the Church. Saint John Vianney said “All the good works in the world are not equal to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass because they are the works of men, but the Mass is the work of God. Martyrdom is nothing in comparison for it is but the sacrifice of man to God, but the Mass is the sacrifice of God for man.” The Church considers the Mass the greatest possible prayer of intercession because it is the perfect offering of Christ to the Father by making present the Paschal Mystery of his Death and Resurrection. It is a longstanding tradition in the Church that a Priest may be requested to offer a Mass for a specific intention, even when one cannot be physically present at the Mass.

As we prepare to open the 2021 Mass Book, I want to share a few thoughts about the practice of having a Mass said for a deceased or living person. We often refer to this as having a Mass said for someone. Most often we ask that a Mass be said for someone who has died, because they rely on us, the living, to pray for them. Masses can also be offered in Thanksgiving for something or someone or for a living person as a spiritual gift on their birthday, anniversary, or when they are sick, as a few examples. Some of what follows comes from a column written by Fr. William Saunders in the *Arlington Catholic Herald*.

“The tradition of offering Masses for others, particularly the dead, originates in the very early Church. Inscriptions discovered on tombs in Roman catacombs of the second century evidence this practice... St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), in one of his many catechetical discourses, explained how at Mass both the living and dead are remembered, and how the Eucharistic Sacrifice of our Lord is of benefit to sinners, living and dead. St. Ambrose (d. 397) preached, “We have loved them during life; let us not abandon them in death, until we have conducted them by our prayers into the house of the Lord.”

Fr. Saunders also quoted Pope St. Gregory (d. 604) who said, “Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.” Fr. Saunders concluded his reflection with these words: “We find not only the origins of this practice dating to the early Church but we also clearly recognize its importance. When we face the death of someone, even a person who is not Catholic, to have a Mass offered for the repose of [their] soul and to offer our prayers are more beneficial and comforting than any other sympathy card or bouquet of flowers. To have a Mass offered on the occasion of a birthday, anniversary or special need is appropriate, beneficial, and appreciated.”

When you come and ask for a Mass to be offered, you are not ‘buying a Mass’ though some refer to it that way. Church law in canon 946 states: “The Christian faithful who make an offering so that the Mass may be applied for their intention contribute to the good of the Church and by their offering take part in the concern of the Church for the support of its ministers and works.” The suggested but not obligatory offering for Masses is \$10. The faithful are free to offer more if they desire, and priests are encouraged to celebrate Mass for the intentions of their faithful even if they are unable to make the usual offering. By making this offering, the faithful associate themselves more intimately with Christ who offers Himself in the Sacred Host, and obtain thereby more abundant fruits.