

## BACKGROUND ON MASS OFFERINGS

(Diocese of Pittsburgh, Office for Worship – July, 1992)

In accepting a Mass offering the priest is committed to celebrating a Mass – but the meaning and purpose of that Mass is determined by the nature of the Mass itself. In the words of the Roman Canon, it is an offering “for all who hold and teach the catholic faith..., for ourselves and those who are dear to us, for all who sleep in Christ.” In remembering the intention of the donor at Mass, the priest does so *privately* and as an individual within the assembly (though one with a unique role). His remembrance (the donor’s intention) does not become the “public intention” of the Mass. Among the gathered faithful there will be many “Mass intentions.” They are all part of the responsibility of that assembly, along with its priest, to celebrate the Eucharist for all God’s people. Theologically, we can never say simply “this Mass is offered for Mary Jones”; each and every mass is offered for all the living and all the dead.

Related to this ritual offering is the daily self-giving to which Christians are likewise called by their baptism. The love of Christ is made visible in tangible care for the poor and in concern for the welfare of the church community. Early in our liturgical tradition, this commitment to practical self-sacrifice found expression in the Mass itself: the faithful brought gifts for the church’s life and its many charitable works. These gifts of food, clothing, and money were presented before the altar for later distribution by community leaders. Often a portion of bread and wine was set aside for the celebration of the Mass itself.

Liturgical practices have varied through the ages, but the authentic tradition of “offerings at Mass” has always connected any tangible “gift” with the *self*-donation that is at the heart of the Eucharist. How foreign to this vision is the notion that a “Mass offering” is payment to have someone else “say a prayer” or even “offer the sacrifice of the Mass” in place of the donor. Rather, as Pope Paul VI said, donors of Mass offerings, “join to the eucharistic sacrifice a kind of sacrifice of their own as a way of taking part more intensely.” Mass offerings do not “buy a Mass”; they further the work of the church by helping the community to support its priests. This is an economic consideration, but it is a tangible way that the sacrificial gift of the Mass-offering assists the ministry of the church.

All the “intentions” of the gathered community are woven into the Mass; none has precedence over any other. This wonderful vision is lost when we suggest that the private intention of a donor (through the priest) is the primary object of the grace of that Mass. Those who make donations for the celebration of Mass enable the Church to sustain its ministry of offering the Eucharist on behalf of the whole world. Their tangible offering is united with the “holy and living sacrifice” of all the church in union with Christ.