

PRAYING FOR THE DEAD/MASS INTENTIONS

When I was working full-time as an oncology and hospice nurse, I'd go to funerals pretty regularly. It wasn't a required part of the job, but you grow pretty close to patients and their families when you provide that kind of care. After accompanying them on the final, often tumultuous stages of living and dying, it only seemed fitting to be a part of the final leave-taking whenever possible.

Yet, my presence as a healthcare provider could be a troubling reminder of what might've been a painful, agonizing process, so I always liked to keep a very low profile. Usually I'd arrive just as the service commenced, sign the book of remembrance in the vestibule, and sit in the back of the church. I'd sing and pray and cry with everyone else gathered, but then scoot out at the very end, but not before slipping a Mass card in the appropriate receptacle, regardless of the deceased's church affiliation.

I recall one day finding out that a patient I'd cared for quite a bit had passed away, but her funeral conflicted with an already scheduled commitment. I brought a Mass card with me to work the next day, and I asked my supervisor to mail it to the family for me.

"But she wasn't Catholic," my boss said. "Why a Mass card?"

Why indeed.

Certainly it's somewhat risky to give Mass cards to non-Catholics – sometimes even to Catholics these days. The risk is inherent in the pre-printed wording: "For the repose of the soul of...." It implies that the dearly departed *may not be at rest quite yet*, and could possibly benefit from the spiritual benefaction of the card-giver. For Catholics, that implication is built right into our funeral liturgy. "Adult funerals are very much intercessory prayers for the deceased," writes Fr. Edward McNamara. "It is this power of intercession by the Church's prayer, rather than a presumption of instant canonization, that should bring consolation to those left behind."

For most of our Protestant brethren, however, praying for the dead is eschewed, and a Mass card can represent a challenge to their convictions that deceased loved ones are already enjoying eternal beatitude. Even so, I still distribute Mass cards liberally, to Catholics and non-Catholics alike – and not just at funerals. If someone is seriously ill or injured? A Mass card is in the mail. Special occasions or milestones? More Mass cards.

The reason is clear: What better gesture of love and support can I give someone than to connect him to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? If we believe the Mass is what we say it is, then it matters little if the recipient of that connection is Catholic or not, for he will benefit from the limitless graces of the Eucharistic celebration regardless. In terms of expressing sympathy, a non-sectarian card would suffice as a gesture of condolence. Yet, by making a formal request that a Mass be offered for the deceased, the condolence is combined with a real spiritual benefit. And if the surviving family is correct in their convictions that the deceased is already in heaven? Then the intended graces will be applied elsewhere according to the whims of the Spirit. Nothing is wasted in the economy of salvation!

But is it OK to have Masses said for non-Catholics? Absolutely! "It is not only permissible, it is *laudable* to pray for the dead, Catholic, non-Catholic, Christian, non-Christian," writes Fr. John Zuhlsdorf. "People don't have to be Catholic for us to pray for them.... early and often." And we don't have to take Fr. Zuhlsdorf's word for it: "A priest is free to apply the Mass for anyone," reads the Code of Canon Law, "living or dead."

As an added benefit, there's the stipend or offering that normally attends Mass intention requests. To be clear: a Mass stipend is most definitely *not* the "purchase price" of a Mass and its accompanying graces – how can we put a price on something that is priceless, right? Instead, think of the stipend as a thank-you to the priest who will say the Mass, and an opportunity to share in his ministry at the altar. In the old days, Mass stipends were an important way for clergy to keep body and soul together,

and even today they can make a huge difference for missionary and foreign priests around the world. “Unfortunately, recent years have seen an increasing dearth of requests for the celebration of Masses in Western society,” notes McNamara, “and even the Holy See has felt the pinch” – all the more reason to send Mass cards, I say!

Of course, the merits of any given Mass are infinite, because every Mass re-presents in the here and now the salvific actions of Christ in his passion, death and resurrection. Consequently, every Mass benefits *all* the Church and the whole world, and any number of individual intentions – of the priest-celebrant himself as well as everyone in attendance – can be associated with it. Nevertheless, by request, specific intentions are connected to specific Masses for particular spiritual needs – even by those who will not be present in the congregation. It’s hard to wrap your mind around this idea, isn’t it? Siphoning off and re-directing a measure of grace from an infinite supply – almost like holding up a small tube to a searchlight in order to aim part of the shine at a precise target. It’s a mystery, to be sure, but one that is a laudable part of our tradition, and a huge gift to the recipients, whether living or dead, and church membership simply doesn’t matter.

If you’re still worried about giving offense, then by all means skip the Mass card and just request the Mass intention – it’ll still take! But, really, the risk of offense is small, and people have a tendency to put the best spin on gestures of compassion, especially following a loved one’s death. I remember when my grandmother died, and the extended family gathered at a restaurant to decompress following the funeral. Nana, as we called her, had been steeped in Masonic anti-Catholicism, and was a staunch Presbyterian right up until her death. As the family talked and ate, my aunt went through the pile of sympathy cards one by one, and she commented that there were several Mass cards in the pile. I’ll never forget her observation about the propriety of those Catholic expressions of condolence. “Well, that’s OK, they’re Catholics” she noted. “That’s just what they do.”

Exactly. “Grace is everywhere,” Georges Bernanos assures us, and Mass cards just spread it around all the more.

By Rick Becker 06/19/15 on www.ncregister.com