e-ISSN: 2656-7997
p-ISSN: 2775-3425

JOURNAL of ASIAN ORIENTATION in THEOLOGY
Vol. 08, No. 01, February 2026 : 33 - 50

No Price for Grace:

Canonical Reflections on Mass Offerings and the Poor

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Submitted: 29-09-2025 | Accepted : 28-01-2026

Abstracts:

In the evolving context of how the Church administers the sacraments, a profound question arises again regarding the practice of Mass offerings, especially in light of the decree issued by the Dicastery for the Clergy in April 2025. This paper will focus on cc. 848 and 945 §2, which emphasize justice and generosity in accepting Mass intentions, especially from the poor. How are we to respond pastorally to those who truly cannot make an offering? This question touches the core of the priestly vocation today: to embody a Church that stands with the marginalized, while reaffirming the identity of the priest as a servant of mercy, not merely a manager of rites. In the modern pastoral context, where poverty may change in form but never truly disappears, this issue presents both an urgent challenge and an invitation to remain faithful in serving Christ present in the poor.

Keywords:

Offering, Mass, The Poor, Spiritual goods.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24071/jaot.v8i1.13547
Web: http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/JAOT | E: jaot@usd.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

A Mass intention is a specific prayerful request in which a person asks the priest to apply the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and to unite more intimately and particularly with that sacrifice, through an offering or a personal act of self-giving. In the celebration of the Mass, the sacrifice of Christ, accomplished once for all on the Cross for the salvation of humanity, is made present in a real and sacramental manner. The prayers offered by the faithful are joined to this sacrifice, so that believers trust their petitions are received more perfectly by God through the mediation of Christ and the Church.

Each time a Mass is celebrated, it brings forth three distinct graces: the universal grace for the entire Church; the particular or ministerial grace for the priest in his role as minister; and the personal grace received by each participant, according to their individual spiritual disposition. Through this framework, a Mass intention becomes a concrete expression of the faithful's union with Christ's sacrifice, while simultaneously fostering communion within the Body of Christ.

So, in addition to the general and universal intention, the faithful may add a particular intention entrusted to the priest. This intention can concern various events in life, whether joyful or sorrowful: for example, as an expression of thanksgiving, for the sick, for those undergoing trials, for the conversion of sinners, for spiritual benefit, or to commemorate an important event. The Mass may also be offered to assist the souls of the deceased in their journey of purification before God. Praying for the dead or for souls in purgatory constitutes a profound act of mercy.

The practice of requesting intentions, whether for the living or the deceased, also underscores the communion of the faithful with the Communion of Saints. Prayers offered at Mass are beneficial not only for

those still living but also for souls undergoing purification (cf. CCC, 958; 2 Macc 12:45). Accordingly, each celebration of the Eucharist becomes an expression of love and concern among members of the Body of Christ, both those in the world and those who have reached heaven.

The Mass offerings offered alongside an intention should be understood as a voluntary offering or alms, not as a price for the sacrament. It represents one way in which the faithful participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice. The Church consistently emphasizes pastoral justice in matters concerning Mass offerings. The spiritual right of the faithful to request a Mass for a particular purpose must not be hindered by material limitations. In the decree issued by the Dicastery for the Clergy in April 2025, the importance of transparency and fairness in the administration of Mass stipends was reaffirmed. The decree also clearly states that, if possible, one Mass should be applied to a single intention. If this is not feasible, that is, when a Mass for multiple intentions is celebrated, the minister of the Eucharist must obtain the consent of the faithful requesting those intentions before the Mass is offered.

This study aims to assist readers in entering the historical and juridical discussion regarding the regulation of Mass intentions and stipends. The topic may be sensitive, considering past controversies, particularly the protests of Martin Luther at the Church of Wittenberg, Germany, on 31 October 1517, who objected to the simoniacal practices associated with indulgences. This study seeks to provide clarity on the proper understanding of offering intentions at Mass, with particular attention to the pastoral care that should be extended to the poor when they request the offerings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a library-based research methodology, utilizing a historical, juridical, and pastoral approach. The primary sources include Church documents concerning the regulation of Mass intentions, particularly current documents issued after *Mos Iugiter* (1991) and the most recent decree regarding the regulation of Mass stipends (*Secundum probatum*, 2025), as well as the universal law of the Catholic Church (CIC). The study consciously limits itself from addressing the theological dimension of the subject matter, instead emphasizing that the ultimate aim of this work is to highlight the practical pastoral dimension, particularly in the ministry of Mass intentions for the poor who request them.

Research and Findings

The offering of the Mass according to Canon Law

The offering (in Latin, *stipendium*) is generally understood to be the alms given for the celebration of the Holy Mass. This practice is a venerable and praiseworthy tradition, long accepted and upheld by ecclesiastical authorities. Nevertheless, over the centuries it has not been immune to certain abuses. In current canonical usage, the term "stipend" is considered less appropriate; instead, the term "offering" is preferred and more in keeping with the language of the present Code of Canon Law[1]. One reason, though somewhat speculative, is as follows: the term *stipendium* in the 1917 Code of Canon Law may be understood as

[1] Cf. J. Burke, A Dictionary of Canon Law, p. 312.

"*denaro*" (money) given to "pay" for the Mass. If interpreted this way, it could be misunderstood as an act of simony (cf. c. 1380)[2].

To apply the Mass means to intentionally offer the spiritual fruits of the Eucharistic celebration for a particular person or intention. According to the Tradition of the Church, this is carried out through the intention of the priest who celebrates the Mass. The application of the spiritual fruit of the Mass is intrinsically linked to the celebrant's act of offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice, by virtue of his sacerdotal ordination. Consequently, such an application depends solely on the celebrant and cannot be prevented or substituted by the Church, should he omit it.

C. 946 clearly states the purpose for which the Tradition of offering gifts for the celebration of Mass has been preserved in the Church. The act of giving an offering to a priest, so that one or more Masses may be applied for a particular intention, is understood as a form of participation in supporting the good of the Church, especially in sustaining her ministers and their works. In this sense, the offering given at Mass is not regarded solely as the only basis for the sustenance of the clergy, although in practice it often becomes a very important source of support. It should be remembered that the term "works of the Church" can be interpreted broadly, depending on the concrete situation of the particular Church in each local context.

In principle, with regard to the amount of the offering for the celebration of Mass, priests must adhere to the norms of universal law (cf. cc. 945-958). First and foremost, this *guideline* must always be observed: in matters concerning offerings, any appearance of commerce or the buying and selling of offerings for Mass must be entirely avoided. The

[2] Cf. A. Perlasca, «Ad canonem 945», p. 799. Simony is the buying or selling of spiritual realities or of things connected to the spiritual for a temporal price. Cf. A. Calabrese, Diritto penale canonico, p. 290.

legislator explicitly states this in c. 947, and in the penal section of the Code, such a violation may incur canonical sanctions (cf. c. 1383). All of this is based on the reality that the Sacraments are a free gift from Christ who was Crucified and Risen. Therefore, at the moment of their administration, nothing can be demanded from the faithful; only a free and spontaneous offering can be accepted.

It is helpful to pause for a moment to consider the canonical offense that may arise from abuses related to the regulation of Mass offerings. C. 1383 defines the object of such a delict as anyone (priest) who illegitimately "seeks profit from Mass offerings". The underlying motivation is the pursuit of gain, something that must be entirely avoided in light of the Church's explicit directive to prevent any semblance of "selling the Mass". Notably, this penal norm applies exclusively to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, and not to other sacraments.

How, then, can this offense be concretely realized? It may take various forms. For example: after accepting an offering, the Mass is not applied (cf. c. 948); more than one offering is received per day for personal gain on days not permitted by law (cf. c. 951); a priest demands an offering exceeding the amount set by the bishops of the province or local custom (cf. c. 952); he accepts for himself more intentions than the number of Masses he can celebrate within a year (cf. c. 953); or he withholds the portion of the offering owed to another priest (cf. c. 955), and so forth.

Such offenses must be addressed and penalized by the Ordinary. Taking into account the manner and gravity of the offense, the judge must impose a penalty that is appropriate and proportionate to the

circumstances; either a censure or an expiatory penalty, among those listed in c.1336 §§ 2–4[3].

Now, in cases where the offering has already been received but, through no fault of the priest, the Mass offering is lost. It is important to recall that c. 949 establishes the principle of a bilateral contract (*do ut facias*), whereby both the donor and the priest who is to celebrate the Mass are bound by a stable right and obligation. This constitutes an obligation in justice![4]

In such a case, the priest remains obliged to apply the Mass for the intention requested by the donor. If the priest has not yet had the opportunity to know the number of Masses to be celebrated or the specific intentions (for example, if the request was enclosed in an envelope), and the donor can still be contacted, the priest should reach out to the donor to ask precisely what intention was being requested. In cases where this cannot be achieved, it is sufficient that, in his heart, he intends that the Mass be offered according to the intention of the donor (*ad mentem offerentis*).

It must always be borne in mind that the offering for the celebration and application of the Mass is determined at the regional level, namely by the provincial council or a meeting of the bishops of the province, for practical purposes. The Mass offering cannot be set at the discretion of the Pastor. Therefore, no one is permitted to request an amount greater than that which has been established. Nevertheless, it is permissible to accept an offering that is either greater or lesser than the established amount, provided it is given freely (cf. c. 952 §1).

[3] Cf. Dicastero Per I Testi Legislativi, Le sanzioni penali nella Chiesa, p. 144.
[4] Cf. G. Ghirlanda, Il diritto nella Chiesa, mistero di comunione, p. 376.

The Latest Decree on Mass Intentions and Collective Offerings (2025)

The Core Issue. In principle, one offering is to be applied to one Mass. A priest who accepts an offering for a specific intention is obliged to celebrate one distinct Mass for that intention, in accordance with c. 948. He is bound in justice to fulfill this obligation personally (cf. c. 949), or, if unable, may entrust it to another priest under the conditions prescribed by law (cf. cc. 954–955). It is not permitted to combine several intentions in a single Mass without the prior consent of the donors.

In practice, however, it frequently occurs, despite no difficulty in celebrating a separate Mass for each requested intention (given sufficient time and enough priests), that in many places, a single Mass is celebrated with numerous intentions from different offerings. Unfortunately, it is often the case that no prior permission has been requested from the donors, informing them that their submitted intention would be combined with others in the same Mass.

This issue is not new and has already been addressed by the Church through the same Dicastery in the Decree *Mos Iugiter* (1991). In art. I, §2, it is stated in quite strong terms that priests who indiscriminately collect offerings for the celebration of Mass according to specific intentions, and then, without the knowledge of the donors, apply them in a single Holy Mass celebrated under what is termed a "collective" intention, are considered to be acting against the norms and must bear the corresponding moral responsibility.

Nevertheless, the norm also provides an exception in cases where the faithful making the offering are clearly informed beforehand by the priest that their offerings will be combined with others into a single offering, and they freely give their consent. In such cases, it is permissible

to fulfill their intentions through the celebration of a single Holy Mass offered for a "collective" intention (Mos Iugiter, Art. II, §2). Conversely, it follows logically that if such consent is not given, the celebration of a Mass with a collective intention is not permitted.

The latest decree issued on April 13, 2025, and approved by Pope Francis, provides clearer norms, especially concerning the conditions and reasons for allowing the celebration of Masses with a collective intention. *First*, the provincial council or the bishops' conference of the province is tasked with clearly determining the contextual factors that may justify the use of a collective intention in the celebration of Mass; for instance, a shortage of priests relative to the number of Mass intentions requested by the faithful, or other social and ecclesial circumstances. *Second*, a Mass with a single "collective" intention may be celebrated if, and only if, all donors have been informed and have freely given their explicit consent. *Third*, the consent of the donors can never be presumed; in fact, in the absence of explicit consent, it must always be presumed that such consent has not been given. *Fourth*, a priest celebrating a Mass with a collective intention is only permitted to retain the offering from one intention, in accordance with universal law, except on the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord. *Fifth*, every Christian community should ensure that there is the opportunity for the celebration of daily Masses with a single intention, and for such Masses, the amount of the offering is to be determined by the provincial council or the meeting of bishops of the province[5].

Access to Mass Intentions: A Right of the Poor

All the norms outlined above essentially pertain to the material aspect, namely, what is given: money. Nevertheless, one fundamental

[5] Dicastery for the Clergy, Decree on the discipline of Mass intentions, April 13, 2025, Art. I, §§1-4.

truth that cannot be contested is that all the Christian faithful have the right to receive assistance from their pastors, especially from the spiritual goods of the Church, that is, the Word of God and the Sacraments (cf. c. 213). Therefore, practical regulations concerning offerings must remain purely "practical" in nature and may never limit access to these spiritual goods, which belong to the faithful by virtue of their baptism into, or reception into, the Catholic Church.

One very interesting aspect of universal law and particular norms concerning offerings for Mass intentions is the attention given to the "situation of the poor." This theme cannot be overlooked, for if it is connected to a "monetary offering," there is a danger that a person in financial hardship may be unable to request a personal intention for a Mass. Clearly, the Church's legislation explicitly addresses this: the poor must have access to these spiritual goods!

C. 848 states that *"The minister is to seek nothing for the administration of the sacraments beyond the offerings defined by competent authority, always taking care that the needy are not deprived of the assistance of the sacraments because of poverty."* This provision reflects a profound ecclesial principle: that the grace of God is gratuitous and must never be restricted by a person's economic condition.

The Church, as the sacrament of salvation for humanity, bears the mission of manifesting God's unconditional love. In light of the Gospel, especially Jesus' teaching on mercy (cf. *Lk 4:18*, *Matt 25:35–40*), the Church affirms the preferential option for the poor as a structural dimension of her mission. Therefore, when the Church requires that the poor not be prevented from accessing the sacraments, she embodies the love of Christ, who stands with the weak, the excluded, and the powerless. Thus, c. 848 is not merely a legal norm, but a proclamation of divine love

within the Church's juridical order: that poverty must never become a barrier for anyone to receive the grace of God[6].

Meanwhile, c. 945 §2 states: *"It is recommended earnestly to priests that they celebrate Mass for the intention of the Christian faithful, especially the needy, even if they have not received an offering"*. Through this recommendation, the Legislator affirms the pastoral spirit and charity of the Church towards the faithful, especially those who are materially poor. Although it is customary in the Church's tradition to give an offering when requesting a Mass intention, priests are nonetheless encouraged to attend to such requests without expecting any compensation. This reflects the fundamental principle that the grace of God is gratuitous, and that the sacramental ministry of the Church must not be a privilege reserved only for those who can afford it, but rather be accessible to all the faithful, especially those most in need.

Furthermore, the offering that often accompanies a Mass intention is not a price or payment in the commercial sense. To understand it as such is to fall into a reductive and gravely mistaken view, far removed from the nature of the Sacrament as a gift from God. The offering is a way for the faithful to participate in supporting the needs of the Church and its ministers, not a mandatory condition for receiving God's grace.

Every member of the faithful, even one who possesses nothing materially, has the spiritual right to request a Mass intention, because they are members of the Mystical Body of Christ. That request flows from their faith and becomes an expression of openness to God's grace. As Scripture says: *"Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give"* (*Matt 10:8*). This affirms that all sacramental grace is fundamentally

6 Cf. D. Composta, «ad canonem 848», p. 525.

a free gift from God, which must not be commercialized or treated as a privilege of the wealthy.

The offering made to request a Mass intention is, once again, not an obligation, nor does it imply any form of "purchase" or proprietary "right" on the part of the donor over the celebration of the Mass, since the Mass itself is offered for the entire Church and all present, even if the name of the deceased or a specific intention is explicitly mentioned. On the other hand, this offering does not dispense anyone from other forms of economic participation in the life of the Church, as supporting the Church remains an important commitment for every Christian, which can be fulfilled in various ways, even beyond monetary contributions.

The two canon provisions above are reaffirmed in the Decree issued by the Dicastery for the Clergy in article 3, §1. It emphasizes that the concern for the poor's desire to receive spiritual assistance from pastors regarding the sacrament of the Eucharist must never be hindered solely because of their poverty, even though other normative adjustments may exist. This point appears to be immune from any changes, as it represents the true, and perhaps the most fundamental and legitimate reason behind the offering for Mass, which consistently distances it from any suspicion of being a "commercial practice," or what canon criminal law refers to as "simony."

"The prayer of the poor rises to God" (cf. Sir 21:5)

Without repeating what has already been discussed at length, the decree on the renewal of regulations concerning Masses with collective intentions was deemed necessary because, in actual practice, many priests have taken the easier route: combining multiple Mass intentions into a single celebration, often without first obtaining the explicit consent of the individual petitioners. While practically convenient (especially

given the current shortage of priests) such pluri-intentional Masses pose a serious risk: they may overlook or even violate the spiritual rights of the faithful, rights which must be respected and safeguarded.

At this point, a specific pastoral issue merits thoughtful attention: what about the poor who request Mass intentions? How is their situation handled in practice? Are they truly being served?

This question should never have arisen, and indeed, it must not become an issue. The Church is called to be with, and to be built among, the poor.

This brings us back to Christ's profound desire to establish an *Ecclesia Pauperum*: a Church of the poor. Christ did not redeem humanity through worldly splendor or power, but by choosing the path of humility, poverty, and suffering. Redemption was wrought through the Cross, not a throne; through self-emptying, not conquest. He, "though in the form of God, emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:6–7); and "though he was rich, for your sake he became poor" (2 Cor 8:9). It is along this path that the Church is formed and to which she is continually called.

Indeed, the Church makes use of human instruments to fulfill her mission, but she was not established to seek earthly prestige. Her very nature is to be a witness to humility and self-emptying. In following Christ's example, the Church is called to proclaim the Gospel to those most vulnerable: the smallest, the forgotten. For the Lord Himself was sent "to bring good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18), to heal the brokenhearted, and to seek and save the lost (cf. Lk 19:10).

The Church's true face, when she is faithful to her Lord, is seen in her closeness to the poor and suffering. In the poor, she recognizes the face of Christ: rejected, crucified, risen. To serve them is to serve Christ Himself. To neglect them is to betray her very essence.

A particularly troubling temptation in contemporary pastoral practice is the increasing tendency to reduce the faithful's participation in the Church's life to material contributions. This trend is becoming more visible in many urban parishes, including those in Indonesia, where QR codes and digital transfer methods are now displayed during the offertory for donations directly to parish accounts. The traditional act of physical offering is being replaced with a digital transaction.

While efficient, this shift can unintentionally foster a sense of exclusivity, where only those who are financially able can participate meaningfully. But what of the poor? How can they participate equally and be made to feel that they belong?

This concern becomes all the more urgent when it comes to Gregorian Masses. How are dioceses and parishes applying pastoral norms when requests for these Masses come from those who have no means to offer anything at all?

The answer, according to the Church's law and spirit, is unequivocal: yes, the Mass must be applied for them, even if no offering is made due to poverty, regardless of the kind of Mass intention requested. The cry of the poor reaches God's ears!

The prayer of the poor reaches heaven because it springs from a heart crushed and wholly dependent on God. Throughout Scripture, God consistently takes the side of the lowly and oppressed. Their prayer is not merely a request, it is a cry for justice that pierces the clouds and does not rest until the Most High responds (cf. Sir 35:17–18). Poverty opens the heart to a pure and sincere faith, for often the poor possess nothing but God Himself. Jesus embraced the path of poverty and united Himself with them, thus every cry of theirs echoes in His Heart. That is why, in the poverty of the poor, there is a power in prayer that Heaven cannot ignore.

The absence of an offering must never be a reason to refuse their intention, nor should it ever be regarded as a burden. Rather, every priest ought to see this as part of the very mission of Christ entrusted to the Church.

The poor, in every generation, are an inseparable part of the family of the faithful. Only when they truly become part of our lives do we begin to taste the joy of heaven even on earth. We are called to love them not because they are good or bad, nor because they meet our expectations or fail to, but simply because they are brothers and sisters of Christ, entrusted to our care.

The law of the Church, in its most authentic and enduring spirit, always ensures the protection of the poor. The poor will always "have a place" within the legislation of Christ's Church: for *Deus caritas est*, and His Church is the *Ecclesia Pauperum*.

Some Practical Suggestions

The issue of applying a Mass for the intention of a poor person is not merely a question of whether or not they can make an offering. Many other pastoral and cultural factors must also be taken into consideration.

In many Eastern cultures, economic hardship often causes individuals to feel inferior. There is a sense of shame or embarrassment in requesting a Mass intention, especially when they are unable to accompany their request with even a modest offering. In such contexts, emotional hesitation often outweighs spiritual need. As a result, many poor individuals choose to remain silent rather than claim their rightful access to the Church's spiritual goods; gifts that should be offered freely by their pastors.

This challenge becomes even more urgent when compounded by a lack of juridical and pastoral awareness regarding offerings for Mass intentions. Such knowledge rarely reaches the grassroots level, either because it is considered unimportant or not a pressing matter. Moreover, in many regions, the poor live in remote rural areas where access to communication and transportation is severely limited. While this is a clear and undeniable reality, it in no way diminishes our obligation to inform the poor of the spiritual goods that rightfully belong to them.

Pastors are bound by the duty to proclaim the Word of God and to provide the sacraments in their parish territory without exception (cf. c. 528 §§1–2). One of the most fundamental ways to fulfill this obligation is through catechesis, a tradition deeply rooted in the Church's life throughout the centuries. Sadly, catechesis is often undervalued or neglected in our times. Pastors, and especially parish priests, are called to go out and seek those who are poor, suffering, isolated, lonely, displaced, or burdened by life (cf. c. 529 §1). A true shepherd cannot rest knowing that some among his flock are unaware that they can freely access the Church's spiritual goods, gifts offered for the salvation of their souls.

This is why such practical matters must be consistently reinforced in regular catechesis. It is not merely about canonical norms or procedural knowledge, but about the core concern of spiritual well-being.

The faithful must be clearly and compassionately informed: if they have a Mass intention but are unable to offer even the smallest stips, their intention will still be honored and applied in the celebration of the Eucharist. In fact, if possible, we should take the initiative to offer this to them freely. The poor often carry a deep sense of reserve or unworthiness; they remain silent not because they lack faith, but because they feel inadequate.

These matters may seem small, but in our ministry, we must never forget that, in the words of St. Vincent, the poor are our masters and lords. If this is true, then we are called to do all that we can for the good and salvation of their souls, and for the souls of all, both living and deceased, whom the poor entrust to our prayers through their Mass intentions.

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