

# Fees

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help reduce confusion about the stipend system, but it is unlikely to stem an intermittent, decades-long debate over the system among members of the diocesan Priests' Council.

"It's a sore that never completely heals," said Father Kiggins, who served as a priest representative to the Salary and Benefits Committee of the Diocesan Personnel Commission. "There's a certain amount of unease over the structure that has grown up over the centuries."

Father Benedict Ehmann had hoped that the issue was resolved in 1984, when he proposed that the "whole stipendiary system ... return to the province of 'gift' as it was in its origins."

"God's great gift, in Eucharist and sacraments, stands outside the province of economics and business transaction," Father Ehmann wrote in a March 5, 1984, letter to the council. "They can never be weighed in values of dollars and cents. It's urgent for our people to know they cannot 'buy' a Mass."

Concrete action on Father Ehmann's proposal was delayed until 1987, when — after nearly a year's debate — the council, and later the diocese, approved a standard "church fee" of \$50 for weddings and funerals, stipulating that no fee is required for the celebration of baptism. Proceeds of church fees are now turned over to the parish, rather than to the celebrant.

The 1988 diocesan salary and benefits package then compensated priests for the loss of stole fees with an across-the-board

raise of \$1,500 — a figure that represented the average number of weddings and/or funerals at which a priest presides.

The move generated some heated response from priests — particularly those likely to celebrate more than the average number of wedding and funeral Masses. Since then, however, few complaints have been raised.

"There was some inequity," one priest remarked. "But I don't think priests are in the business to make money. If something like that hurt the morale of a priest, it would be the priest's own problem."

Father Kiggins, meanwhile, surveyed his fellow priests in connection with the stole-fee proposal, and found that while many older priests favor stipends, younger priests opposed them.

Consequently, the Priests' Council has recommended that a committee, headed by Father John M. Mulligan, research the theological and pastoral practices of stipends. "What we heard the priests saying was if you need the increase, fine, but there are bigger issues to be looked at," said Father Mulligan, who is now recruiting members for his committee. "We are trying to come to some deeper understanding of what people understand the Mass offering to be, the theology of the idea of asking that somebody be remembered in the Eucharist," he explained.

Death is the most common occasion for Catholics to request a special Mass intention — both as a comfort to loved ones immediately after they suffer a loss, and to commemorate the anniversary of a significant date, sometimes for years afterward.

Rosemond Erbland, a parishioner at St. Andrew's in Rochester, likes to remember

her son that way. Each year, she requests Masses in his memory to be offered on his birthday, the anniversary of his death and at Christmas. "It's the only kind of Christmas gift I can give Jimmy, and I don't like to leave him out," she said.

Although the church is bound to encourage such expressions of piety, priests are "disturbed at the sense of ownership some people display toward the Mass they have 'purchased.'"

"They believe that the Mass somehow belongs to them," explained Father Hohman. "They can get pretty furious if you don't mention their intention (during the liturgy), or if you reschedule."

At the root of the ownership misconception is a basic contradiction. In accepting a stipend, the priest undertakes a solemn obligation under church law to honor the requested intention, although he is not required to mention from the altar the particular intention for which the Mass is being celebrated.

At the same time, every Mass is also considered the property of the whole church, and is offered for the intentions of every member of the community.

Members of the community, meanwhile, are often misinformed about what happens to stipends. Contrary to many Catholics' belief, stipends go to the priest who celebrates the Mass, not to the parish.

"People think when they leave money for Masses (in their wills) that it goes to the parish, but it doesn't. It goes to the priest," said one pastor. "People have in some cases left thousands (of dollars) for Masses that can't be satisfied by the parish, so the money goes elsewhere."

Because pastors and diocesan officials

have the opportunity to approve such wills before they are administered, they can challenge provisions that they cannot reasonably fulfill. But there has been no large-scale diocesan effort to deflect such bequests, or to educate lawyers about the diocesan stipend system.

"We haven't done anything to redirect people's desire to pay for Masses. It's partly due to the piety of people, and we would certainly not want to fault that," Father Mull said. "If we're brought into (the process of making a will), we try to clarify the person's intent ... If their intent is to contribute to the church, we tell them (stipends) don't go to the church, but to the person who celebrates Mass."

Because priests are entitled by canon law to receive stipends, the alternatives to the present system are limited. One possibility is to eliminate the exchange of money for Mass intentions, allowing people to request intentions without making a donation, but encouraging them to contribute those funds in other ways to the support of the parish.

Another alternative is to redirect stipends to general parish funds from which the priest's salary is drawn, then adjust the priest's salary — in a manner similar to the action the diocese took with stole fees in 1987. Either reform would require the cooperation and consent of all diocesan priests, and a considerable campaign of education.

But many priests believe the effort would be worthwhile. "There's something wrong that we have to pay for that intention," Father Murphy concluded. "I feel that if we could eliminate the money factor from the Mass offering, we would be much better off."

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