

Gregorian Masses

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A ZENIT DAILY DISPATCH

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Answered by Legionary of Christ Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Q: I understand a Gregorian Mass to consist of 30 Masses said with unbroken succession. Recently an elderly priest told me that if it is interrupted even for one day, one has to begin the Masses all over. I have also met an elderly religious who was catechizing the lay faithful in the same line. Here then are my questions: 1) Has this Gregorian Mass (or Masses) any liturgical or canonical foundation? 2) Does the effectiveness of the Masses depend on celebrating them without interruption? 3) If this is so (as it is widely held), are we not coming close to superstition or what St. John of the Cross referred to as lack of simplicity of faith? According to him, "These people attribute so much efficacy to methods of carrying out their devotions and prayers and so trust in them that they believe that if one point is missing or certain limits have been exceeded their prayer will be profitless and go unanswered. As a result they put more trust in these methods than they do in the living prayer, not without great disrespect and offense toward God." — P.C., Rome

A: The practice of Gregorian Masses goes back to a tradition hailing from Pope St. Gregory the Great (540-604). According to legend, a deceased monk appeared and requested 30 Masses to be celebrated for the release of his soul from purgatory. On completion of the stipulated days he appeared once more radiant in heavenly glory.

From this legend the practice of celebrating 30 consecutive Masses for one and the same person with the intention of procuring release from purgatory became an established custom which has been regulated in various ways over the centuries.

Present regulation stems from a declaration published by the Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship on Feb. 24, 1967, which mitigated some of the restrictions mentioned by our reader and of which the elderly priest is apparently unaware.

According to the aforementioned declaration, maintaining the tradition that the Gregorian Mass is a series of 30 consecutive celebrations, it is not required that the same priest celebrate all the Masses nor that they be celebrated on the same altar. Thus, if a priest who has accepted the obligation of celebrating the series finds himself impeded on any particular day, he may request another priest to take the intention for him.

Likewise, it could happen that the priest cannot find a substitute and the series is interrupted because of an unforeseen impediment (for example, an illness), or for a reasonable cause (the celebration of a funeral or a wedding). In this case the Church has disposed that the fruits of suffrage (which, until that moment, Church practice and the piety of the faithful have attributed to this series) are maintained. The priest retains the obligation to complete the 30 Masses as soon as possible but need not begin the series anew.

I do not believe that this pious custom induces superstition or reflects a magical concept. It presumes that the soul is in purgatory and thus recognizes the reality that few people are immediately ready for heaven after death. It is also an act of faith and confidence in the infinite intercessory power of the Mass with respect to souls undergoing purgation. As such, the request for such a series of Masses is a spiritual act of mercy akin to obtaining plenary indulgences on behalf of the deceased.

The Just Judge is also infinitely merciful and can be as generous to those who have toiled but an hour as he is toward those who bore the brunt of labor all day long.

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In themselves, Gregorian Masses do not necessarily affect the liturgy in any way as they refer only to the priest's intention in offering the Mass. There are no special rites or formulas attached to Gregorian Masses.

Our reader has a point, however, that Gregorian Masses are rarely celebrated in parish settings. This is not because of special rites but because a parish priest would find it very difficult to dedicate 30 days of Masses for one single intention, especially when many parishioners request Masses.

Therefore Gregorian Masses are usually celebrated in monasteries, seminaries, priestly houses of studies, and other similar locales with priests in residence with relatively few pastoral commitments. These are usually the only ones who can take upon themselves the commitment to celebrate 30 consecutive Masses for the same deceased person.

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