SILENT HOMILIES

Little Treasures

THIRTY MASSES FOR ONE SOUL

The Catholic Tradition of Gregorian Masses



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The Catholic Tradition of Gregorian Masses

A little book for people who have heard of Gregorian Masses, and would like to know what the Church is actually asking them to trust.

Before You Begin

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Someone has died. After the funeral, a Catholic friend says, “Have you thought about Gregorian Masses?” You have heard the expression. You do not know what it means, and this does not feel like the week to look ignorant.

This little book is for the cup of tea after that sentence. It is not a treatise on Purgatory, and it is not a promise that thirty Masses will produce a date. It is an attempt to say, in ordinary words, where the practice comes from, what the Church teaches, and what she does not teach.

If you are afraid that the number thirty is a piece of folklore, start with the chapter about Justus, and do not skip the chapter that asks whether the thirtieth Mass releases the soul. If you only have ten minutes, read the chapter that asks whether one Mass is enough. The rest can wait until the kettle boils again.

Where the answer depends on your case, this book says so. A priest should be able to put it in your hands without having to correct it afterwards.

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Chapter 1

Thirty Masses for one person

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Somebody says it after the funeral, often in the porch, while people are still deciding who is going back to the house. “Have you thought about Gregorian Masses?” You nod, because you have heard the words. A grandmother used them. You never asked what they meant, and this does not feel like the week to look as if you do not know.

If you came into the presbytery and asked me, I would start with the plain thing. Gregorian Masses are thirty Masses, offered for one person who has died, on thirty days. The name comes from Pope St Gregory the Great, who died in 604. He did not invent prayer for the dead. He told a story from his own monastery, and Catholics after him kept the practice that grew out of that story.

They are ordinary Masses. There is no secret rite, and no special form of words that makes them work. People sometimes hear “Gregorian” and think of the chant. The chant is named after the same pope. That is the only link. What marks these thirty is the intention, and the keeping of the days. One deceased person, named, carried to the altar day after day.

You might reasonably ask why a parish does not simply put them in the book. Often the book is already full. A Sunday Mass may be spoken for a couple who booked it months ago, and the weekday intentions run on for weeks. Thirty days in a row, for one name, is a real undertaking. That is why a monastery, a religious house, or a priest with room in the diary is often the one who takes the series. It does not mean your own priest is unwilling. It means he can see the next six weeks before you can.

A son in Australia can arrange them for his mother in Wales. He does not have to be in the church. He gives the name, and a priest he may never meet says it. If you remember one thing from this first chapter, let it be this. You are asking that the sacrifice of Christ be offered for someone you love, thirty times, in a form the Church has long recognised. You are not buying an outcome.

A Reflection

When somebody dies, the family wants a date they can hold. The funeral is booked. The stone will say a year. The phone puts the anniversary in the calendar before anyone has asked it to. Thirty Masses can start to look like another date of that kind, a finish line.

Christian prayer does not quite work like a finish line. We ask, and we keep asking, and the answer belongs to God. The series gives the asking a shape. It does not give you a right to announce what God has done with it.

A short prayer

Lord, receive the name we can no longer call across a room. Amen.

Chapter 2

The monk called Justus

†

There is a detail in Gregory's account that surprises people who only know the later custom. He tells the story himself, in the fourth book of his Dialogues, and he says it happened in his own monastery about three years before he wrote it down. He was not collecting a legend. He was remembering his own house.

The house was St Andrew's, on the Caelian hill in Rome, which he had founded in the family home before he was pope. One of the monks was Justus. He knew medicine, and he had looked after Gregory through his illnesses. Justus had a brother in the flesh, Copiosus, a doctor in the city. Copiosus was not a monk of that house.

When Justus knew he was dying, he told Copiosus that he had three gold coins hidden. You have to picture what that meant in the house. The rule was that the brothers lived in common and kept nothing of their own. Food, clothing, tools, even the medicines, belonged to the monastery. A hidden coin was not a small private saving in the modern sense. It was a monk quietly stepping out of the life he had promised, and doing it among the very remedies he used for the sick.

Copiosus could not hide it. The coins were found among the medicines. Gregory writes that he could hardly bear it. He wanted the dying man brought to sorrow for the sin, and he wanted the living brothers warned. So he told Pretiosus, the prior, that none of the monks were to visit Justus or speak a word of comfort to him. If Justus asked for them, his own brother was to tell him that the brethren held him in horror for the hidden money, so that regret might pierce him before he died.

A twenty-first-century reader is allowed to flinch at this. It is severe. Gregory meant it to be. When Justus was dead, they did not lay him with

the other monks. They dug a grave in the dung-pit, cast the body in, threw the three coins on him, and cried together the words Peter once spoke to Simon Magus in the Acts of the Apostles: “Your money perish with you.” Then they covered him with earth.

Thirty days after the death, Gregory says his heart turned. He called Pretiosus again. The brother, he said, had been a long time in fire, and they owed him charity. For thirty days following, no day was to pass without the saving sacrifice being offered for his release. Pretiosus went and did it. Gregory, taken up with other business, did not count the days.

Then Justus appeared at night to Copiosus. Copiosus asked how he was. Justus answered that until then he had been in a bad way, and that now he was well, because that day he had received communion. Copiosus told the monks. The monks counted. It was the day of the thirtieth offering. And here is the part Gregory himself thinks worth noticing. Copiosus had not known that the Masses were being offered. The monks had not known of the appearance. The two reports arrived together, and they met on the same day.

That is the account, as Gregory gives it. He does not put a speech about Purgatory into Justus’s mouth. He does not use the later name Gregorian Masses. What he records is a hard mercy in a monastery, thirty offerings, and a report that came on the last day. The Church has treasured the story. She has not turned it into a law of God.

A Reflection

Most of us, if we are honest, want the mercy without the severity. We would rather Gregory had simply ordered the Masses and left the dung-pit out. He did not, and the book is more use to us with the dung-pit left in.

A hidden thing at the hour of death was, for him, serious enough to disturb the funeral. It was not serious enough to put the brother beyond charity. That second judgement is the one the thirty Masses come from. The first judgement is why they were needed.

A short prayer

Lord, you know the things we hid. Do not leave us, or our dead, outside your mercy. Amen.

Chapter 3

Why thirty?

†

This is the question that comes next, almost before the tea is poured. “But why thirty?” People hear a number and want it to unlock. Thirty days in a month. Thirty pieces of silver. The age at which some old writers thought the Lord began his public work. You can collect these if you like. Gregory does not say that any of them is the reason, and I am not going to pretend he did.

In the story, thirty is the number he asked for. Thirty days had already passed since the burial when his pity woke. He then asked for thirty days of Mass, and he told Pretiosus that no day was to be missed. The Church kept that shape. Thirty, on consecutive days, for one person. The name Gregorian came later, as a way of saying where the custom had been learned.

You might wonder why we need to pray for the same person again and again. After all, God heard us the first time. But think about the Rosary. We say the Hail Mary many times, not because Our Lady has forgotten what we said, but because prayer is something we return to. We do the same when we pray for somebody we love. We remember them today, and we remember them tomorrow. The thirty Masses follow that same idea. We keep bringing one person before God, trusting in his mercy.

The Mass is not made powerful by the fact that there are thirty of them. Each Mass is the sacrifice of Christ, and one would be enough if “enough” meant the worth of the offering. The thirty belong to a particular way of asking. They are the form the tradition took, a month of days in which one name is not allowed to slip. The number is there so that the asking is kept. It does not make the mercy happen.

You will still see pages on the internet that talk as if the thirtieth Mass were the turn of a key. We will come to that. For now it is enough to know why the number is there. A pope told his prior to keep going, and Christians after him recognised the sense in not stopping after a single kind impulse.

A Reflection

When somebody has died, a number is a comfort. Thirty feels more serious than "whenever you can," and less endless than "for the rest of your life." Human beings like a term they can see the end of, especially when the thing they are facing has no visible end.

Christian trust sometimes means leaving the end with God, and keeping the days anyway. The calendar on the fridge can be filled in. What it cannot do is tell you the day heaven received the person whose name is written on it.

A short prayer

Lord, keep us faithful in a prayer that has to last longer than a feeling. Amen.

Chapter 4

What exactly are we doing for the dead?

†

Prayer for the dead is older than Gregory, and it is stranger than people expect. In the second book of Maccabees, Judas Maccabeus wins a fight and then finds, under the tunics of his own dead, objects taken from the idols of Jamnia. These are men who died with forbidden things on them. A modern person might think the finding ended the matter. Judas does not. He collects money, sends it to Jerusalem for a sacrifice for the dead, and the writer calls it a holy and pious thought, so that they might be freed from their sin. Prayer, in that page, is not only for the obviously good.

The early Church kept the same instinct in a quieter form. Christians buried their dead with a request that they might rest in peace, and they asked the living to pray. You can still hear the instinct every Sunday if you listen to the first Eucharistic Prayer. After the living have been named, the priest says, Remember also, Lord, your servants who have gone before us with the sign of faith, and rest in the sleep of peace. Most of a congregation has heard that sentence for years without quite noticing that the Mass itself is already a prayer for the dead.

St Monica, dying at Ostia, told her sons to bury her body anywhere. What she asked them to remember was the altar. Augustine writes it down in the Confessions. Later in the same book he asks the readers to remember his mother, and his father Patricius, at the altar of the Lord. A son who has just described a holy death still thinks his mother needs to be prayed for. That has stayed with the Church longer than any one custom.

What you are doing, when you ask for a Mass, is joining that old request to the sacrifice the Church believes she has. You cannot take the person food any more. You can ask that Christ's offering be applied to them. The Council of Trent said the souls detained in Purgatory are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, and especially by the sacrifice of the altar. A

suffrage is simply a prayer or a work offered for somebody else. The Mass is the greatest of them.

The priest applies that Mass, in the Church's name, for the person you have named. He is free to do this for anyone, living or dead. The Eucharist is not made smaller by the name. The name is carried into something that was already larger than any one of us. This is why a Catholic does not wait until he is certain of the particular judgement. We do not see it. We do what the Church has always done with her dead.

A Reflection

Judas prayed for men who had died with idols under their coats. Monica asked to be remembered at the altar after a death her son thought holy. Neither of them was arranging a feeling. They were doing a work, and they did it without a report from the other side.

That is a useful memory if you are frightened about the way somebody died. The Church's prayer did not begin with the tidy cases. It began with the dead as they were.

A short prayer

Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. Amen.

Chapter 5

Purgatory is not another Hell

†

The word frightens people who have only heard it used as a threat. Let me say what the Church actually teaches, because it is narrower than the threat. Those who die in God's friendship, truly repentant, but not yet wholly clean, undergo a purification, so that they may enter the joy of heaven. Heaven is where they are going. Purgatory is not a second chance for someone who has refused God to the end, and it is not Hell with a shorter sentence.

St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, speaks of a person's work being tested by fire. If the work survives, the person receives a reward. If it burns, the person suffers loss, and is saved, though as through fire. The Church has never treated that paragraph as a map of Purgatory, with distances and temperatures. She has treated it as a serious picture of a life being finished by God, rather than frozen on the last bad afternoon.

The Lord says there is a sin that will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. Christians have long heard, in that "age to come," a sign that some remission belongs beyond death. Again, it is not a diagram. It sits beside another sentence, from the book of Revelation: nothing unclean will enter the holy city. God does not despise a soul that dies wanting him. He also does not pretend that wanting him has already healed everything.

The pain of that purification is real. The Church does not describe it to satisfy curiosity, and I am not going to invent a description. She teaches it so that we will not treat the dead as finished, and so that we will not treat them as lost. A soul in Purgatory, if that is where a particular person is, is a soul that has died in grace. That is a great thing. It is not the same as knowing it of your husband, or your mother.

Hell remains in the world the creed describes. A person can refuse God. The Church does not fill that possibility with the names of people we loved. She prays. Prayer is not a verdict on them. It is a plea, and a plea is an honest thing to make at three in the morning, when the ceiling is doing you no good.

A Reflection

There is a humility in allowing God to finish, in another person, what we could never have repaired. A wife can forgive a hard decade. She cannot reach the corner of a conscience that was never shown to her. Purgatory, if we have understood it, is God agreeing to finish a work that love on earth could only begin.

That is stricter than the idea that death tidies everyone. It is also kinder than the idea that the last week is the whole story.

A short prayer

Father, purify what we cannot purify, in us and in the dead we love. Amen.

Chapter 6

But isn't one Mass enough?

†

You might reasonably ask this, and you should. The sacrifice of Christ is perfect. The Mass does not add a second Calvary, and it does not improve on the first. What the Church celebrates is that one offering, made present sacramentally, so that we can be joined to it. If that is true, why tomorrow, and why thirty times?

Because the worth of the offering and the application of its fruit are two different things, and the difference matters. The offering is without limit, because it is Christ. We are not without limit. A person receives mercy as a person, in the company of the Church, and the priest applies this Mass for this intention. Tomorrow somebody may ask him to apply another. He has not decided that yesterday's Mass failed. He has been asked to intercede again, and the Church allows him to.

Imagine an ordinary kitchen. One good meal can feed a household. You still cook the next day, not because the first meal was a failure, but because the people are still there and still hungry. The comparison breaks down as soon as we remember that food runs out and grace does not. What remains of the comparison is the staying. Love that has been fed once does not treat the feeding as a reason to leave.

God is free in this. The Church does not control the fruit of a Mass as if she were pulling a lever, and a priest who speaks as if he did has gone past his brief. We offer, and we ask, and we trust the one who was offered. Thirty Masses are thirty askings, inside a tradition that learned the number from Gregory. They are not thirty instalments on a debt that Christ left unpaid.

So the answer is yes, and then a further sentence. One Mass is enough, because Christ is enough. We still ask again, because love asks again, and because the Church has been given a sacrifice she is allowed to plead more than once for the same person.

A Reflection

A widow who has a Mass said on the anniversary has not forgotten the funeral Mass. She is not correcting it, and she is not implying that it was thin. She is still his wife in the only way left, which is to ask.

The thirty days are that same instinct, given an old shape. You can keep the instinct even if, in the end, you only manage the anniversary. The Church will not rank you for it.

A short prayer

Christ, our passover, hold in your one sacrifice the names we bring back to you. Amen.

Chapter 7

Does the thirtieth Mass release the soul?

†

This is worth slowing down over, because it is the point at which a real comfort can turn into a claim the Church has not made. Gregory reports that Justus said he had been received on the day of the thirtieth offering. The Church has never turned that report into a doctrine. A story in the Dialogues, even told by a pope and a saint, is an historical account with a vision in it. It is not a dogma, and it is not a promise made to every family that books a series.

What the Church has said is more careful, and the care is a kindness. She has treated the confidence of the faithful in this practice as a pious and reasonable confidence. In a declaration of 24 February 1967, published in the Acta Apostolicae Sedis, the Holy See spoke of the fruits of suffrage which the practice of the Church and the piety of the faithful have recognised in the Gregorian thirty. That is a real acknowledgement. Read it again, though, and you will notice what it does not say. It does not say that the thirtieth Mass opens heaven.

This is perhaps where we need to be careful with the word confidence. A Catholic can arrange these Masses with real confidence that prayer for the dead matters, and that the Mass is the greatest prayer the Church can offer. Confidence is not the same thing as having a receipt. We have not been told that after Mass number thirty we may announce that this particular soul entered heaven at that moment.

God does not run a counting house in which the twenty-ninth Mass leaves a person in Purgatory and the thirtieth sends him out. If a website says the release is automatic, it is saying more than the Church says. You may still ask, and ask steadily. Catholics have trusted this way of asking for a long time, and you are allowed to trust it too. What you cannot do is tell the family the day on which heaven received him.

If you need a sentence for a neighbour who has been worried by the internet, use a plain one. We believe the Mass helps the dead. We do not believe we can date their arrival.

A Reflection

People like certainty when somebody has died. A date would help the family at the kitchen table, and it would give the youngest son something to say at work. Christian trust, on this point, means leaving a thing unresolved with God, and not filling the gap with a better story.

The last square on the calendar can be crossed off. That shows the series was kept. It does not show you the other shore.

A short prayer

Father, we will not demand a date. Receive our prayer, and do what you will. Amen.

Chapter 8

What if the person is already in Heaven?

†

You may already think she is. The death was peaceful. She had the sacraments. Someone said they felt her close at the hospital. None of that is knowledge. It may be hope, and hope is a Christian virtue, not a soft word for pretending. It is still not a report from the other side.

Suppose she needs nothing. God is not embarrassed by a Mass offered in love. A prayer is not a parcel that comes back marked unknown. I am not going to invent a system by which a suffrage is automatically sent on to some other soul, because the Church has not given me that system to explain. What she does teach is that no prayer made in Christ is empty, and that he knows what to do with a request better than the person who made it.

There is a fitting way to aim the intention if you are at peace. A Mass can be offered in thanksgiving for her life, and for the living who miss her. If you ask for Gregorian Masses in the strict sense, you are asking for the old suffrage for one deceased person, which presumes the need. Both are honest requests. Tell the priest which one you actually mean, especially if the family is divided about it.

The harder fear is the other one. What if he died far from the Church, or in a sin you knew about, or after years of not going. The particular judgement is Christ's. Despair is not a courtesy to the truth, and it is not a favour to him. You may pray. You may ask for the Mass. You may not announce either heaven or loss, and a priest should not announce them for you.

Romans says that nothing in death or life can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul is talking to the living, about the love that holds them. The Church has never used that paragraph as a guarantee about every person who has died. She has used it as a reason not to give up on prayer. A daughter who keeps a name on a list for years is doing the one work that death did not cancel.

A Reflection

Hope and uncertainty can sit in the same person on the same afternoon. You can thank God for a good death and still have a Mass said, because thanks and intercession are not rivals. One does not cancel the other.

What you cannot honestly do is take a feeling in the car park of the cemetery and build a certainty on it. The Church leaves room for not knowing. That room is part of the faith, not a gap in it, and it is the place the prayer is meant to stand.

A short prayer

Lord, if they need nothing, let our prayer become thanks. If they need mercy, let it be mercy. Amen.

Chapter 9

Do they really have to be consecutive?

†

The tradition is thirty days in a row. Gregory told Pretiosus that no day was to pass without the sacrifice. That is the shape people mean when they ask for Gregorian Masses rather than "thirty Masses when you can get to them." If a priest offers you thirty scattered dates, you are being given thirty Masses, which are a real gift. You are not being given the series.

Life interrupts, and this is where people understandably get anxious. A priest falls ill. A funeral comes in and occupies the intention of a day. You will still read, on many devotional pages, that the whole thing must then begin again, even if the miss was on the twenty-eighth day. That was the older strict answer.

In the declaration of 24 February 1967 the Holy See judged differently, and it is worth knowing the judgement, because the websites have not all caught up. If the series is broken by an unforeseen hindrance, such as illness, or by another reasonable cause, such as a funeral or a nuptial Mass, the fruits which the Church's practice and the piety of the faithful have recognised in the series are preserved. The priest must complete the thirty as soon as he can. He does not have to go back to day one.

Good Friday has no Mass. The Church does not celebrate the Eucharist on that day, so a series that runs into Holy Week cannot have a Mass on the Friday of the Lord's death. The older practice was that the Sacred Triduum did not break the thirty, provided the offering was taken up again on Easter Sunday. A priest who accepts Gregorian Masses will know how those days are handled in his house. You do not have to solve them at the kitchen table.

Sundays count. A saint's day counts. The series is not paused because the parish is keeping a feast. The Mass of the day is still a Mass, and a name can be carried inside it. Ask, when you arrange them, that they be the Gregorian series. Then let the priest keep the count. If he tells you a Wednesday was missed and offered on the Thursday, you have not lost the prayer.

A Reflection

Illness interrupts more than diaries. A priest with a temperature is doing, in a small way, what a family already knows from the last weeks of a life: the plan was for a Tuesday, and the body decided otherwise.

God can receive a fidelity that had to be mended. The 1967 ruling is, among other things, a refusal to punish the sick for being sick. The series is completed. The gap is not treated as a failure of love.

A short prayer

Lord, hold together the days we manage to keep and the days we have to mend. Amen.

Chapter 10

Does the same priest have to say all thirty?

†

The old instinct was that one priest should carry the whole series, at one altar. You can see why. A family likes to picture one man, in one place, remembering the name each morning. It is a good picture. It is not the present rule.

The Holy See has made clear that the same priest is not required, and neither is the same church. If the priest who accepted the obligation is hindered on a day, he may ask another priest to take that Mass. What has to be kept is the series itself: thirty Masses, for the one person, in the Gregorian way. A different voice on the Thursday does not make the prayer less itself.

You may still prefer one priest, if a monastery can offer that. Say so when you ask. It is a preference, and a reasonable one. It is not a condition of the prayer. God is not more attentive in a chapel you have visited than in a church you will never see.

The priest who accepts the offering accepts the work. He may not take the money and then forget the days. If he cannot see a way to keep the series, the honest thing is for him to say so at the start, and to help you find a house that can. A full parish diary is a reason. It is not a discourtesy.

You will not usually receive a chart unless you ask for one. Trust is reasonable. So is a simple question, a month later, if you want to know that the thirty were kept. A son who asks from the other side of the world is not being awkward. He handed over his mother's name.

A Reflection

A person you never meet can stand at an altar you never see, and pray for somebody you knew better than anyone. That is a strange mercy, and it is one of the ordinary works of the Church.

We are used to thinking of communion as the people in the same bench. The series quietly widens it. The priest in another county is not a stranger to the dead. He is a member of the same body, doing the one thing that body exists to do.

A short prayer

Lord, bless the priest who says the name, whether we know his face or not. Amen.

Chapter 11

Can I have them offered for anyone?

†

The Gregorian series, in the strict sense, is for one deceased person. Not for a couple as a couple, and not for "all the family who have died," however much you love the phrase. A Mass can be offered for several people. The thirty-day series, as this tradition has been kept, is singular. If you want your mother and your father prayed for in this particular way, you are asking for two series.

They may be offered years afterwards. Suppose your mother died ten years ago, and nobody mentioned Gregorian Masses at the time. There is no closing date. Delay is not a refusal, and it is not a sign that you cared less in the year she died. A father who died in 1994 can be named now.

A priest is free to apply a Mass for any person, living or dead. That is the canon. Gregorian Masses, as Gregorian Masses, are a suffrage for the dead. If you want Masses for someone who is ill, ask for Masses for the sick. Do not use the old name and hope it will stretch. The stretching only confuses the priest, and it confuses you a month later when you try to remember what you asked for.

A child who has died can be prayed for. If the child died before the age of reason, the Church does not teach that Purgatory is the ordinary path, and you should not force the child into it. A Mass may still be offered in love, and in thanksgiving, and for the parents who are left. An infant who died without baptism is entrusted to the mercy of God. Ask the priest how to aim the intention. He would rather have that conversation than discover the age at the end of the form.

Someone who was not Catholic can be prayed for. A public funeral has its own rules, and they are real, and a priest will know them. A Mass intention is a different question. You may ask. The Mass does not become

a statement that the person died in full communion with the Catholic Church. It becomes a prayer, which is what you wanted.

Suicide is not a reason for silence. Come and say it, even if the sentence is hard. The Church knows that grave illness and fear can weigh on a person's responsibility, and she does not claim to see the last moment. A Mass may be offered. The offering is not an argument about the past. It is a plea.

A Reflection

One name is a discipline, and disciplines exist so that love does not become a blur. You can still pray for the others at your own table, in your own words, without putting them all on the one card.

If the list in your head is long, begin with one. The others are not insulted by being second. They can be next, and next is a real place.

A short prayer

Lord, gather the names we cannot fit into one prayer, and hold the one we place on the altar. Amen.

Chapter 12

Are we paying for Mass?

†

The envelope is the part that makes a decent family wince. A monastery mentions an offering for thirty Masses. It may be a few hundred pounds. Somebody looks at the funeral bill, which has already been larger than anyone said it would be, and wonders whether grace is now being sold on top of it.

It is not. The Eucharist is not for sale. To sell a spiritual thing, or to buy one, is the sin the Church calls simony, and she forbids it. What you are being asked for is the old offering by which the faithful share in the support of the priest and the Church, attached to a particular intention. Canon law still provides for it. A priest may not demand more than the amount set by the diocese. He may accept more if you freely give it. He may also celebrate with no offering at all.

Thirty Masses mean thirty offerings, which is why the figure is larger than for one Sunday. The money does not purchase a stronger sacrament. A Mass said for a widow who cannot pay is the same sacrifice as a Mass said for a family that can. If the suggested sum is beyond you, say so before you agree to anything. A poorer family is not allowed, by the gospel or by the canons, to do less for its dead.

Religious houses ask for a real amount because thirty days of a priest's work are a real thing, and the house has to be heated. You may ask what the offering is. You may go to another priest. You may give what you can and let him tell you what is possible. None of those is a rude question.

It helps to keep two sentences apart, and then the shame loosens. You are not buying the Mass. You are supporting the priest who will offer it, and asking him to apply it to this name.

A Reflection

Catholics are used to invisible gifts arriving through ordinary things. Bread and wine. Oil. Water. A building that has to be insured. A pair of hands that belong to a man who also buys milk. An envelope is in that family of things. It is not the grace. It is one of the ways the grace is not left floating above the parish.

Write the name on the outside before you put the money in, if you want a way of remembering which is which. If there is no money this month, the name can still be written. Tell him that too.

A short prayer

Lord, keep us from buying what you give, and from refusing to support those who serve your altar. Amen.

Chapter 13

The thirty days at home

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You do not have to attend the thirty Masses. Most people cannot. Work starts again, sometimes before the family is ready, and a monastery may be in another country. The series does not fail because you are on a shift. Your part is smaller than the priest's, and it is real.

Put the name where you will see it. A photograph on a shelf is enough. So is the funeral card in the prayer book, or the old picture that is still on the phone, the one you cannot quite delete. You might mark the thirty days on a calendar. Not as a score. Just so that you remember to pray on the wet Tuesday as well as the Sunday, when the house is quieter and the not-praying is easier.

A decade of the Rosary, the Divine Mercy chaplet, a visit to the grave after the supermarket, a Mass when you can get to one: all of these fit. None of them is required for the series to be what it is. Do not build a second devotion and then feel you have failed it on the day you were too tired. The thirty Masses are the undertaking. The rest is love, done as you can.

There is often something unfinished. A quarrel, a sentence you did not say, a kindness you postponed until the person was no longer there to receive it. These thirty days are a good time to forgive, including a person who cannot now forgive you back. Forgiveness is not a technique for shortening Purgatory. It is a Christian act. It helps the one who forgives, whether or not you ever see any other result.

Give something away if you can, in their name, and do not announce it. Food, money, an hour. The Church has long joined alms to prayer for the dead. She has not fixed a price for the joining. The coat still hanging by the door can wait until you are able to move it. Moving it is not part of the series.

A Reflection

Grief changes the length of an afternoon. A day at work can pass in a piece, and the evening in the kitchen can take longer than the day did. Making one cup of tea, where there used to be two, is a small proof of it.

The prayer is not there to hurry that strange time, or to make you efficient at missing somebody. It gives the missing a place to go, so that it is not only turning over itself.

A short prayer

Mary, who stood by the dead, stand by us while we remember. Amen.

Chapter 14

After Mass number thirty

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On the thirtieth day you may feel you ought to stop, as if another prayer would be a lack of trust in the series. It would not. The series is finished. The love that asked for it has not been given its notice.

Catholics keep praying, and they have ordinary ways of doing it. The name can be spoken at an anniversary Mass. November is a month the Church gives to the dead, whether or not you feel ready for it. A grave can be visited on a Saturday after the shopping. The prayer of the Mass already carries the dead, in the Eucharistic Prayer, even on a morning when your person is not named aloud.

Another set of thirty is sometimes asked for. It is allowed, as a further work. It is not owed, and it does not mean the first series was defective. If money is tight, one series offered honestly is a great deal. Do not let a page on the internet persuade you that mercy begins at the second thirty, or that a family has been careless because it stopped at one.

You may also find that the formal month gives way to something plainer. A person on a bus, saying a name once between stops, has not dropped the practice. They have let it become part of the day, which is where most Christian prayer ends up living.

The dead do not need us to be impressive after the series. They need the Church to go on being herself. A body that does not forget is already a great deal, in a world that clears the mantelpiece quite quickly.

A Reflection

A phone will put the anniversary back on the calendar next year, without asking whether you want it. Some families are glad of the reminder. Some would rather it did not arrive on a Tuesday morning between the traffic and the first meeting.

Either way, the date is not a bill. You can have a Mass said. You can say the name in the car. You can do neither, and still be a person who loved them. The thirty days were a piece of work you undertook. They do not renew themselves, and nobody is keeping a tally if you simply remember the name next year.

A short prayer

Lord, when the series ends, do not let us think that love has been stood down. Amen.

Chapter 15

Love still has something to do

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Before a death, love has errands. You ring. You sit. You bring the thing they asked for, or the thing they did not ask for and needed. After a death those errands stop. The house is full of objects that no longer have their old use, and the family stands in the kitchen wondering what, exactly, there is left to do.

The Church does not offer you a replacement errand with the same shape. She offers you something older than the errand. You can still pray. You can ask that the sacrifice of Christ, who has already gone through death and come out in the resurrection, be offered for the person whose chair is empty. That is a real doing. It is not a consolation prize for people who can no longer be useful in the hospital.

Gregorian Masses are one way of doing it, with a history and a discipline and a story you can tell. They are not the only way. A single Mass, a rosary said badly because you are tired, an act of mercy, the prayer of a daughter on a Wednesday night: none of these is a lesser Christianity. The thirty are a particular treasure of the tradition. They are not a ranking of families.

If you arrange them, you will hand over a name. For thirty days that name will be carried to the altar by a priest you may never meet. You will not see the carrying. The Mass that carries it is not a new sacrifice, added to Calvary thirty times. It is the one sacrifice of Christ, pleaded again, for a person who can no longer plead in the way the living do.

Then the bins still have to go out. Grace has never been a reason to leave them. It has been a reason the person who takes them out is still joined, by prayer, to someone they can no longer touch. Faith is content with that on most days. On the other days, say the name yourself, and let that be enough for the evening.

A Reflection

Christian hope is not a mood you are meant to feel at the end of a book. It is the claim that Christ has gone through death ahead of the people we love, and that he does not lose what is given to him.

A name on a piece of paper is a small giving. The person is not small. The altar has room for the difference, which is why the Church keeps bringing names to it, long after the porch has emptied.

A short prayer

Christ, firstborn from the dead, keep those we give you, and keep us until we meet them in your mercy. Amen.

The questions people actually ask

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"Can Gregorian Masses be offered for someone who was not Catholic?" You may ask. A priest can apply a Mass for any person. A public funeral is a separate question, and it has its own rules. The Mass is a prayer. It is not a claim that the person died in full communion with the Church.

"Can I arrange them years afterwards?" Yes. There is no closing date. A death in 1994 can be named now.

"Can they be offered for a child?" Yes, as a prayer of love. If the child died before the age of reason, do not assume Purgatory. Ask the priest to aim the intention truly. An unbaptised infant is entrusted to the mercy of God.

"Can two people share one series?" Not in the strict Gregorian sense. The series is for one deceased person. Two people need two series, or a different kind of Mass intention, which the priest can explain.

"Must they be celebrated in the same church?" No. The same altar is not required.

"Must the same priest celebrate every Mass?" No. If he is hindered, another priest may take a day.

"Can I attend them?" Yes, if you know where they are and you are able. The series does not depend on your being in the bench.

"What if the priest misses a day?" If the break is illness, or another reasonable cause such as a funeral or a wedding, the Holy See said in 1967 that he completes the thirty as soon as he can, and does not begin again. Let him keep the obligation. You do not have to restart the worry.

"Can Mass be celebrated on every one of the thirty days?" On Good Friday the Church does not celebrate Mass. The older practice resumed the series on Easter Sunday. The priest will know those days.

"Can they begin before the funeral?" Yes. They can also begin after it. Neither is late.

"Can they be offered for somebody who died by suicide?" Yes. Come and ask, even if the sentence is difficult. The Church does not treat that death as a reason to stop praying, and she does not claim to see the last moment.

"What if I do not know whether the person died reconciled with God?" Then you are where most of the living are. Pray. Ask for the Mass. Do not announce the verdict, and do not let anyone announce it for you.

"What if I cannot afford the suggested offering?" Say so. A priest may celebrate without a stipend. Lack of money is not lack of love, and it should not be treated as if it were.

"Should I arrange another set afterwards?" You may. You need not. One honest series is a real work. Further prayer can be simpler than a second thirty, and simpler is allowed.

Father, how do I arrange them?

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You do not have to understand the whole history before you ask. You have to give a name, and say that you are asking for Gregorian Masses.

Speak to your parish priest, or to a monastery, an abbey, a religious community, or another priest who accepts these intentions. If the parish diary is already full for the next six weeks, that is a fact about the diary. Ask who might have the days. A full book is not a no.

Give the full name of the person who has died, and the date of death if you know it. Say that you are asking for the Gregorian series, not simply for thirty Masses at whatever interval the parish can find.

Ask when the series can begin, and ask whether the house keeps the thirty as the Church's Gregorian practice. A priest who cannot undertake it should say so. You need not argue him into a promise he cannot keep.

Ask about the offering before you agree. The diocese will have a customary amount for one Mass. Thirty means thirty. If you cannot meet what is suggested, say that in the same conversation. Do not go home and disappear from shame.

You do not have to attend. Pray for the person during the thirty days in whatever way you can keep. A short prayer in the kitchen is enough. A Mass of your own, when you can get to one, is a good companion to the series. It is not a condition.

If you want to know that the days were kept, ask. A month later is a reasonable time. You are not auditing a priest. You are a mourner who handed over a name, and you are allowed to hear that it was carried.

Then go on. The series will end. The prayer does not have to end with it, and it does not have to keep the same shape.

A last word

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You may still have the piece of paper in your pocket. A name, written once, given to a priest.

For thirty days that name is carried to the altar. You will not see the carrying. The Mass that carries it is not a new sacrifice, added to Calvary thirty times. It is the one sacrifice of Christ, pleaded again, for a person who can no longer plead in the way the living do.

We entrust the dead to him because he has already gone through death, and come back. The thirty days are a way of staying with that entrusting. They are not a door of their own.

Go and give him the name, if you are going to. If you cannot yet, say the name tonight. That is already a beginning.

Sources and Further Reading

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This is a little book, not a commentary. The notes below are the authorities a priest can check.

Sacred Scripture

2 Maccabees 12:38–46, Judas, the amulets from Jamnia, and the offering for the dead. Matthew 12:32, on forgiveness in the age to come. 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 and 15:20–28, on a life tested by fire and on Christ the firstborn from the dead. John 6, the bread of life. Romans 8:31–39. Revelation 21:27, nothing unclean enters the city. Acts 8:20, the words used at the burial of Justus. Quotations in this book are paraphrases, not a printed translation.

Magisterium

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 958 and 1030–1032 on prayer for the dead and Purgatory; 1362–1372 on the sacrifice of the Mass and on suffrages; 1471–1479 on indulgences, which are a different gift from a Mass intention; 1689 and 2282–2283 on funeral prayer and on suicide. Council of Trent, session 22, on the sacrifice of the Mass; session 25, on Purgatory and on suffrages, especially the sacrifice of the altar. The Roman Canon, and Eucharistic Prayer I, in the commemoration of the dead.

St Gregory and the discipline of the series

Gregory the Great, Dialogues, book 4, chapter 57, on the monk Justus, Pretiosus and Copiosus. The incident belongs to his years at St Andrew's on the Caelian, which he had founded in his family house; he says he is writing about three years afterwards. Holy See, declaration of 24 February 1967 on the continuity of the Gregorian thirty, Acta Apostolicae Sedis 59 (1967) 229–230: if the series is interrupted by an unforeseen hindrance or another reasonable cause, the fruits recognised by the Church's practice and the piety of the faithful are preserved, and the priest completes the thirty as soon as possible. The same priest and the same altar are not required. The older custom of beginning again is what many devotional pages still repeat.

Canon law

Code of Canon Law (1983), canon 901, a priest may apply Mass for any person, living or dead; canons 945–958, on Mass offerings, especially 945, 948 and 951. Diocesan customs about the amount of an offering vary. A priest may celebrate without a stipend.

A further witness

Augustine, Confessions, book 9. Monica at Ostia asked to be remembered at the altar of the Lord, wherever her body was buried. Later in the same book Augustine asks his readers to remember Monica and Patricius at that altar.

The next name on the card

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You have just spent these pages with one kind of name. A husband, a mother, a child, written once and given to a priest, so that for thirty days the altar would know who was being prayed for.

There is always another name, not yet written. Somebody will hear the words Gregorian Masses in a porch next month and not know what to ask. This little book is free to read. It was not free to make. Gregory's own account had to be found, and then kept distinct from the stories people tell about it. The 1967 ruling had to be checked against the pages that still say the series must begin again. The canons on offerings, the teaching on Purgatory, the page in Maccabees: each of those had to be looked at, and then said in sentences a mourner could follow.

That takes time, and it takes the ordinary resources by which any small work is printed and kept available. If this booklet has helped you, and you are able to make a gift through the website, it helps me write the next one and leave it where someone can find it. It is not payment. These pages are already yours. Nothing is owed.

If you cannot give, pass the booklet to a person who has just been handed a Mass card and does not yet know what the thirty days are. A name you will never meet may be written more clearly because you did.

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