

ALTAR SERVERS

A THEOLOGY OF LAY LITURGICAL MINISTRY

“But you are a ‘chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises’ of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”

(1 Pt. 2:9).

All liturgical ministers are members of the body of Christ, the “holy people and royal priesthood” who participate in Christ’s ministry of redemption and salvation. In the Mass, the lay faithful exercise this ministry in various ways, but the fullest and most fundamental expression of it has always been “conscious, active and fruitful participation in the mystery of the eucharist” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition, 2002–GIRM, #5*), a participation “to which the Christian people have a right and duty by reason of their Baptism” (*GIRM, #18*).

Some of the faithful are called to serve God’s people in a more particular way through one of the many liturgical ministries that have flourished in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. This diversity of roles, functions and ministries enriches our celebrations and assists us in our prayer. Serving in one of these ministries is both an honor and a responsibility, and those who commit to it deserve nurturing and support. This handbook has been prepared to help lay liturgical ministers to acquire a deeper understanding and love for the liturgy, their ministry and ultimately the Lord whom we all serve.

I. THE MINISTRY OF THE ALTAR SERVER

Since Vatican Council II, Catholics have become accustomed to lay people serving during the liturgy as lectors, eucharistic ministers, cantors, musicians, ushers and altar servers. We call these people “liturgical ministers” and recognize that they have an important role in our liturgical celebrations. They serve the assembly—the group of Christians gathered for prayer and worship—and assist in its prayer. One of the oldest liturgical ministries is altar server.

For many centuries boys and young men (called “acolytes” when they were preparing for holy orders) assisted the priest at the altar during Mass and led the people in responding to the prayers. When Latin became the only language used by the Church, altar servers were often the only people capable of saying these prayers. In the 1960’s the Church declared that the language of the people should be used at Mass, but that did not diminish the importance of the ministry of the altar server. Altar servers continue to serve a necessary liturgical function by assisting priests and deacons before, during and after the liturgy, and serving as prayer leaders for the people. In Masses without a congregation the server says “the peoples parts as appropriate” (GIRM, #252).

Because altar servers are so visible to the assembly throughout the liturgy, they have a unique opportunity to model how and when to sit, stand and kneel. When they sing with enthusiasm and pray from their hearts, they encourage others to do the same. Of all the things that altar servers do during the Mass, perhaps none is more important than the good example they give to the assembly of how to pray with dignity and grace.

II. TRAINING AND FORMATION

All liturgical ministers have the right to adequate training from their parish communities before being assigned to service in the assembly. Altar servers have many duties to perform during liturgical celebrations and need ample opportunity to learn and practice what they are expected to do. In addition to serving during Sunday Mass, altar servers may be called upon to assist during the Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil), as well as at baptisms, weddings, funerals and other parish celebrations.

Responsibilities of altar servers include

- Carrying the cross and candles in procession.
- Presenting the book to the presider and holding it open for him.
- Preparing the altar for the Liturgy of the Eucharist when no deacon is present.
- Assisting in receiving the gifts of the people.
- Bringing the bread and wine to the altar and presenting them to the priest.
- Assisting the priest during the washing of hands.
- Receiving and arranging the vessels after communion.
- Preparing, carrying and presenting the vessels used for incense.
- Assisting the priest or deacon in any way required.
- Singing, praying and listening attentively with the people.
- Practicing responsibilities with confidence and dignity in the space where they will serve.

Obviously it takes time and practice to become an accomplished altar server. On-going formation that develops skills and encourages spiritual growth is just as essential as adequate training and should be offered regularly by the parish.

Formation for altar servers includes

- Understanding the structure of the Mass.
- Understanding the importance of symbol and ritual in Catholic worship.
- Familiarity with liturgical books.
- Reflecting on the meaning of the prayers and responses used during Mass and including them in daily prayer.
- Becoming familiar with the Sunday readings, praying with them and reflecting on what they mean.
- Studying Scripture to foster a greater love for God's word.
- Gathering with the parish for prayer, reflection and fellowship on a regular basis throughout the liturgical year.

III. PREPARATION FOR LITURGY

Besides taking advantage of the training and formation opportunities offered by the parish or through the Office of Liturgy, servers also have a serious responsibility to prepare in a more immediate way for the liturgies at which they serve.

This more immediate preparation for altar servers includes

- Arriving in enough time to become calm and unhurried before the liturgy begins and to check for any changes or special instructions.
- Making sure that all the items and sacred vessels needed for Mass are in place on the credence table (a small table placed to the side of the altar) and that candles are lighted.
- Dressing in a way that reflects the importance and dignity of this ministry. (Many parishes provide albs or cassocks with surplices for servers to wear, but footwear should also be dignified.)
- Notifying someone in authority if you cannot serve when scheduled and/or arranging for a substitute.

IV. DURING THE LITURGY

The Entrance Procession

- The server carrying the cross leads the procession by walking between and slightly ahead of the servers carrying the lighted candles.
- When incense is used the “thurifer” leads, carrying the container of smoking incense which is called the “thurible.”
- When the procession reaches the sanctuary, the server places the cross in its base on the floor; or, in the case of a stationary cross in the sanctuary, takes the processional cross to its designated place outside the sanctuary. The servers with the candles place them near the altar or on a side table. Then all servers take their places in the sanctuary.

The Opening Rites

- One server holds the *Sacramentary* (also called the missal) so the priest may easily read the greeting, the penitential rite and the opening prayer. When a deacon is assisting, and option C is selected for the penitential rite, the server moves with the *Sacramentary* to the deacon who reads the invocations.
- When the priest completes the opening prayer, the server takes the book to the side table and sits in his/her seat.
- A sprinkling rite may replace the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass. During this ritual, a server may walk with the priest and carry the container of holy water which is used to bless the people.

The Liturgy of the Word

- Servers listen with attention during the Scripture readings and respond with the assembly during the psalm.
- Incense may be used at the gospel reading, and servers with lighted candles may accompany the priest or deacon who reads the gospel.

Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts

- After the prayer of the faithful, one of the servers places the corporal, purificator, chalice and missal on the altar.
- Parishes vary in the way they receive the collection and the gifts of bread and wine, but servers usually assist the priest with this.
- After the gifts are received and placed on the altar, they may be revered with incense.

Washing of the Hands

- From the side table, servers take water, a bowl and a towel to the priest. When the priest has finished washing his hands, the servers return the items to the side table and return to their places.

Eucharistic Prayer

- Servers join with the assembly in singing and responding during the Eucharistic Prayer.

- If servers are positioned in the sanctuary during the Eucharistic Prayer, then they stand. If they are positioned with the assembly, then they take the posture of the assembly (kneeling or standing according to parish custom).

Communion

- During the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, the servers stand in the orans position.
- After receiving communion, servers take their places in the sanctuary and join in singing the communion song.

Concluding Rites

- After the blessing and dismissal, most parishes have a recessional while the dismissal hymn is sung. Usually the servers walk out in procession in the same order, and carrying the same items, as when they entered.
- In the sacristy after the liturgy, servers usually assist in putting away the cross, candles and other items used at Mass.
- If servers wear albs or cassocks with surplices, they should return them neatly to their proper place.

V. GLOSSARY

Alb	A long white robe worn over regular clothing that can be used by all liturgical ministers.
Ambo	A sacred place from which the word of God is proclaimed. It is reserved for the readings, the psalm, and the Easter Proclamation (<i>Exsultet</i>), but may also be used for the homily and general intercessions.
Aspergillum	A long-handled vessel containing holy water used to sprinkle the assembly.
Assembly	The people of God gathered for prayer and worship.
<i>The Book of the Gospels</i>	The book containing the gospels that is carried in procession each Sunday and from which the priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel.
Cassock	A long, fitted garment with long sleeves, usually in a dark color, most commonly black, but also red or purple. It is worn with a surplice, a loose, white, wide-sleeved garment ranging from hip length to knee length.
Censor/Thurible	A container in which incense is burned. A piece of charcoal is burned in the thurible and incense is placed on the burning coal.
Chalice	The cup used to hold the wine for consecration during Mass.
Ciborium	A covered bowl used to hold consecrated hosts after Mass.
Corporal	A small white cloth placed on top of the altar cloth to hold the sacred vessels used for the Eucharist.
Credence Table	A small table placed to the side of the altar that holds items used during Mass.
Cross	A vertical bar with a horizontal bar across it near the top adorned with a figure of Christ crucified, either positioned permanently in the sanctuary of a church or carried in procession.
Incense Boat	A container to hold incense for burning.
<i>Lectionary for Mass</i>	The book containing the scripture readings used on Sundays and the readings for Mass during the week.

Liturgical Minister Someone who serves in a special role during a liturgical celebration.

Missal/Sacramentary The book containing the prayers used by the priest during Mass.

Parts of the Mass

The Mass is divided into four main parts.

- Introductory Rites - from the entrance song through the opening prayer.
- Liturgy of the Word - from the first reading through the prayer of the faithful.
- Liturgy of the Eucharist - from the preparation of the gifts through the prayer after communion.
- Concluding Rite - the priest's greeting, blessing and dismissal of the assembly.

Purificator

A clean cloth used for wiping the chalice during communion and cleaning it after Mass.

Sacramentary/Missal The book containing the prayers used by the priest during Mass.

Sanctuary

The sacred space around the altar usually set apart in some way from the rest of the church building.

Surplice

A loose, white, wide-sleeved garment ranging from hip length to knee length. It is worn atop a cassock, a long, fitted garment with long sleeves, usually in a dark color, most commonly black, but also red or purple.

Thurible/Censor

A container in which incense is burned. A piece of charcoal is burned in the thurible and incense is placed on the burning coal.

VI. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Guidelines for Altar Server, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,
www.usccb.org/liturgy/current/servers/shtml

Kwatera, Michael, OSB. *The Ministry of Servers*, Second Edition. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004.

Phillipart, David. *Serve God with Gladness: A Manual for Servers*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998.

Nevins, Albert J. *Called to Serve: A Guidebook for Altar Servers*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1993.

VII. CONCLUSION

This handbook was prepared by the Office of Liturgy to assist you who are called to liturgical ministry. It addresses your responsibilities according to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (3rd edition, 2002), the current directive of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.

We are committed to supporting you in this ministry and in your desire to grow in your understanding of the liturgy you serve. It is our hope that this handbook will be the beginning of a dialogue among liturgical ministers that encourages us to reflect upon why we do what we do and how to enter into “full, active, conscious” participation in the liturgy through the ministry to which we have been called.

If you have questions, comments, or ideas to add to the revision of this handbook, please direct them to the Office of Liturgy, 197 East Gay Street, Columbus, OH 43215, 614-221-4640, or to LITMailbox@colsdio.org.

A MINISTER'S PRAYER

(Adapted from an ancient Celtic prayer attributed to St. Patrick).

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.

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