

A Handbook for 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, first and foremost, members of the Body of Christ. Through their baptism they are the "holy people and royal priesthood" whose right and privilege it is to participate in the ministry of Christ. How the lay faithful exercise this ministry in the world varies, 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 - GIRM, Introduction #5).

Since the celebration of the Eucharist is the "action of the whole Church" (GIRM, Introduction #5), everyone in the assembly has "an individual right and duty to contribute their participation" (GIRM #58). 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 need nurturing and support. This handbook has been prepared to help you grow in a deeper understanding and love for the liturgy, your ministry and ultimately the Lord whom we all serve.

I. ALTAR SERVERS

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. As Latin became a language used only 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. More recently still, girls and women were permitted to become altar servers. Despite these changes, altar servers continue to serve an important 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 once again represents the people and responds in their name (GIRM, #209-231).

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.
- Washing the priest's 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 attentive listening along with the people.
- Practicing to carry out these 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 your parish.

Formation for altar servers includes:

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

III. PREPARATION

Those who exercise a liturgical ministry are expected to develop their skills by taking advantage of the training and formation opportunities offered by their parish or through the Office of Liturgy. In addition, they have a serious responsibility to prepare in a more immediate way for the liturgies at which they will 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 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 "thruifer" leads, carrying the container of smoking incense which is called the "thurible".
- When the procession reaches the sanctuary, the cross is placed in its base on the floor and the candles on placed near the altar or on a side table. The servers take their places in the sanctuary.

The Opening Rites

- One server holds the missal (also called the "Sacramentary") so the priest may easily read from it during the greeting, the penitential rite and the opening prayer.
- When the priest completes the 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.

Preparing the Altar and the Gifts

- After the prayers 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 where they were placed before the liturgy, servers take water, a bowl and a towel to the priest. When he has finished washing his hands, the servers return the items to the side table and return to their places.

Communion

- Servers join with the assembly in singing, responding, standing and kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer.
- 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 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 are wearing albs, these should be neatly returned 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 (Exsultet), 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.
Book of the Gospels	The book containing the gospels that is carried in procession each Sunday and from which the priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel.
Chalice	The cup used to hold the wine for consecration during Mass.
Corporal	A small white cloth placed on top of the altar cloth to hold the sacred vessels used for the Eucharist.
Ciborium	A covered bowl used to hold consecrated hosts after Mass.
Credence Table	A small table placed to the side of the altar that holds items used during Mass.
Incense Boat	A container to hold incense for burning.
Lectionary	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 - The parts of the Mass before the scripture reading, 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 and blessing and the dismissal of the assembly.

Purificator

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

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.

Sanctuary

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

VI. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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

VII. CONCLUSION

This handbook has been prepared by the Office of Liturgy to assist you who are called to liturgical ministry. It defines your responsibilities according to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2nd.edition - 1975) the current directives of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.

Consultation and study of the *Institutio Generalis Romani 2000* is in progress. the actual text of the new Roman General Instruction cannot be changed, however, emendations can be made for its application in the United States. While the NCCB Committee on the Liturgy continues its work, Bishop Griffin has directed that no changes be made to current liturgical practice within our diocese (protocol #09/00).

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 between 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:

Sister Rene Simonelic, OSF.
Director/Office of Liturgy

Peace and all good!

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.