

I. THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

"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.

II. ALTAR SERVERS

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have become accustomed to lay people serving during the liturgy as lectors, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, 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 congregation—the group of Christians gathered for prayer and worship—and assist in its prayer. One of the oldest liturgical ministries is that of an altar server.

For many centuries, boys and young men (called "acolytes" when they are 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 may 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. In Masses without a congregation the server once again represents the people and responds in their name.

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

III. TRAINING & FORMATION

All liturgical ministers have the right to adequate training from their parishes 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 may include but are not limited to:

- ◇ Carrying the cross and candles in procession.
- ◇ Presenting the Missal to the presiding priest; 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 carrying 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. Ongoing 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 should include:

- ◇ 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.

IV. 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 for Divine Worship. 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 or cassock and surplice 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.

V. 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 the procession, 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 are placed near the altar or on a side table. The servers take their places in the sanctuary.

THE OPENING RITES

- ◇ One server holds the Roman Missal 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 Missal to the credence 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 (aspergillum), 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.
- ◇ 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. Servers walk out in procession in the same order, and carrying the same items, as they entered.
- ◇ In the sacristy after the liturgy, servers assist in putting away the cross, candles and other items used at Mass.
- ◇ All vestments should be hung with care.

VI. ALTAR SERVERS DURING COVID-19

In these times, one must take many precautions to keep themselves and others safe. Please consult with your pastor as to if altar servers will be scheduled or not. The pastor may choose not to use altar servers as to eliminate contact as much as possible. However, if altar servers are used, please use extreme caution.

- ◇ Prior to Mass, clean your hands with an alcohol-based disinfectant.
- ◇ Altar servers may be asked by the pastor to wear masks.
- ◇ Altar servers may be asked by the pastor to wear gloves when handling the processional cross and/or candles.
 - A good recommendation would be to purchase cloth gloves that would be aesthetically pleasing (rather than surgical gloves). These gloves could then be washed and disinfected.
- ◇ Remember that anything you touch should be properly cleaned following Mass.
- ◇ Depending on the setup of the particular sanctuary, you should be seated at least six feet from other servers, the presider, and deacons.
- ◇ During this time, it is recommended that the presider place the Missal on a stand by his chair as to not expel air directly into the face of the servers.

There is no way to tell how long these measures should be in place. Please follow the guidelines of the Bishop and your pastor.

VII. GLOSSARY

- ◇ **Acolyte-** one who assists or serves the Priest or Deacon at the altar before, during, and after the Communion service. Altar server is known as an Acolyte.
- ◇ **Alb-** is a long white robe worn by the Priest, Deacons and Altar Servers.
- ◇ **Altar-** the Holy table from which the priest presides over the Mass. It is used for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, where the priest consecrates bread and wine into the substance of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.
- ◇ **Altar Server Sacristy-** is the room where the Altar Server albs are stored.
- ◇ **Ambo-** podium where the readings and homily take place.
- ◇ **Aspergillum-** the Aspergillum, or sprinkler, usually looks like a ball on a handle. The priest puts the Aspergillum in a container of Holy Water, so that water will get inside the Aspergillum through little holes. The priest then walks through the church and blesses people and objects by sprinkling them using the Aspergillum.
- ◇ **Baptismal Font-** a stand with a basin or pool containing water in the area of church where Baptism takes place.
- ◇ **Book of Gospels-** the book which contains the Gospel readings.
- ◇ **Chalice-** is the cup that holds the wine for consecration and it becomes the Precious Blood of our Lord.
- ◇ **Chasuble-** the outer most vestment worn by a priest.
- ◇ **Cincture-** is a rope or cord worn around the waist over the alb.
- ◇ **Ciborium(a)-** is used to hold the consecrated Hosts, the Precious Body of Our Lord. The ciboria are kept in the tabernacle.
- ◇ **Cruets-** two small jug-like containers made of glass. One cruet contains wine and the other contains water.
- ◇ **Communion Cup-** is used at Communion for the people to receive the Precious Blood of Jesus.

- ◇ **Corporal-** a large, square white cloth which is placed on the altar underneath the chalice and paten.
- ◇ **Credence Table-** is used to hold the chalice, paten, ciboria, communion cups and other liturgical items before they are brought to the altar.
- ◇ **Cross Bearer-** the altar server who carries the cross in procession.
- ◇ **Dalmatic-** the outermost vestment worn by deacons.
- ◇ **Elements-** the bread and wine to be consecrated at the Eucharist.
- ◇ **Finger Bowl / Lavabo-** the bowl is used to catch the water poured over the priest's hands.
- ◇ **Incense boat-** is a covered container, with a spoon, for the incense that will be burned in the thurible.
- ◇ **Monstrance-** typically looks like a sun burst with a glass center. The back of the Monstrance has a small door. The inside holds a glass container called the Luna. The priest or deacon puts a consecrated Host in the Luna, and places the Luna in the Monstrance. The Monstrance is then placed on the altar for Benediction or Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.
- ◇ **Offertory Table-** a small table or surface in the back of the Church. The wine and hosts are placed before mass to be carried to the Sanctuary during the Presentation of the Gifts.
- ◇ **Pall-** a square, protective cover of stiffened cloth placed on the chalice during Mass.
- ◇ **Paschal Candle-** a large decorated candle (with a cross and Alpha and Omega letters). It is lit during all baptisms, funeral services and during the Masses of the Easter season.
- ◇ **Paten-** a plate used to hold the large hosts which will become the consecrated body of Jesus.
- ◇ **Pews-** the bench-like seats in the main body of the Church.
- ◇ **Presider's Chair (Celebrant Chair)-** the chair in which the priest sits.
- ◇ **Processional Cross/ Crucifix-** the cross carried in and out during Mass.
- ◇ **Purificator-** a fine linen (or other) white cloth used for wiping the chalice during the administration of Communion and for cleansing the paten and chalice during ablutions.

- ◇ **Pyx-** a small metal container which is used to hold consecrated host(s) when visiting the sick or homebound.
- ◇ **Roman Missal or just the Missal-** is the large book with the red cover containing all of the prayers used by the priest at Mass. This book is placed on the altar during the Mass.
- ◇ **Sanctuary Candle-** a clear/translucent container with a candle that burns near the place where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. The candle is never extinguished when the Sacrament is present.
- ◇ **Sacristy-** a room where the priests and deacons, altar servers, and other ministers prepare for the Mass.
- ◇ **Sanctuary-** a sacred consecrated area around the altar of a church where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated; and the altar, ambo, tabernacle, credence table, priest, deacon and altar server chairs are located.
- ◇ **Sanctus Bell-** a set of bells sometimes called Sacred Bell because it is rung at the time of the Sanctus, the “Holy, Holy, Holy, and may be rung to call attention to the Consecration of the bread and wine.
- ◇ **Tabernacle-** a box or house-shaped receptacle where the consecrated Eucharistic bread (Jesus) is reserved after Holy Communion has been distributed.
- ◇ **Thurible-** a metal container that holds the charcoal for the incense. This is carried by the server in the right hand.
- ◇ **Vestibule-** the back of the Church where the main entrance doors to the Church are located.
- ◇ **Vestments-** are what the priest and deacons wear during Mass.

VIII. LITURGICAL COLORS

The color of vestments gives expression to the mysteries of our faith and is like a calendar for the church year.

- ◇ **White/Gold-** Masses of Easter, Christmas season, Feasts and Memorials of Jesus, Mary, the angels, saints (who were not martyrs), weddings, and funerals. This color symbolizes purity, holiness, joy, triumph, and the Resurrection.
- ◇ **Red-** used on Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday), Good Friday, Pentecost, Feasts of the Apostles, Evangelists and Martyrs. Red symbolizes the Holy Spirit and the blood of martyrs.
- ◇ **Green-** used during Ordinary time, symbolizing life, growth, and hope.
- ◇ **Violet-** used during Lent and Advent, and funerals symbolizing Penance, atonement and expiation.
- ◇ **Black-** used at some funerals, and All Souls' Day. This color expresses mourning, sin, death, and judgement.
- ◇ **Rose-** On the Third Sunday of Advent and the Fourth Sunday of Lent, the color rose may be worn as a sign of anticipated joy.

IX. MINISTERS & FIGURES

- ◇ **Altar Servers-** a young boy or girl, or an adult who is specially trained to assist the priest at Mass.
- ◇ **Bishop-** is higher than a priest. He has the authority to ordain priests. This authority is given to him by the Pope.
- ◇ **Cardinal-** is a high church official ranking next in line to the Pope. He assists and advises the Pope, consecrates Bishops, and elects the Pope.
- ◇ **Deacon-** assists the priest. He can assist in preaching, perform baptism, marriages, and helps run the parish. He does not offer Mass or hear Confessions.

- ◇ **Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion-** a person who assists the priest in the distribution of Communion. They also can bring Communion to people who are sick at home or in the hospital.
- ◇ **Lector-** the person who reads (first and second readings) and sometimes the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass.
- ◇ **Priest-** specially ordained men who consecrate and offer the Body and Blood of Jesus at Mass. They forgive sins, perform baptisms, marriages, funerals, run the parish and lead the people closer to God.
- ◇ **Pope-** is the supreme authority of the Catholic Church. He is sometime called “Pontiff” and “Holy Father” and will normally be the leader of the church until he dies.
- ◇ **Sacristan-** the person whose ministry is the care of the sacristy, sanctuary, vestments, sacred vessels, etc.

X. CONCLUSION

Please note that this handbook is an overview of what it means to be an altar server, common terms, etc. Each parish is different in what the role of the server looks like. Please follow the guidance of your pastor detailing what should be done and in what manner at your parish. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask your pastor or contact the Diocesan Office for Divine Worship. We will be happy to assist you in any way possible.



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