The Proper Care and Cleansing of Altar Linens & Sacred Vessels in the Archdiocese of Boston

In recent years the Office of Divine Worship has received a number of inquiries concerning the care and cleansing of altar linens and sacred vessels. The following directives are adapted from the USCCB Committee on the Liturgy and reflect some modifications based upon the most recent General Instruction on the Roman Missal.

Whatever is set aside for use in the liturgy takes on a certain sacred character both by the blessing it receives and the sacred functions it fulfills. Thus, the cloths and sacred vessels used at the altar in the course of the Eucharistic celebration should be treated with the care and respect due to those things used in the preparation and celebration of the sacred mysteries.

Altar linens should be "beautiful and finely made, though mere lavishness and ostentation must be avoided." Altar cloths, corporals, purificators, lavabo towels and palls should be made of absorbent cloth and never of paper. Sacred vessels should be made of precious metal, although in the United States other precious materials may be used. Glass, ceramic or clay chalices and patens are not appropriate for use in the liturgy, since they are easily breakable or damaged if dropped.

Altar linens and sacred vessels are appropriately blessed according to the Order for the Blessing of Articles for Liturgical Use.

Altar Cloths

Just as the altar is a sign for us of Christ the living stone, altar cloths are used "out of reverence for the celebration of the memorial of the Lord and the banquet that gives us his body and blood." By their beauty and form they add to the dignity of the altar in much the same way that vestments solemnly ornament the priests and sacred ministers. Such cloths also serve a practical purpose, however, in absorbing whatever may be spilled of the Precious Blood or other sacramental elements. Thus the material of altar cloths should be absorbent and easily laundered.

While there may be several altar cloths in the form of drappings or even frontals, their shape, size, and decoration should be in keeping with the design of the altar. Unless the altar cloths have been stained with the Precious Blood, it is not necessary that they be cleaned in the sacristry. Care should be taken, however, that proper cleaning methods are used to preserve the beauty and life of the altar cloth. It is appropriate for those who care for sacred vessels, cloths and other instrumenta of the liturgy to accompany their work with prayer.

Corporals

Sacred vessels containing the Body and Blood of the Lord are always placed on top of a corporal. A corporal is spread by the deacon (or in the absence of a deacon, another minister) in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar. When concelebrants receive the Eucharist from the altar, a corporal is placed beneath all chalices or patens. Finally, it is appropriate that a corporal be used on a side table, and placed beneath the sacred vessels which have been left to be purified after Mass.
Because one of the purposes of the corporal is to contain whatever small particles of the consecrated host may be left at the conclusion of Mass, care should be taken that the transferral of consecrated hosts between sacred vessels should always be done over a corporal. The corporal should be white in color and of sufficient dimensions so that at least the main chalice and paten may be placed upon it completely. When necessary, more than one corporal may be used. The material of corporals should be absorbent and easily laundered.

Any apparent particles of the consecrated bread which remain on the corporal after the distribution of Holy Communion should be consumed in the course of the purification of the sacred vessels. Please note that the Corporal should never be left on the Altar after Mass, but should be opened and placed on the Altar during the preparation of the gifts and the altar, and then should be folded carefully following the distribution of Communion, so as to contain whatever small particles of the consecrated host that may remain. These particles should be emptied into the sacarium between Eucharistic celebrations.

When corporals are cleansed they should first be rinsed in a sacarium and only afterwards washed with laundry soaps in the customary manner. Every church or chapel should be equipped with a sacarium. However, if no sacarium is present, the linens should be rinsed or hand-washed in a basin before being washed in the laundry. The water in the basin should then be reverently poured into the ground at an appropriate spot on the church property.

Corporals should be ironed in such a way that their distinctive manner of folding helps to contain whatever small particles of the consecrated host may remain at the conclusion of the Eucharistic celebration.

Purificators

Purificators are customarily brought to the altar with chalices and are used to wipe the Precious Blood from the lip of the chalice and to purify sacred vessels. They should be white in color. Whenever the Precious Blood is distributed from the chalice or even accidentally spilled, purificators should be used to absorb the spill. The material of purificators should be absorbent and easily laundered. The purificator should never be made of paper or any other disposable material.

Because of their function, purificators regularly become stained with the Precious Blood. It is, therefore, essential that they should first be cleansed in a sacarium and only afterwards washed with laundry soaps in the customary manner. Purificators should be ironed in such a way that they may be easily used for the wiping of the lip of the chalice.

Lavabo Towels

The Order of Mass calls for the washing of the hands (lavabo) of the priest celebrant in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar. Since it is his hands and not only his fingers (as in the former Order of Mass) which are washed at the lavabo, the lavabo towel should be of adequate size and sufficiently absorbent for drying his hands. Neither the color nor the material of the lavabo towel is prescribed, though efforts should be made to avoid the appearance of a "dish towel," "bath towel" or other cloth with a purely secular use.

Other Cloths

Other cloths may also be used at Mass. A pall may be used to cover the chalice at Mass in order to protect the Precious Blood from insects or other foreign objects. In order that palls may be kept immaculately clean they should be made with removable covers of a worthy material which may be easily washed in the sacarium and then laundered. Chalice veils either of the color of the day, or white may be fittingly used to cover the chalice before it is prepared and after it has been purified.
Disposal of Worn Altar Linens

Consistent with the disposal of all things blessed for use in the liturgy, it is appropriate that altar linens, which show signs of wear and can no longer be used, should normally be disposed of either by burial or burning.

Sacred Vessels

Among the requisites for the celebration of Mass, the sacred vessels are held in special honor, and among these especially the chalice and paten. The General Instruction on the Roman Missal (GIRM, no. 328) notes: “Sacred vessels should be made from precious metal. If they are made from metal that rusts or from a metal less precious than gold, they should generally be gilded on the inside.” It goes on to say that in the Dioceses of the United States, “sacred vessels may also be made from other solid materials which in the common estimation in each region are considered precious or noble... provided that such materials are suitable for sacred use” (GIRM, 329). The GIRM goes on to speak about chalices and other vessels that are intended to serve as receptacles for the Blood of the Lord, noting that, “they are to have a bowl of material that does not absorb liquids” (GIRM, 330). If materials other than precious metal are used, “preference is always given to materials that do not easily break or deteriorate” (GIRM, 329).

Sacred vessels that do not meet the expectations of the liturgical law are no longer to be used and may be properly disposed of by burial on church grounds or in a catholic cemetery. Please note: Glass, ceramic, and clay chalices and patens are not appropriate for use in the liturgy, since they easily break.

The Purification of Sacred Vessels

In 2005, a special permission (indult) expired, which allowed extraordinary ministers in the United States (unlike elsewhere) to assist in the purification of the sacred vessels. The indult was not renewed by the Vatican, and therefore the purification of the vessels is reserved to the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion.

Paragraph 279 of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal says: “The sacred vessels are purified by the Priest, the Deacon, or an instituted acolyte after Communion or after Mass, in so far as possible at the credence table. The purification of the chalice is done with water alone or with wine and water, which is then consumed by whoever does the purification. The paten is wiped clean as usual with the purificator. Care is to be taken that whatever may remain of the Blood of Christ after the distribution of Communion is consumed immediately and completely at the altar.”

Conclusion

The manner in which we treat sacred things (even those of lesser significance than the chalice, paten, liturgical furnishings, etc.) fosters and expresses our openness to the graces God gives to His Church in every celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, by the diligent care of altar linens and sacred vessels, the Church expresses her joy at the inestimable gifts she receives from Christ's altar.