

BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
GUIDE FOR ALTAR SERVERS

*“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.
The Father will honor whoever serves me.”
-John 12:26*

Thank you for your decision to serve your parish community. What might seem to you like a small act is truly a powerful example that celebrating Mass is as much about what we do in service for God as it is what God does for us. The hope for this guide is that it will give you the help you need to do your best each time you serve.

Your Ministry is rooted in the simple fact that whenever Jesus had a meal, someone had to have set the table and serve the food and drink, including in the upper room at the Last Supper. Jesus almost always observed the detailed rituals and customs of his culture. Accounts of early Christian celebrations of the Eucharist mention those who assisted deacons and priests. From the Middle Ages until recent times, service at the altar was restricted to boys and young men, some (but not all) of whom were ordained “acolytes” and on the path to priesthood. At that time the prayers of the Mass were quietly spoken by the priest in Latin, so it was up to the servers to make all of the responses since they were the only ones who could hear him. In modern times, following the reform of the liturgy, the server ministry has greatly changed. Women are now permitted to serve. The responses of the Mass belong to the entire assembly. Today the duties of the altar server are different from parish to parish, according to need. However, many things have remained the same throughout the Church’s history. Servers still typically wear special vestments and, along with the priest and deacon, are the most visible ministers of liturgical celebrations. They remain the priest’s most important assistants, helping him so that he may concentrate on his duties as celebrant.

Who may serve

At Blessed Sacrament, anyone in 5th grade or above who has received First Communion may serve at the altar. There is no upper limit for this ministry

This ministry is a service to God and to the faithful of our community. It deserves and requires your best effort. Attend trainings when offered, study this guide, show up when you are scheduled, act calmly and professionally when you are serving.

I. Schedules

It goes without saying that you are expected to show up when you are scheduled to serve. You will usually be scheduled to serve at the Mass time you indicated (Sat 5:00, Sun 8:30, Sun 10:30), but you may also be scheduled at other Masses as needed.

Typically servers will be scheduled into the following slots, with duties identified later in this guide:

- a) Principal
- b) Assistant
- c) Crossbearer

The schedule will usually be done three months at a time and posted on the website (go to www.blessedsacramentnc.org, select "Liturgy & Worship" under the Ministries menu, and click on the altar server link on the left). It will also be posted in the altar server vesting room.

When you cannot serve a scheduled Mass, you must arrange for your own replacement. You will be provided with a list of names and contact information for other servers. Do not call the parish office.

If you miss two scheduled assignments during the year (September to September) without arranging for a substitute, you will be removed from the active list of servers.

When attending a Mass for which you are not scheduled, always check to see if the scheduled servers have arrived. If someone is missing with five minutes or less to go before Mass, please step in and take their place. The sacristan and the **Principal** servers should look for a substitute if needed. Please volunteer even if you are not wearing the proper footwear because you were not expecting to serve.

II. Appearance

Comb your hair. Wash your hands. Keep your fingernails trimmed.

Dark colored dress shoes or nice sandals are to be worn when serving. No athletic shoes or flip-flops are to be worn.

The altar server vestments are an alb (light robe-like garment) and cincture (tied around the waste). Take good care of them, since they are used by all servers. Please hang them up properly.

Your alb should fit properly. It should be long enough to come just to the top of your shoes.

III. Before Mass

Arrive at least 15 minutes before Mass. It is important that you arrive on time so that the priest or sacristan isn't worried about whether or not you will show up.

Check your name off as present on the altar server schedule posted in the vesting room. If you are filling in for someone, cross out their name and write your name on the schedule.

If it is five minutes before Mass and you have not arrived, a replacement will be found. When you are not scheduled, please check in to make sure those who are scheduled are present. Please volunteer to serve if someone is missing.

When you arrive in the vesting room, find a properly fitting alb. It should go all the way to the top of your shoes. If the alb you select is too short or too long, please find one that fits. Select a cincture for your waste. It should hang down to your ankle, never all the way to the floor.

Immediately after vesting, the **Principal** is responsible for lighting the candles on either side of the altar and tabernacle. Additionally, if the large Paschal candle is next to the ambo (usually during the Easter season), it should be lit as well.

Immediately after vesting, the **Crossbearer** goes into the church and gets the processional cross. It is taken to the gathering space via the side aisle of the church (not down the center aisle).

All servers meet the priest and other liturgical ministers ten minutes prior to Mass in the gathering space to pray. After the prayer, go to your place outside the center church doors in the gathering space for the procession.

IV. Demeanor

Since you are almost always visible as you carry out your duties, it's important that you're aware of your demeanor at all times during Mass.

Eyes

Your eyes should always be focused on the liturgical action wherever that is taking place. It could be at the altar, the presidential chair (where the priest sits), the ambo, or even in the direction you are walking. You should not be looking all around, for instance, at others in the congregation.

Standing

Stand up straight with both feet flat on the ground, shoulders relaxed, head up. Whenever you are standing, but don't have anything to hold, always fold your hands together in front of your chest.

Sitting

Sit up straight with your knees together. Do not cross your legs, or tap or swing your feet. Keep your hands on your lap or at your side.

Walking

Take your time, never rushing, always with dignity. Never hurry or run. If you are walking with another server, always remain together, side-by-side, walking at the same pace. Fold your hands together in front of your chest when you don't have anything to hold.

Kneeling

Fold your hands together in front of your chest, as you do when you are standing.

Bowing

Stop and make a respectful, slow bow from your head and shoulders at these times a) Before you turn your back to the altar when you are leaving to go back to the credence table or your seat, b) Returning a bow from the deacon or priest.

Genuflecting

You only need to genuflect (go down to one knee as a sign of respect) before or after Mass (never during) when you pass from one side of the tabernacle to the other.

Behavior

Our goal is that Mass is as prayerful and focused as possible. You are expected to participate fully in the entire Mass by being attentive and participating in the responses, prayers, and singing. Any fooling around, joking, or distracting or disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated and is grounds for dismissal from the ministry. If for some reason it is necessary to speak with another server with a question or clarification, please do so quickly, quietly and simply as to not cause distraction. No other conversations should take place during Mass.

V. Procedures for a typical weekend Mass

This guide attempts to cover your duties at Mass. However, since your principal duty is to serve the priest, you should always follow his instructions even if it differs from what is in this guide.

Also, depending on the occasion, there might be additional duties in addition to those listed here. Do not get nervous about having to do something that's new or different. Do the best you can, always in a calm, prayerful way.

During special times of the year, for instance, the liturgies of Holy Week, or when the bishop comes for Confirmation, there will always be a time for specific instruction, either before Mass, or at another scheduled time.

Everyone makes mistakes! That's how we learn! The good news is, chances are no one else in the congregation will know if you make a mistake. Calmly make the correction, or redo what you were supposed to do. No need to laugh, cry, or worry about it. Correct, forget about it, move on, and try not to make the mistake again!

If you have a question, before or after Mass, never hesitate to ask a more experienced server, the sacristan, or even the priest.

Now to the Mass itself....

A. Entrance Procession

Line up outside of the church doors in the gathering space in this order... 1) the **Crossbearer**, 2) the **Principal and Assistant** side by side, 3) the **Lector** carrying the Book of the Gospels, 4) the **Priest**. The priest may instruct the **Principal** to go into the church to ring the bell to announce the beginning of Mass. The ushers will open the doors. As the music begins, begin processing, led by the **Crossbearer** holding the cross high, hands at chest-height. *This is not a race!* Proceed slowly up the aisle. The **Principal** and **Assistant** wait at the door until the **Crossbearer** gets to the first pew row before processing. *Keep the same space all the way down the aisle.* Upon arriving at the altar the **Crossbearer** stops, then turns to the left, places the cross on the stand, and goes to her/his seat. The **Principal** and **Assistant** stop, bow together to the altar when they arrive, and go to their place.

The front row of the section of pews next to the baptismal font is reserved for the servers. The **Principal** server should sit nearest the font, followed by the **Assistant**, and then the **Crossbearer**.

B. Collect

During the singing the Gloria, or, when the Gloria is not sung (during Advent and Lent) the **Principal** should go to the credence table and pick up the Missal (large book of prayers used

during Mass). As soon as the priest says, “Let us pray,” the **Principal** takes the book before the priest. The priest will open it to the proper page. Hold the book open so the priest can read the prayer. When the priest indicates, close the Missal, return it to the credence table, and return to your place.

C. Preparation of the Altar

Immediately after the Universal Prayer (when we all respond, “Lord, hear our prayer.”) the assembly will sit and music will begin. At that time the **Crossbearer** takes the cross from the stand and proceeds slowly down the aisle to the back of the church to await the procession of the gifts.

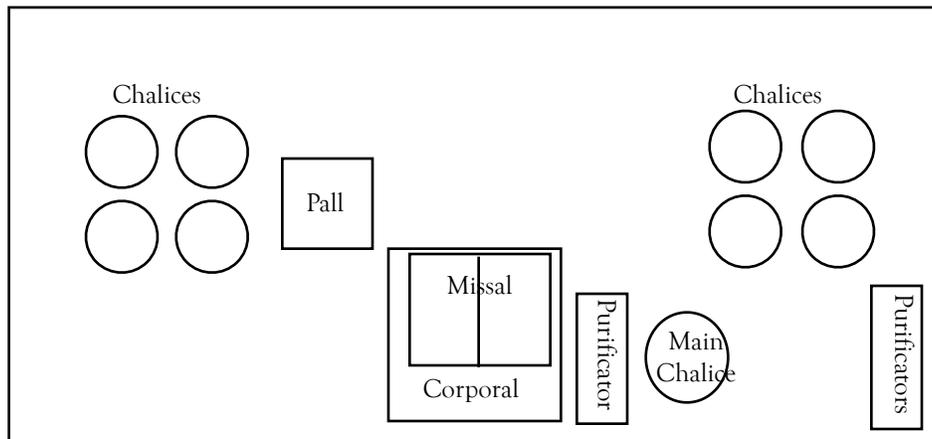
Meanwhile, the **Principal** and the **Assistant** go to the credence table. The **Principal** brings the main chalice, along with the purificator, corporal and pall, to the altar. The **Assistant** brings the Missal to the altar. The **Principal** unfolds the corporal, and places the the pall and priest purificator in the correct positions (see diagram below). Finally, the **Principal** places the Missal on the corporal.

Meanwhile, after he/she has brought up the Missal, the **Assistant** begins bringing the other chalices, two at a time, from the cart behind the large brick pillar and places them in position on the altar. The **Assistant** retrieves the purificators for communion and places them on the altar.

The **Principal** is ultimately responsible for the proper setup of the altar.

After the altar is set up, the **Principal** and **Assistant** go back to their place to await the procession of the gifts. The **Principal** should pause and bow to the priest indicating the altar is properly prepared.

Altar Setup



D. Presentation of the Gifts

When the gifts are ready, the priest will stand and move to the front of the altar. The **Principle** and **Assistant** should stand and follow him. When you arrive at the front of the altar, stand on either side of the priest. *Be sure never to cross in front of the priest, always behind.*

When the priest arrives in front of the altar, the **Crossbearer** begins slowly leading the procession of the gifts to the front. Upon arrival at the front the **Crossbearer** takes the cross back to the stand and returns to her/his place.

The priest will hand the various gifts to both servers. Wait alongside the priest as he receives the gifts. If he bows in appreciation to those who have brought the gifts, bow with him. Upon receiving the gifts, the follow the priest back to the altar. Upon arrival at the altar, the **Principal** and **Assistant** will hand the gifts to the the priest. *Do not place the gifts on the altar... always hand them to the priest.*

After handing the gifts to the priest, the **Principal** and **Assistant** go to the credence table. The **Principal** retrieves the cruet of water and both return to the altar (the **Assistant** carries nothing). Once the priest has filled the chalice with wine, he will hand the empty flagon to the **Assistant** and take the water cruet from the **Principal**. He will pour a little water into the chalice and hand the water cruet back to the **Principal**. Both servers then return the cruet and flagon together to the credence table. The **Principal** then takes the water cruet (again) and lavabo bowl, and the **Assistant** takes the towel, unfolded, from the credence table. Return to the altar. When ready, the priest will turn to you. The **Principal** pours a little water over the priest's hands into the lavabo bowl. The priest will take and return the towel from the **Assistant**. Return everything back to the credence table. Make sure the table is arranged neatly (again, the responsibility of the **Principal**), and return to your places.

E. Eucharistic Prayer

After the singing of the Sanctus (Holy, Holy), all three servers kneel on the first step of the sanctuary in the same order as you are seated (**Principal** closest to the tabernacle).

During the Eucharistic Prayer, there are three times when the **Principal** rings the bells:

1. First, during the Epiclesis, the priest will place his hands over the bread, ring one time
2. Second, during the elevation of the consecrated bread, ring three times
3. Third, during the elevation of the consecrated wine, ring three times

Note: Bells are traditionally not used during the season of Lent

F. Communion

Stand and walk up the steps of the sanctuary to receive Communion. After receiving Communion the **Principal** retrieves the Missal from the altar and places it on the credence table. All the servers return to their place in the pew for the remainder of Communion.

After Communion, when the priest returns to the altar, the **Principal** retrieves the water cruet, and the **Principal**, **Assistant**, and **Crossbearer** approach the altar together. The **Principal** holds the cruet for the priest as needed. As he purifies the vessels, he will hand them to the **Assistant** and **Crossbearer**. They take them to the credence table and return to the altar until all the vessels are off the altar. The **Principal** returns the cruet to the credence table and all return to their place.

G. Prayer after Communion

Immediately after the singing of the Song of Praise, the **Principal** goes to the credence table and picks up the Missal. When the priest says, "Let us pray," the **Principal** brings the Missal to the

priest just as the Collect prayer at the beginning of Mass. The Missal is returned to the credence table after the prayer.

H. Recessional

After the final blessing, immediately after the people say, “Thanks be to God,” and the music begins, the **Crossbearer** retrieves the cross from the stand. All the servers wait for the priest to kiss the altar, then follow him around to the front of the altar. Except for the **Crossbearer**, all bow to the altar with the priest. Immediately after the bow, led by the **Crossbearer**, followed by the **Principal** and **Assistant** side-by-side, and then the priest, slowly process to the back of the church.

I. After Mass

After Mass the **Crossbearer** returns the cross to the stand by means of the side aisle (not the center!). The **Principal** extinguishes the altar candles. All servers return to the vesting room and put away their albs and cinctures in the closet neatly. Finally, recite the prayer for servers after Mass silently before leaving:

Lord Jesus,
thank you for the opportunity
to serve You during the Holy Mass.
In Your Sacred Presence,
my heart is filled with joy and peace.
May Your Spirit always guide me
so I may grow in Your love
by the grace of the Heavenly Father.