

# Altar Server



Handbook

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# Saint Tarcisus

Patron Saint of Altar Servers

Tarcisus was a twelve-year-old acolyte during one of the fierce Roman persecutions of the third century, probably during that of Valerian. Each day, from a secret meeting place in the catacombs where Christians gathered for Mass, a deacon would be sent to the prisons to carry the Eucharist to those Christians condemned to die. At one point, there was no deacon to send and so St. Tarcisus, an acolyte, was sent carrying the "Holy Mysteries" to those in prison.

On the way, he was stopped by boys his own age who were not Christians but knew him as a playmate and lover of games. He was asked to join their games, but this time he refused and the crowd of boys noticed that he was carrying something. Somehow, he was also recognized as a Christian, and the small gang of boys, anxious to view the Christian "Mysteries," became a mob and turned upon Tarcisus with fury. He went down under the blows, and it is believed that a fellow Christian drove off the mob and rescued the young acolyte.

The mangled body of Tarcisus was carried back to the catacombs, but the boy died on the way from his injuries. He was buried in the cemetery of St. Callistus, and his relics are claimed by the church of San Silvestro in Capite.

In the fourth century, Pope St. Damasus wrote a poem about this "boy-martyr of the Eucharist" and says that, like another St. Stephen, he suffered a violent death at the hands of a mob rather than give up the Sacred Body to "raging dogs." His story became well known when Cardinal Wiseman made it a part of his novel *Fabiola*, in which the story of the young acolyte is dramatized and a very moving account given of his martyrdom and death.

Tarcisus, one of the patron saints of altar servers, has always been an example of youthful courage and devotion, and his story was one that was told again and again to urge others to a like heroism in suffering for their faith. In the *Passion of Pope Stephen*, written in the sixth century, Tarcisus is said to be an acolyte of the pope himself and, if so, this explains the great veneration in which he was held and the reason why he was chosen for so difficult a mission.

If this young child can become a saint, then youth is no barrier to holiness. The call to holiness begins at baptism, and we do not have to wait for old age and gray hair to serve God. Youthful saints tell us something about sanctity, and their example is especially luminous as they dedicate their young lives to God.



# What To Do Before Mass

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1. Make sure you are dressed appropriately to serve Mass
  - a. *Note – servers should dress nicely and have appropriate shoes (this means no tennis shoes, sandals, flip-flops, etc)*
2. Arrive at least 15 minutes before Mass begins
3. Write your name on the sign-in sheet in the server's sacristy
  - a. *Note – if you are substituting for another altar server please indicate who you are substituting for in parentheses*
4. Put on an alb and make sure that it fits properly
  - a. *Note – the alb should come down to just above your shoes*
5. Put a cross around your neck and tie the cincture around your waist
  - a. *Note – the color of the cincture should be the liturgical color of the day. If you are unsure of what color to wear, you can ask the presider or consult the calendar on the wall (the date is printed in the liturgical color of the day)*
6. Check with the presider to see if there are any special instructions for Mass
7. Take the gifts to the cross isle
  - a. *Note – this ordinarily means the ciborium filled with bread and the cruets filled with water and wine*
8. Place the Roman Missal on the table next to where the cross bearer is going to sit
9. Double check to make sure everything that will be needed for Mass is on the credence table
  - a. The large corporal
  - b. The priest's chalice and purificator
  - c. The pitcher, bowl and towel for the washing of hands
  - d. The tray with 6 empty ciboria
  - e. The tray with 4 chalices filled with wine and 4 purificators
10. Light the candles on either side of the altar and on either side of the tabernacle using the candle lighter

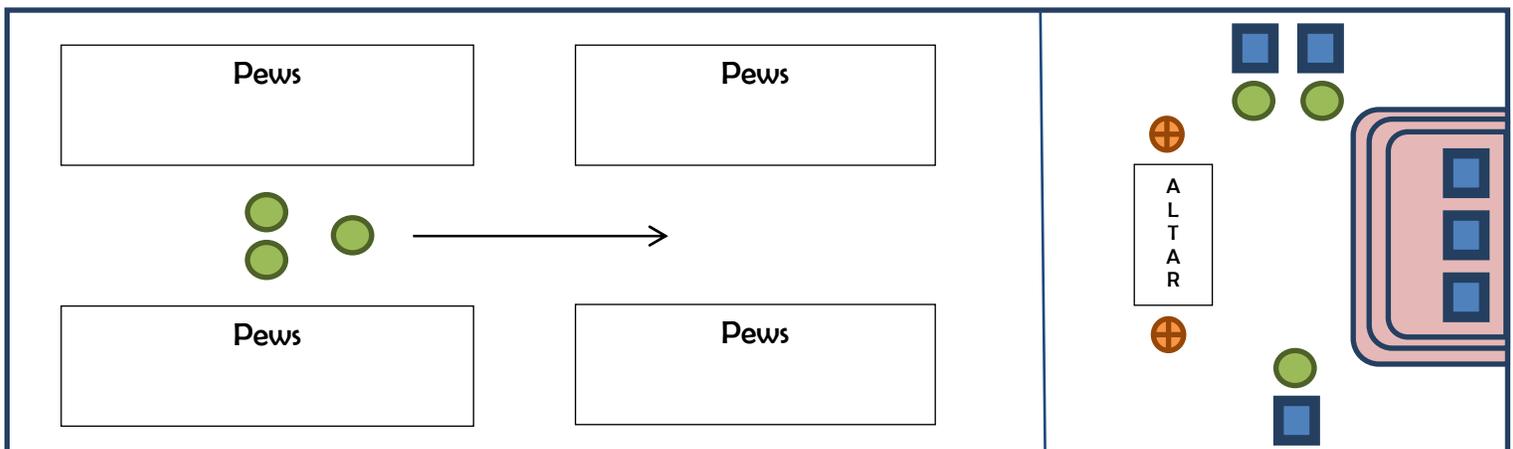
11. Meet with the other altar servers to decide who will handle the various responsibilities
  - a. If there are 4 altar servers
    - i. 1 server will carry the cross and handle the Roman Missal
    - ii. 2 servers will carry the candles, help receive the gifts and handle the things that need to be done at the altar during the Liturgy of the Eucharist
    - iii. 1 server will handle the incense
  - b. If there are 3 altar servers
    - i. 1 server will carry the cross and handle the Roman Missal
    - ii. The other 2 servers will carry the candles, help receive the gifts and handle the things that need to be done at the altar during the Liturgy of the Eucharist
  - c. If there are 2 altar servers
    - i. 1 server will carry the cross and hand the Roman Missal
      1. *Note – Candles are not carried in procession when there are only 2 servers*
    - ii. Both servers will help receive the gifts and handle the things that need to be done at the altar during the Liturgy of the Eucharist
  - d. If there is only 1 altar server
    - i. This server will carry the cross, handle the Roman Missal, help receive the gifts, and handle the things that need to be done at the altar during the Liturgy of the Eucharist
12. The altar servers will accompany the other ministers to the back of the Church before Mass begins



# How To Serve Mass

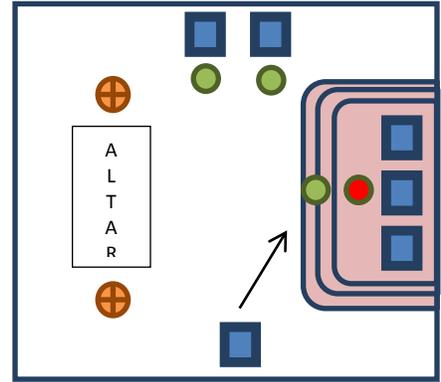
## Entrance Procession

1. Gather at the back of the Church
  - a. *Note – on rare occasions, the Mass may begin elsewhere – for example Mass begins outside on Palm Sunday*
2. After the Prayer Before Mass, line up according to the order below
  - a. 1<sup>st</sup> – Incense (*if used*)
  - b. 2<sup>nd</sup> – Cross Bearer
  - c. 3<sup>rd</sup> – The 2 servers carrying the candles standing next to each other
    - i. *Note – if there are only 2 servers at the Mass, the second server does not carry a candle, but simply follows the cross bearer with hands folded*
3. Once the words to the opening hymn have begun, begin processing down the center aisle
  - a. *Note – the procession should be dignified, i.e. not rushed, but not unnecessarily slow either*
4. When the procession has arrived at the first step of the Sanctuary, the cross bearer does not stop, but proceeds immediately into the sanctuary and hangs the cross up on whichever side he or she is sitting and then goes to their chair
5. Upon reaching the first step of the Sanctuary, the 2 servers carrying the candles proceed immediately to the altar and place their candles in the stands on either side and then proceeds to their chairs
6. *Note – if there are only 2 servers, then the server following the cross genuflects before entering the Sanctuary and then goes to their chair*



# Introductory Rites

1. The order of the Introductory Rites is as follows
  - a. Sign of the Cross
  - b. Greeting
  - c. Act of Penitence
  - d. Gloria
  - e. Opening Prayer



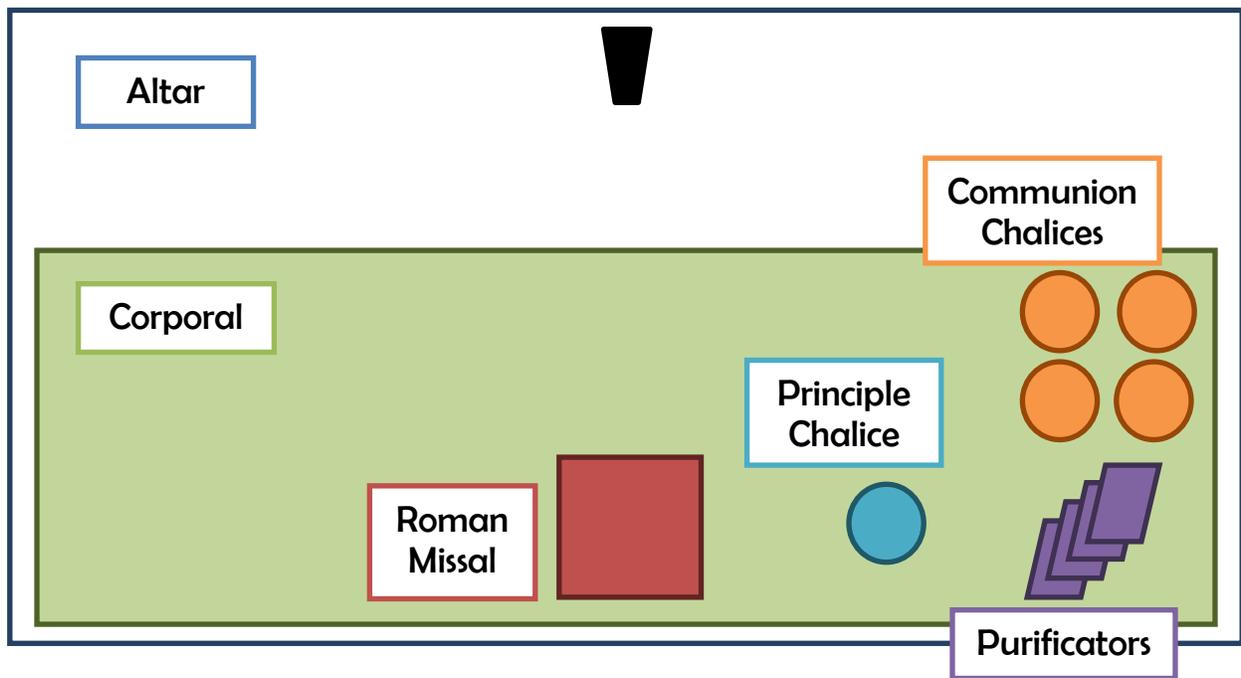
2. After the Sign of the Cross, Greeting, Act of Penitence, and the Gloria, the priest will say “Let Us Pray” - in response to which, the server will bring the Roman Missal and stand in front of the priest for the opening prayer
3. The entire congregation will respond to the prayer by saying “Amen,” at which time the server will return to their chair with the Roman Missal

# Liturgy of the Word

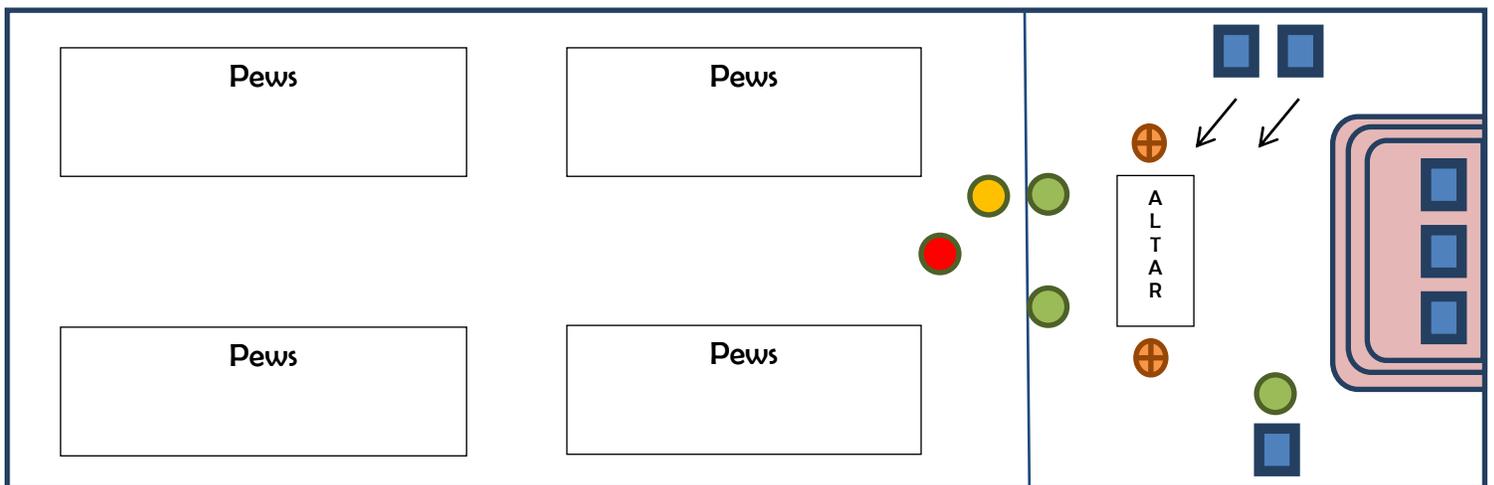
1. The order of the Liturgy of the Word is as follows
  - a. First Reading
  - b. Responsorial Psalm
  - c. Second Reading
  - d. Gospel Acclamation
  - e. Gospel
  - f. Homily
  - g. Creed
  - h. General Intercessions
2. During the Liturgy of the Word, while the altar servers don't have any specific actions to perform, they should endeavor to set an example of reverence in their posture and behavior by sitting properly with their feet on the floor and their hands in their laps. They should also strive to fully participate in the Mass by being attentive to the Scriptures as they are proclaimed, and by praying the Creed and General Intercessions with the rest of the congregation.

# Liturgy of the Eucharist

1. The order of the Liturgy of the Eucharist is as follows:
  - a. Preparation of the Gifts
  - b. Eucharistic Prayer
  - c. Communion Rite
2. After the General Intercessions, the server(s) responsible for handling the things that need to be done at the altar will proceed to take the items from the credence table and set up the altar
  - a. If there is a deacon assisting at Mass, the server(s) simply bring the following items and hand them to the deacon who will actually set up the altar
    - i. Corporal
    - ii. Roman Missal
    - iii. Principal Chalice
    - iv. Communion Chalices
    - v. Purificators
  - b. If there is no deacon assisting at Mass, the server(s) will need to set up the altar as follows
    - i. 1<sup>st</sup> – the large corporal is unfolded
    - ii. 2<sup>nd</sup> – the Roman Missal is placed on the altar on top of the corporal
      1. *Note – you will need to check with the priest to see where he would like the Roman Missal placed*
    - iii. 3<sup>rd</sup> – The principle chalice is placed on the right side of the altar on top on the corporal
    - iv. 4<sup>th</sup> – The communion chalices and purificators are placed on the upper right side of the corporal
      1. These are carried over on the tray by one server while the other server places them on the altar. The tray is then taken back to the credence table

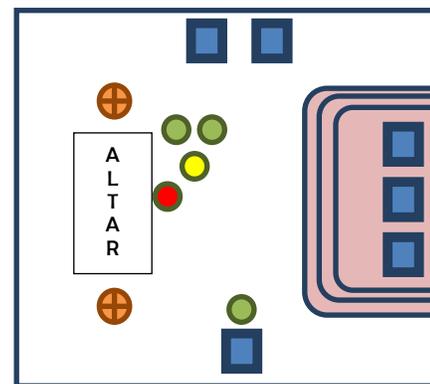


3. Once the altar is set up, the server(s) returns to his or her chair until it is time to receive the gifts
4. When the priest stands up and goes to stand in front of the altar to receive the gifts, that is the cue to the server(s) to come and stand behind the priest (or the deacon if he is assisting)



5. The priest will receive the gifts from those bringing them forward and will hand them to you (or he will hand them to the deacon who will hand them to you)
6. Once the gifts have been received, come to stand behind the altar and hand the priest the things that he will need in the order in which he will need them

- a. 1<sup>st</sup> – hand him the ciboria with the hosts (or hand it to the deacon if he is assisting)
- b. 2<sup>nd</sup> – hand him the wine and the water (or hand it to the deacon if he is assisting) and then take them back to the credence table
- c. 3<sup>rd</sup> – retrieve the bowl, pitcher, and towel and return to the altar for the washing of the hands



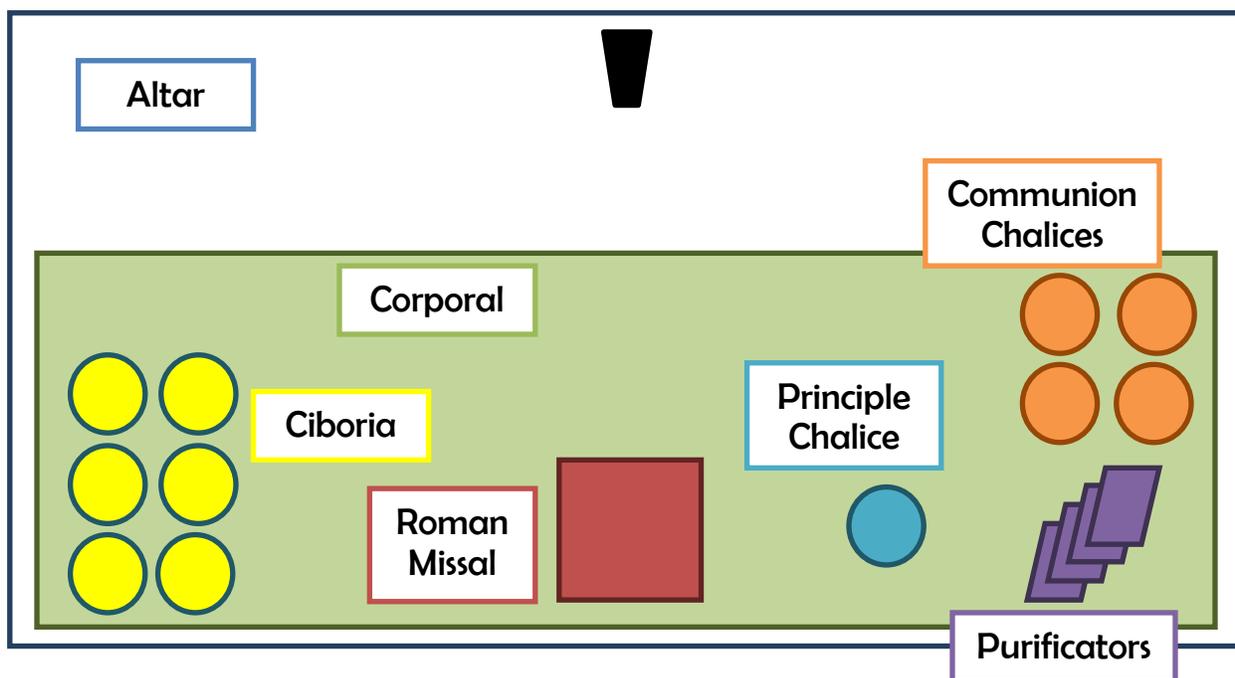
7. Return to your chairs and participate in the Mass

a. *Note – your posture should be the same as that of the congregation*

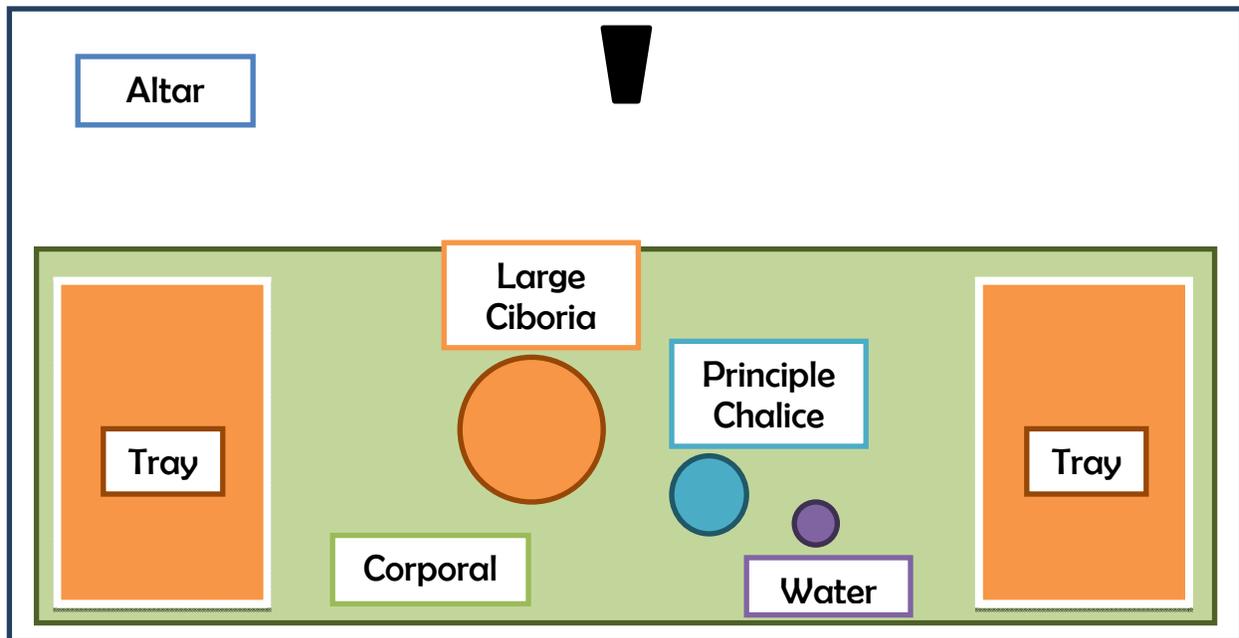
- i. When they are standing you should be standing
- ii. When they are kneeling you should be kneeling on the cushions located next to your chairs

8. After the Sign of Peace the two servers who are handling the things that need to be done at the altar will bring over the tray with the six ciboria, taking each ciborium off the tray and placing it on the corporal on the left side of the altar and returning the tray to the credence table

a. *Note – If the Roman Missal is where the ciboria are to be placed, it should be removed at this time*



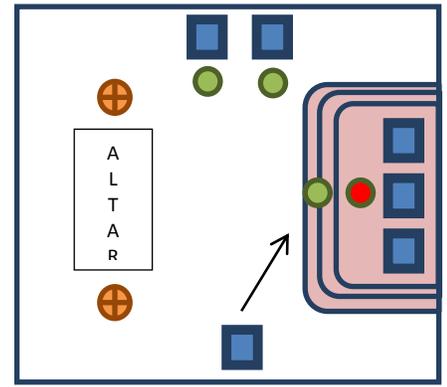
9. When it is time to receive Holy Communion, the server(s) should come and stand in line with the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. After having received the Eucharist, they should return to their chairs
10. While Holy Communion is being distributed to the rest of the congregation
  - a. The server handling the Roman Missal should take it back to his or her place if it has not been done already
  - b. The other server(s) should bring the two trays and place them on either side of the altar, along with the cruet of water



11. After the distribution of Holy Communion the priest (and the deacon, if assisting) will return to the altar and purify the sacred vessels. When they have placed the vessels on the trays, the server(s) handling those things that need to be done at the altar should take the trays back to the credence table
12. The Eucharist is then given to those Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion who are going to take the Eucharist to the homebound.
  - a. If there is a deacon assisting, the priest will fold up the corporal and hand it to one of the servers who is take it to the credence table
  - b. If there is no deacon, one of the servers should come and fold up the corporal and take it to the credence table while the priest is giving the Eucharist to the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

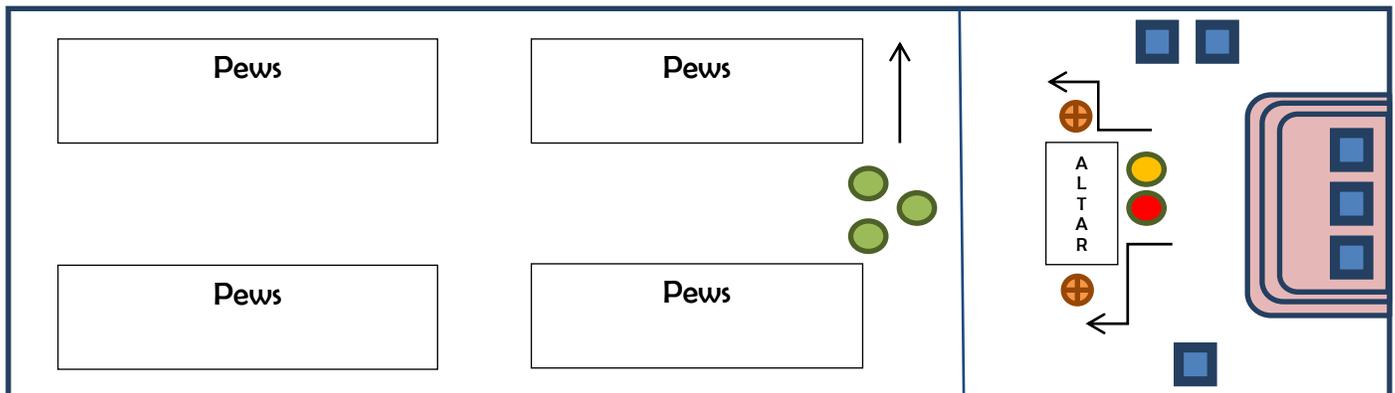
## Concluding Rites

1. After a period of silent prayer, the priest will stand and say “Let Us Pray,” in response to which, the server who is handling the Roman Missal will bring it and stand in front of the priest for the closing prayer
2. If there is a solemn blessing, the server should remain until after the solemn blessing
  - a. The priest will indicate this by placing his hand on the missal after the closing prayer
3. If there is no solemn blessing, the server will return to their place after the congregation replies “Amen”



## Recessional

1. After the congregation is dismissed, the servers will line in front of the altar for the recessional
  - a. The server carrying the cross will get the cross and move to stand facing the altar
  - b. If there are 3 servers, the two remaining servers will get the candles and stand behind the cross bearer
  - c. If there are 2 or less servers, the remaining servers will simply stand behind the cross bearer



2. After the sever(s) are in position in front of the altar, the priest (and deacon, if assisting) will come down and reverence the altar and the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle. Then they will come around the altar and move in front of the altar, at which time, the server(s), led by the cross, will turn and lead the procession through the side door

# What To Do After Mass

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1. After exiting through the side door, the server(s) should proceed up the stairs to the sacristy and return the cross to the wall and the candles to either side of the altar
2. The server(s) should then neatly hang up their cinctures and crosses, and return their albs to the closet on the appropriate hangers

## Prayer After Mass

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It is important to give thanks to God for the great gift of being able to come to the Holy Mass and receive Jesus Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament. Make sure to offer up a short prayer to God after every Mass. This can be a prayer that springs spontaneously from your heart, or you can use the one below

Lord Jesus Christ, take all my freedom,  
my memory, my understanding, and my will.

All that I have and cherish  
you have given me.

I surrender it all to be guided by Your will.

Your grace and Your love  
are enough for me.

Give me these, Lord Jesus,  
and I ask for nothing more.

Amen.

# Glossary

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**Acolyte:** An altar server that has been officially instituted by the bishop.

**Alb:** The long white robe that covers your street clothes; a reminder of our baptismal garment.

**Altar:** The large table like structure that sits in the center of the Sanctuary on which the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered.

**Altar Server:** The one who assists that priest at the celebration of Mass.

**Ambo /Pulpit:** The stand in the sanctuary from which the scriptures are read.

**Ambry:** The place in the sanctuary where the holy oils are stored.

**Aspergillum:** A wand that is used to sprinkle holy water as a reminder of baptism.

**Aspersorium:** The bucket containing the holy water where the aspergillum is dipped.

**Bishop:** Ordained minister who is a successor to the Apostles and possess the fullness of the priesthood.

**Boat:** A small container that holds the incense. It usually includes a spoon to scoop with.

**Book Bearer:** The person who carries the Roman Missal in procession when a bishop is celebrating.

**Cantor:** The person who leads the congregation in singing at the celebration of the Mass.

**Chalice:** The special cup that a priest uses at Mass. It is the vessel that holds the Blood of Christ.

**Chasuble:** The colored outermost robe that a priest wears over his alb and stole at Mass.

**Ciborium:** The bowl-like container holding the bread before Mass and the Body of Christ after the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

**Cincture:** The cord worn around the waist over the of the alb

**Corporal:** The cloth that is unfolded on the altar and on which the sacred vessels are placed. The purpose of the corporal is to respectfully catch any fragments of the sacred body of our Lord or drops of his precious blood.

**Credence Table:** The table at the side of the sanctuary that holds the sacred vessels and other items that are used at the celebration of the Mass.

**Cross Aisle:** The gap between the front section of pews and the back section of pews.

**Crucifer:** Also known as the “cross bearer.” This person carries the cross in procession.

**Cruets:** The small containers for the water and wine used at Mass.

**Deacon:** Ordained minister of the Church who assists the priest at the celebration of Mass.

**Easter Candle:** Also called the “Paschal Candle.” It is a large candle usually located by the baptismal font. It is lit during Easter Time and for funerals and baptisms.

**Genuflection:** A gesture of reverence to Jesus truly present in the Blessed Sacrament. It consists in kneeling down on your right knee for a brief moment and then standing up again.

**Host:** Term used to refer to the bread that is used for the celebration of the Mass.

**Lectionary:** The book containing the scripture readings for the celebration of Mass.

**Lector:** The person who reads the scripture readings at Mass.

**Liturgical Colors:**

- a. Green: Ordinary Time
- b. White: Christmas, Easter, Feasts of Saints (not martyred), Funerals, Weddings
- c. Purple: Advent, Lent
- d. Red: Pentecost, Good Friday, Masses of the Holy Spirit, Feasts of Martyrs
- e. Black: May be worn on the Feast of All Souls, and as an option for funerals

**Luna:** The circular container which holds the Blessed Sacrament so that it can be inserted into the Monstrance.

**Paten:** A flat dish-like container that is sometimes used in place of a ciborium to hold the Body of Christ.

**Priest:** Ordained minister who exercises the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

**Presider’s Chair:** The chair where the priest sits at Mass.

**Purificator:** The rectangular cloth used to wipe the rim of the chalice.

**Roman Missal:** The book containing the prayers of the Mass

**Sacristy**: The place in the church building where the priest and other ministers prepare before Mass and where the items used for Mass are stored.

**Sanctuary**: The place in the church building where the altar, presider's chair, and ambo are found.

**Sanctuary Lamp**: The candle located near the Tabernacle used to indicate that the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.

**Stole**: The band of colored material worn by the clergy to symbolize their office. A priest wears his straight down in front, and a deacon wears his hanging diagonally down from his left shoulder down to his right side.

**Tapers**: Long wicks covered in wax.

**Tabernacle**: The place where the Blessed Sacrament is kept in reserve after Mass.

**Thurible/Censer**: The vessel which holds lighted charcoal and into which incense is placed to be burned.

**Thurifer**: The person who carries the thurible.