

Guidelines for Altar Servers

A. Introduction

Altar servers accept an important responsibility: serving Holy Mass. Their assistance is invaluable because it helps the faithful to worship God with attention and devotion. When altar servers fulfill their tasks with dignity, care and devotion, they help others to pray and draw closer to God. By serving them in this way, altar servers are imitating Christ himself, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45). Altar servers serve their parish families as well as the priest who is offering the Eucharist. Above all, they are serving Christ the High Priest. The commitment to serving at the altar is far more than a task, far more than a responsibility, far more than an honour. It is a truly holy service to the People of God.

B. Preparing for Mass

Servers should assemble in the sacristy or assigned vesting area at least 20 minutes before Mass, and vest in approved attire: alb and cincture, or cassocks and surplices (cf. GIRM, n. 339).

Servers should wear clothing appropriate for assisting at Mass, paying particular attention to wearing shoes that are not distracting.

Prior to leaving the sacristy the priest, deacon or principal altar server may lead the servers in a preparatory prayer; then all reverence, with a bow, the cross or sacred image in the sacristy.

During Mass, servers should minimize chatter among themselves, so as not to distract the congregation. Servers should participate fully in all aspects of the Mass, such as singing, congregational responses, reciting the Creed, and so forth.

C. Procession:

If incense is to be used, it should be put into the thurible prior to the procession.

The thurifer leads the procession, followed by the cross bearer, candle bearers, other servers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, lectors, a deacon or lector carrying the Book of the Gospels, and finally the celebrant.

In procession all look straight ahead; those not carrying anything should have hands joined.

All proceed with proper spacing at a steady but unhurried pace.

On arriving at the sanctuary step and following the lead of the celebrant, those not carrying anything should bow to the altar, or genuflect to the tabernacle if one is present in the sanctuary. Genuflection is not necessary if the tabernacle is located elsewhere than directly behind the altar. Those carrying objects do not genuflect, but should bow their heads.

During the Mass all further gestures of reverence are now made only to the altar.

After placing the cross and candles in their proper locations, the servers move to their appropriate places.



If incense is being used, the thurifer stands at the right-hand side of the altar as the clergy kiss the altar. The thurifer then hands the thurible to the celebrant, or to the deacon if one is assisting. After the incensing of the altar, the thurible is handed back to the thurifer, who then returns the thurible to the stand. When there is no deacon or MC present, the server may walk with the celebrant as he incenses the altar.

D. Introductory Rite

The book bearer presents the missal to the celebrant for the opening rite, if needed; if not, then the missal is presented for the Collect.

E. Liturgy of the Word

If incense is being used, the thurifer and candle bearers process to the chair during the Gospel Acclamation so that the celebrant can add incense.

The servers now move to a location in front of the altar, one candle bearer on each side and the thurifer off-centre so as to make space for the celebrant or deacon to come to the altar for the Book of the Gospels. As the celebrant or deacon lifts the Book, the thurifer leads the procession to the ambo. If there are other servers in the sanctuary, they now turn to face the ambo.

The candle bearers take up a position, one on each side of the ambo. The thurifer stands slightly behind and to the right-hand side of the celebrant or deacon. As the people respond, "Glory to you, O Lord," the thurifer bows to the celebrant or deacon and hands him the thurible. The celebrant or deacon incenses the Book of the Gospels and hands the thurible back to the thurifer, exchanging bows.

At the conclusion of the Gospel and after the response "Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ," the candle bearers return the candles to their location and move back to their seats for the homily. There is no need for the acolytes to bow at the end of the reading of the Gospel.

After the homily, the book bearer presents the missal for the Creed and intercessions.

F. Liturgy of the Eucharist

Offertory Rite

Once the celebrant and people are seated, the servers, either on their own or assisting the deacon, prepare the altar. The principal chalice, other sacred vessels and purificators as needed are brought to the right-hand side of the altar. The priest, deacon or an appointed server unfolds the corporal, placing it in a central position on the altar. The missal on its stand is placed at an angle on the left-hand side of the corporal.

According to custom and if sufficient servers are present, the cross bearer and/or candle bearers now assemble at the altar step facing the altar, bow to the altar and then process to the main entrance of the church where the gifts are prepared for the offertory procession. They then lead the offertory procession to the altar steps.

As the offertory procession begins, the celebrant and deacon, flanked by two servers, proceed to the front of the sanctuary to receive the gifts.

The cruets are handed by the celebrant or deacon to a server who takes them to the credence table. The ciboria are handed to the deacon or another server. The ciboria are placed on the corporal on the altar. The celebrant should not have to carry anything to the altar.

When the celebrant raises the bread and prays “Blessed are you Lord,” servers (or one server, if there are not enough present) proceed with the cruets, stoppers removed, to the right-hand side of the altar. When the priest or deacon approaches them, the servers bow and then the wine cruet is handed to the priest or deacon. Once wine has been poured into the chalice, the server receives the cruet back from the celebrant, and the other server then hands the water cruet to the celebrant or deacon. Once the water cruet has been handed back, the servers bow to the celebrant or deacon and then return the cruets to the credence table.

If incense is being used, the thurifer now brings the thurible and boat to the right-hand side of the altar. The server hands the boat to the celebrant, or to the deacon if one is assisting. Incense is added and the thurible is then handed to the celebrant, or to the deacon if one is assisting.

After the offerings are incensed the deacon leads the celebrant around the altar. If there is no deacon, the thurifer leads the celebrant round the altar. The incensing continues until the middle point of the back of the altar is reached. The celebrant and the deacon or thurifer bow to the main cross, which is then incensed.

After incensing the altar, the celebrant hands the thurible to the deacon who then incenses the celebrant and any concelebrants, and then the congregation. If there is no deacon, the thurifer receives the thurible from the celebrant, steps back an appropriate distance, bows and then incenses the celebrant and any concelebrants, making three distinct double swings. The thurifer then proceeds to the front of the sanctuary to incense the congregation. The thurifer bows and then incenses the people with three distinct double swings, to the centre, the right and the left. At the completion of the incensing, the thurifer bows again to the people.

During the incensing of the altar, the designated servers prepare the towel, basin and water; one carries the basin and water, while the other carries the towel. If only one server is available, the towel is draped over the left arm, the basin is held in the left hand and the water in the right hand. The servers now move to the right-hand side of the altar and bow to the celebrant, who places his fingers over the basin. The server now pours water over the celebrant’s fingers, and then the other server offers the towel for the celebrant to dry his hands. On completion of the washing of the hands, the servers bow to the celebrant, return the basin, towel and water to the credence table and then return to their places.

Eucharistic Prayer

If incense is used, the thurifer adds more incense to the thurible as the celebrant prays the Preface.



During the *Sanctus*/Holy, Holy, Holy, the thurifer prepares to proceed to the front of the altar, trying to time the arrival at the altar step such that it coincides with the conclusion of the *Sanctus*. The thurifer then kneels in unison with the congregation, facing the altar.

The server assigned to bell duty, in accordance with parish custom, may make a short ring of the bell as the celebrant extends his hands over the offerings during the Epiclesis.

During the elevations of the Sacred Host and the Precious Blood, the bell may be rung once or three times for each elevation in accordance with parish custom.

During the elevations of the Sacred Host and the Precious Blood the thurifer makes three distinct double swings of the thurible.

The thurifer remains kneeling at the altar step until the Great Amen is proclaimed, then stands in unison with the congregation. The thurifer bows towards the altar before taking the thurible back to the stand and returning to his/her place.

G. Communion Rite

When the celebrant or deacon proclaims the invitation to offer the Sign of Peace, the servers assemble in the appropriate place in the sanctuary, according to parish custom. After the exchange of peace, the servers kneel as the celebrant says, "Behold the Lamb of God."

The celebrant consumes the Eucharist under both species and then administers both species to the deacon. Then the servers receive Holy Communion. The correct posture for servers receiving Holy Communion is standing.

If patens are used for the general administration of Holy Communion, the assigned servers pick up their patens from the credence table and proceed to assist at the side of the celebrant, deacon or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. The server holding the paten should stand so as not to block the distribution of the Eucharist but still be able to catch the host or any particles that may fall.

After Holy Communion, a server brings the water cruets and presents it to the celebrant or deacon for the purifying of the sacred vessels. As the vessels are purified and placed to one side on the altar, the assigned servers move them to the credence table. After the principal chalice is purified and assembled with purificator, paten, pall, corporal, and chalice veil, the assigned server takes it back to the credence table.

If there are many vessels to be purified, they are taken to the credence table after Holy Communion so that the deacon or priest can purify them after Mass. In this case, the corporal should be laid out on the credence table and the vessels placed on it, and a purificator should be laid out in preparation.

All servers should then be seated.

At the indication of the celebrant, the book bearer presents the Missal for the Prayer after Communion.



H. Concluding Rite

At the conclusion of the final blessing and dismissal, the servers pick up their respective objects – that is, the cross and candles; the thurible can be left on its stand – and, after the celebrant and deacon reverence the altar, they proceed to the front of the sanctuary and stand in a line facing the altar. The cross bearer should be standing closest to the space where the celebrant will stand.

At the sanctuary step and following the lead of the celebrant, those not carrying anything should bow to the altar or genuflect to the tabernacle if one is present in the sanctuary.

The cross bearer, followed by the candle bearers with the other servers right behind them, leads the procession to the main entrance of the church.

I. After Mass

The candles are extinguished and all items are returned to the sacristy or their appropriate locations. All servers now return to the sacristy and say a prayer of thanksgiving, reverence the image or cross, remove their serving attire, and hang the items neatly in the closet.

Approved: Solemnity of St. Joseph,
Spouse of the Virgin Mary
March 19, 2020

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "J. Michael Miller CSB".

† J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver