



The Role of Altar Servers in Liturgy

The server is both a member of the assembly and a minister in the sanctuary. With a foot in both worlds, the server has an unusual perspective when participating at Mass. He or she is called to fully and actively participate in the liturgy, and yet is also called to serve in a particular way.

At the last supper, someone had to set the table and prepare the meal. The servers are not mentioned, but unquestionably the very first Eucharist would have relied on servers. When the early Church gathered together for the breaking of bread in homes, someone had to perform the same functions. In time the liturgy became more stylized, and so did its ministers.

Official Instruction

Much of what we know about altar servers comes from tradition, as little is offered about this ministry in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. The GIRM does state that altar servers assist at Mass. They may carry the cross, candles and incense in the procession (GIRM, 100). At the preparation of the gifts they, in the absence of a deacon, arrange the corporal, purificator, chalice, pall and missal on the altar (139), and assist in receiving the offerings (140). They present the water to the priest or deacon (142), who adds some to the wine. Servers may incense the priest and the people (75). They wash the priest's hands (145). They may ring a bell and incense the body and blood of Christ during the elevations (150). They may exchange peace with other ministers (154). After communion they may remove the vessels (163).

Servers have their own seats (294), and they show their reverence by their dress (339), by bowing and genuflecting when appropriate (49, 90), by singing and joining in the responses (40). While the GIRM never suggests that the server holds the missal so the priest can read the collect and the prayer after communion, it does indicate that the server usually performs this function because the priest is

supposed to be at the chair rather than the altar, offering these prayers with his own hands extended rather than holding the book (124, 127, 165). Still, to understand the current role of the altar server, it is important to know a bit of history.

Early Church

By the third century in Rome, distinguishing of various liturgical ministers was becoming necessary. An early collection of liturgical texts called the "Apostolic Tradition" differentiates between one group of ministers ordained through hand-laying and another group of people who were instituted or recognized for their gifts without hand-laying. Some, but not all of these, carried out liturgical ministries.

Though there is some documented encouragement for students to assist at the altar in the ninth century Synod of Mainz, one could actually go back much farther. The first person to mention the existence of acolytes in Rome is Pope Cornelius in 251 in a letter to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch. One such letter describes the number of ministers assisting him, including 46 priests, 7 deacons, 7 sub deacons, and 42 acolytes. Although Cornelius mentions the existence of acolytes, he does not say what they do. Given the evolution of this term according to its responsibilities, it is likely Cornelius meant those performing some kind of service at the altar and in the community – someone who assisted the deacon and the priest.





By the tenth century, the role of acolyte had become so important to the Church that a ceremony was developed to recognize its importance and its place in the formation of those studying for the priesthood. In those days, an acolyte was the last of the four steps called minor orders, which preceded the major orders and eventually concluded with the ordination to the priesthood.

Around the same time, it was becoming customary for a priest saying even the simplest Mass to have the assistance of an acolyte or some student who would proclaim the reading, make responses to the dialogue, and join and seeing the chants. The need for servers exceeded the number of available acolytes, so the church developed a grassroots tradition of having students serve Mass. These young men were not part of the formal group of acolytes, nor was it require that they be preparing for priesthood. Still, volunteering as a server inspired many boys to consider a vocation to the priesthood.

Throughout history, altar boys have traditionally dressed in a cassock and surplice or an alb and cincture. These vestments identified them as laypersons. Much like today, the duties in the middle ages included lighting and extinguishing altar candles, carrying cross and candle in processions, holding the thurible and boat for the incense, holding the missal for the priest, setting out cloths and vessels, holding the cruets of water and wine, and washing the hands of the priest.

Post Vatican II

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, altar boys offered the responses at Mass. Today, when the priest says, "Lift up your hearts," everyone responds, "We lift them up to the Lord." In the centuries after the Council of Trent, however, servers conducted all dialogs with the priest in a low voice and in Latin, while the people prayed simultaneously in silence, usually from supplemental devotional material.

After the Second Vatican Council the responsibility of servers shifted. They were no longer required to learn the many responses in Latin because these are typically said in the

vernacular. Servers did not have to recite the responses alone; all the people joined the servers. In addition, the responsibilities for other tasks were being shared by different ministers, so the role of servers underwent dramatic changes.

The most dramatic and visible change was the admission of girls to the rank of servers. The 1917 *Code of Canon Law* permitted women to serve Mass only at a distance, when no men were present, and for a just cause. The revised *Code of Canon Law* implicitly gave girls permission to serve in 1983. The Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts interpreted the canon in 1992, saying that it did indeed permit girl servers, but did not require it. In 1994, the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments declared that each Bishop's Conference retains the authority to determine how best to implement the use of altar girls. In the United States, the Conference of Catholic Bishops' decision on whether or not to permit girls as altar servers was left up to the particular diocesan bishop. In the Diocese of Bridgeport, that permission was granted in a letter to all pastors dated June 30, 1994 from Bishop Egan.

Though the term *acolyte* was once used to refer to those who assisted the priest at the altar, the modern usage of the word become more specific. Today, we use the term *acolyte* to refer to one who is installed "responsibility to assist priests and deacons in carrying out their ministry, and as special ministers to give Holy Communion to the faithful at the liturgy and to the sick." (*Institution of Acolytes Rite, 1-4*). We use the term *altar server* to indicate the young men and women who carry out the duties described above. May we continue to be blessed with those who offer themselves for service at the altar, enhancing the prayerful experience of liturgy for all.

(Parts of this article were adapted from the work of Fr. Paul Turner and we appreciate his willingness to share his knowledge with us).

To learn more about the upcoming revisions to the liturgical norms in the Diocese of Bridgeport, visit www.formatioreimagined.org. Meetings will be held throughout November for those who wish to learn more.