



**GUIDELINES
FOR
ALTAR
SERVERS**

Diocese of Lansing

INTRODUCTION

From the earliest days of the Church, when people gathered for prayer, they were led by and served by members of their local communities. This ancient and venerable practice continues to the present day and is nowhere more evident than when we gather to celebrate the sacred mysteries. The assembly does "all and only those parts which belong to them, so that the very arrangement of the celebration itself makes the Church stand out as being formed in a structure of different orders and ministries." [GIRM #58]

Throughout the ages, the Church has seen developments in various ministries. This is no less true of the ministry of the server. Thus, once entrusted only to those preparing for the priesthood, in an installed order of acolyte, the role and the opportunity to serve has been expanded.

Two recent developments are noteworthy. Pope Paul VI's *Ministeria quaedam*, opened the institute of ministry to lay men. Secondly, an authoritative interpretation of Canon 230.2 by Pope John Paul II and the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments was issued in March of 1994. It allows for the functions of the acolyte to be carried out by both males and females and for individual bishops to "make a prudential judgment" on development of this ministry in his own diocese. Hence, these guidelines.

NAME

The ministry of server, like all ministries, arises from our Baptism and is rooted in service. Servers minister to the worshipping assembly specifically by assisting the presider, especially at the chair and altar during Mass or other liturgies. It is for this reason that they are called "servers." By contrast, the appellation "altar boy" or "altar girl" trivializes this ministry and excludes adults from consideration. The word acolyte is to be avoided so as not to confuse it with an order.

FUNCTION

The role of server is integral to the celebration of the Eucharist. At least one server should assist the priest at Mass (Canon 906). On Sundays and major feast days of the Church, according to their solemnity, two or more servers should be employed.

Servers may carry the processional cross; the candles; the thurible and incense; present the gifts to be offered or assist the priest when he receives them from members of the assembly; wash the hands of the priest; and hold the sacramentary or rite book when the priest or deacon is not at the altar (see #68, para. 2 and #142-147 of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*). Additional functions may be required during other rites and popular devotions.

Servers should respond to the prayers and dialogue of the priest and join in the hymns and sung responses. In this way, servers are mirrors and models for the gathered assembly.

Servers may not distribute holy communion unless they are Eucharistic Ministers who have been mandated for this function by the bishop. Even then, duplication of ministries by any liturgical minister is not recommended.

Bearing in mind that the place next to the celebrant is normally reserved for the deacon, servers should be seated near, but not necessarily in, the sanctuary in a place where they can easily assist the priest and deacon.

ATTIRE

In those assemblies where there is vesture, a simple white alb reflects the baptismal root of all ministry. It should be clean and properly fit and appropriate socks and footwear should be worn. Cassock and surplice, reminiscent of the clerical state, should not be worn.

FORMATION

Training and formation of servers should occur before they are commissioned. It should include instruction on the basics of the liturgical year, the Mass and its various parts, other rites of the church, or devotions. They should know the names and purpose of sacred items and how to handle them in a reverent and respectful way. They should be trained in how to move around the worship space in a dignified and unobtrusive manner.

Formation, too, must be concerned with the intention and spiritual disposition of the server and allow for a period of discernment.

VOCATIONS

Care should be taken so as not to neglect the vocational aspect of the ministry. Servers should be given ample opportunity to discuss and reflect on the various vocations open to them—ordained priesthood, vowed religious life or lay ministry as a married or single person. Our baptismal call to serve must continue to evolve.

REQUIREMENTS

Servers are to have already received Holy Communion for the first time. They should actively participate in the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. They should be old enough to understand the duties they are undertaking and to be responsible to them. They should possess the ability to carry out their sacred functions with the dignity, grace, and reverence which is befitting the liturgy.

Once initial training and formation is complete, the candidate is commissioned by the local pastor or his delegate at a public gathering for a period of two years. (Please see Book of Blessings, #1847 to 1870.) His/her commission is renewable with the expectation that continuing formation and discernment is provided and obtained.

RESOURCES

The following resources can be helpful in formation and training. They are available from the Office of Worship—(517)484-5755.

BCL Newsletter, Volume XXX, June/July 1994, pp. 21-22. National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Prot. 2482/93, issued Rome, 15 March 1994 and found in BCL Newsletter, Volume XXX, April 1994.

Pope Paul VI, An Address to Servers, Rome, 25 April 1964 (Documents on the Liturgy, 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts).

BCL Study Text #3, Ministries in the Church. USCC Publications, 1974.

BOOKS:

Fleming, Austin. *Yours is the Share: The Call of Liturgical Ministry*. The Pastoral Press.

Kwatera, Michael. *The Ministry of Servers*. The Liturgical Press.

Hovda, Robert. *There are Different Ministries*. The Liturgical Conference, pp. 11-17.

Power, David. *Gifts that Differ: Lay Ministries Established and Unestablished*. Pueblo.

Untener, Kenneth. *Sunday Liturgy Can Be Better!* St. Anthony Messenger Press.

The Book of Blessings. Catholic Book Publishing Company.

VIDEO:

Kwatera, Michael. Training the Mass Server. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville (41 minutes).

OTHER RESOURCES:

Certificates available (517) 484-4449

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