

Altar Server Handbook for Sunday Masses

Saint Thomas Aquinas
Catholic Church
Pilot Point, TX

Updated as of June 2023

The altar server has a *privileged place in liturgical celebrations*. Those who serve at Mass present themselves to a community. They experience from close at hand that Jesus Christ is present and active in every liturgy. Jesus is present whenever the community gathers to pray and give praise to God. Jesus is present in the words of Sacred Scripture. Jesus is present above all in the Eucharist, under the appearances of bread and wine. He acts through the priest who celebrates Holy Mass and administers the sacraments *in persona Christi* [in the person of Christ]. Therefore, in the liturgy you are far more than mere “helpers of the parish priest.” Above all, you are servants of Jesus Christ, the eternal High Priest. Thus, you altar servers especially are called to be young friends of Jesus. Strive to deepen and foster this friendship with him. You will discover that in Jesus you have found a true friend for life.

– Pope John Paul II, “Wednesday Audience,” August 1, 2001

Requirements to be an altar server:

- Be at least 8 years old
- Have received first communion
- Have completed their safe environment training
- Be enrolled in faith formation
- Be familiar with the parts of the Mass and the responses of the people
- Be able to reverently carry out the responsibilities of the ministry of an altar server

Assisting the priest in leading the parish in the celebration of the Mass is a great privilege which we should all take seriously. With this privilege comes the responsibility to not only pray and fully participate in the Mass ourselves but carry out the ministry of an altar server which enables our fellow parishioners to pray and fully participate in the Mass themselves. To be an effective altar, not only should we study the parts of the Mass and the role of the altar server, but we should also prepare ourselves spiritually for serving at the altar through prayer before Mass and throughout the week. A life of prayer, rooted in our Catholic faith, will enable to us to appreciate more deeply the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

Before Mass

Before each weekend, altars servers should know what Mass they are scheduled for and ensure they can be there or notify the altar server coordinator in advance that they will not.

For each Mass, altar servers should ensure they are properly disposed to fully participate in the celebration of the Mass, participating in the sacrament of reconciliation prior to Mass if necessary. They should be properly dressed for the sacredness of the Mass and the importance of their ministry at Mass:

- Nice pants, either slacks or jeans
- Footwear should be nice and not impede walking up and down the sanctuary steps, closed-toe shoes with little to no added heel, no sandals
- A clean t-shirt may be worn

Arrive 15 minutes prior to Mass to vest in the cassock and surplice. Confirm with the other altar servers and the sacristan who will do which role:

- Crucifer
- Candle bearer (x2)
- Thurifer (most Masses will not have a thurifer. Thurifer instructions are given after the main instructions)

5 minutes prior to Mass, the priest leads the ministers (priest, deacon, acolyte, and altar servers) in prayer. They go to the back of the church with the processional items (cross, candles, thurible). In the back of the church, the candle bearers light their candles. The ministers line up in the narthex in the following order, from front to back:

- Thurifer*
- Crucifer
- Candle bearers
- Acolyte
- Deacon
- Priest

During Mass

The Procession and Introductory Rites

The procession begins once the words of the processional hymn begin. **All ministers** reverently walk toward the *sanctuary* [raised area of the church with the *altar* {table of sacrifice} and the *ambo* {stand for the readings and homily}]. As each minister reaches the first step of the sanctuary, they genuflect (or bow if carrying something). the **crucifer** and **candle bearers** place their items in their stands then proceed to their seats.

After the genuflection/bow during the procession, the eucharist in the tabernacle is NOT revered again until the recession (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 274).

During the penitential act, **all servers** remain standing at their seats. Near the end of the Gloria (or immediately after the penitential act during Advent and Lent), the **crucifer** brings the missal to the priest for the *collect* [opening prayer]. Once the priest closes the missal, the **crucifer** places it on its stand and **all servers** sit for the readings.

The Liturgy of the Word

When everyone stands for the alleluia (or other sung phrase during Lent), the **candle bearers** proceed take their candles and wait next to the credence table. Once the deacon (or priest if no deacon) takes the book of the gospel and begins walking toward the ambo, the **candle bearers** proceed to stand on either side of the ambo, facing the ambo. After the deacon/priest says, “the gospel of the Lord,” the **candle bearers** return their candles to their stands and sit at their seats for the homily. **All servers** stand with everyone for the creed and the intercessions.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist: Preparing the Altar and the Offertory

After the priest finishes the prayer following the intercessions, the **crucifer** brings the missal with its stand to the deacon (or acolyte/priest if no deacon) at the altar. Next, the crucifer immediately retrieves the processional cross and proceeds to the back of the church. Everything else for the altar is brought from the *credence table* [preparation table]. **Candle bearer 1** brings the presider’s chalice [large *chalice* {cup} with the linens on top of it] to the deacon/acolyte/priest. **Candle bearer 2** brings the glass cruet of water to the deacon/acolyte/priest.

Once the altar is set, the priest and deacon (or **acolyte** if no deacon) proceed to the first step of the sanctuary. Once they are at the step, the **crucifer** leads the gift bearers to the sanctuary, places the cross in its stand, and returns to their seat, standing.

The priest and deacon return to the altar to continue preparing the gifts. **Candle bearer 1** waits at the altar. Once the deacon/priest finishes with both the cruets, he hands them to **candle bearer 1** who returns them to the credence table.

Meanwhile, **candle bearer 2** stands ready with the lavabo bowl in one hand, the pitcher in the other, and the towel on the bowl hand’s wrist. After the priest bows and says the silent prayer, he turns to **candle bearer 2** who pours water over his hands into the bowl. After the priest dries his hands with the towel, **candle bearer 2** returns the lavabo bowl, towel, and pitcher to the credence table. If necessary, the **crucifer** may assist candle bearer 2. **All servers** return to their seats, standing.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist: The Eucharistic Prayer

Following the *Sanctus* [“Holy, holy, holy...] **all servers** kneel at their seats.

Once kneeling, the **crucifer** prepares to ring the bells. At the *epiclesis* [when the priest extends his hands over the bread and wine and invokes the Holy Spirit], the **crucifer** rings the bell once. After the *words of institution* [“This is my body...”, “This is my blood...”], the **crucifer** rings the bells three times during both the elevation of the host and of the chalice. The ringing during the elevation of the chalice is the last time the bells are rung.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist: The Communion Rite

All servers stand with everyone for the “Our Father.” During the *Agnus Dei* [“Lamb of God...”], **candle bearer 1** places the small ciborium on the altar. **All servers** kneel with everyone following the *Agnus Dei*. Once the priest *self-communicates* [gives himself communion], **all servers** stand and form a line with the acolyte. Once the priest gives communion to the deacon, he will give communion to the servers and acolyte. Once they have received communion, **all servers** kneel at their seats in prayer.

After distributing communion, the priest and deacon return to the altar. The **crucifer** receives the missal and stand from the priest, places them on their table, then returns to their seat. Meanwhile, **candle bearer 1** one places the cruet of water on the altar. The **candle bearers** wait to receive the vessels from the deacon/acolyte to place them on the credence table.

Once the priest has finished purifying the vessels, all ministers return to their seats for a moment of silent prayer. When the priest invites everyone to stand, the **crucifer** brings the missal to the priest for the post-communion prayer. After the priest closes the missal, the **crucifer** places it on its stand.

The Concluding Rites and Recession

The priest may invite everyone, including **all servers**, to sit for announcements or some other extra activity. If not, he immediately gives the blessing. The deacon (or priest if no deacon) dismisses everyone. Once the words of the recessional hymn begin, the **crucifer** retrieves the cross and proceeds to stand in the center aisle, in between the third row of pews, facing the sanctuary. At the same time, the **candle bearers** retrieve the candles and proceed to stand in front the crucifer, facing the sanctuary. Once the priest, deacon, and acolyte are in front the servers and everyone is facing the sanctuary, **all servers** bow with the priest, turn around, and reverently recess out of the church.

Once outside and down the front steps, the **crucifer** turns to face the church. **All other ministers** face the crucifix. **All** (except crucifer) bowing, the **priest** says “prosit” (“may [the Mass] benefit...”) and **all other ministers** say, “pro omnibus et singulis” (...one and all”). The **acolyte** and **servers** return the sacristy.

After Mass

The **crucifer** returns the cross to the stand in the sacristy. The **candle bearers** extinguish their candles and return them to the stands in the sacristy. **All servers** devest and neatly return their cassock and surplice to their proper place.

Adaptations for Fewer than 3 Servers

Ideally, every Mass will have 3 servers. If not, the following adaptations will be made based on the actual number of servers present.

Two Servers

For the procession/recession, holding the missal for the collect/post-communion prayers, leading the gifts to the sanctuary for the gifts, and ringing the bells, the **crucifer** role remains unchanged.

For the procession/recession, the **2nd server** does not carry a candle.

During the gospel, the **crucifer** and **2nd server** serve the roles of the **candle bearers**.

One Server

For the procession/recession, holding the missal for the collect/post-communion prayers, leading the gifts to the sanctuary for the gifts, and ringing the bells the **crucifer** role remains unchanged.

During the gospel, there are no candles.

The **acolyte** fills the role of the candle bearers for the other parts.

Thurifer Instructions

On major solemnities such as Christmas and Easter, incense may be used at the priest's discretion. A fourth server is needed to serve in the role of thurifer.

Before Mass and the Procession

The sacristan lights the coals of the *thurible* [swinging censer that burns incense] and ensures the *boat* [container for incense] is full before Mass. Right before the procession begins, the priest adds incense from the boat to the thurible. The **thurifer** leads the procession to the sanctuary, gently swinging the thurible. After reaching the steps of the sanctuary, the **thurifer** bows and proceeds to stand behind the altar. After the priest and deacon reverence the altar, the **thurifer** hands the thurible to the priest. The priest and deacon incense the altar, walking around it, while the **thurifer** remains standing behind the altar. Once they finish, the priest hands the thurible to the thurifer who places it on its stand and proceeds to stand with the other servers at their seats.

The Gospel

After the second reading ends, the **thurifer** brings the thurible and boat to the priest who takes the boat and fills the thurible with incense. The priest returns the boat to the **thurifer** who proceeds to stand behind the ambo. After the deacon (or priest if no deacon) introduces the gospel, he takes the thurible from the **thurifer**, incenses the gospel, and returns the thurible to the **thurifer**. After the deacon/priest says, "the gospel of the Lord," the **thurifer** returns the thurible to its stand and sits for the homily.

The Offertory

After the priest says the silent prayer, before the candle bearer washes his hands, the **thurifer** brings the thurible and boat to the altar, hands the boat the deacon (or priest if no deacon) for the priest to add incense to the thurible. The priest takes the thurible and incenses the altar. The priest gives the thurible to the deacon who incense the priest and the assembly. If there is no deacon, the **thurifer** incenses the priest and the assembly with three pairs of swings. The deacon gives the thurible to **thurifer** who returns it and the boat their stand and remains standing at the stand.

The Eucharistic Prayer

During the Sanctus, the **thurifer** adds incense from the boat to the thurible and proceeds with only the thurible to kneel at the front steps of the sanctuary. After the words of institution, the **thurifer** incenses the eucharist with three pairs of swings when the priest holds up both the host and the chalice. After the priest says, "the mystery faith," the **thurifer** proceeds to return the thurible to its stand and kneel with the other servers.

The Recession and After Mass

Once the words of the recessional hymn begin, the thurifer retrieves the thurible and boat and proceeds to stand in the center aisle, in between the third row of pews, facing the sanctuary. Once the priest and **all servers** bow, the **thurifer** leads the recession out of the Church.

After Mass, the **thurifer** returns the thurible and boat to their stand in the sanctuary, devests, and neatly returns the alb and cincture to their proper places.

APPENDIX

PARTS OF THE CHURCH

Narthex – a room/space between the church and the outside



Nave – the section of the church with pews



Sacristy – a room where vestments (vesting sacristy) and sacred vessels (working sacristy) are kept



Sanctuary – the raised area of the church for the altar and ambo



Altar – the table upon which the sacrifice of the Mass is offered



Ambo – the stand from which the readings are proclaimed and the homily is given



Credence Table – the table where the vessels are prepared for Mass



Tabernacle – the locked box for reserving consecrated hosts



LITURGICAL BOOKS

Evangelary – the book which contains the Gospel readings



Lectionary – the book containing all the readings for Mass



Missal – the book which contains the prayers of the Mass



Priest/Intercessions Binder
(color can also be white, red, or purple depending on the liturgical season)



VESSELS, LINENS, ET AL

Ciborium (pl ciboria) – the bowl(s) which hold the hosts (bread) used for the eucharist



Chalice – the cup used to hold the wine which is used for the eucharist



Paten – a plate which can be used to hold the host



Corporal – the linen cloth placed under the sacred vessels. It is intended to catch any fragments of the body of Christ or drops of the blood of Christ



Pall – the stiff piece of cloth which prevents dust/bugs from falling into the chalice or other vessels



Purificator – the linen cloth which is used to wipe the sacred vessels



Lavabo Bowl/Pitcher – the bowl and pitcher to *lavare* (Latin for “wash”) the priest’s hands



Thurible – the swinging censer which burns incense



Boat – the container for the incense



VESTMENTS

Alb – white vestment representing our baptism which enables participation in the Eucharistic celebration



Cincture – the rope-belt worn over the alb



Cassock – black vestment worn by clerics (bishop, priest, or deacon) or servers



Chasuble – the outer vestment worn by the priest



Dalmatic – the outer vestment worn by the deacon



Stole – the vestment worn by priests and deacons over the shoulders

*MINISTERS*

Acolyte – an instituted lay minister to assist the priest at the altar

Crucifer – the server who carries the cross

Deacon – the ordained minister who assists the priest at the altar and proclaims the gospel

Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion (EMHC) – laity who assist the priest and deacon in distributing communion

Priest – the ordained minister who leads the celebration of the eucharist *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ)

Sacristan – a minister who prepares the sacred vessels for Mass and can assist as a server

Thurifer – the server who carries the thurible