

# Guidelines for Altar Servers

*Diocese of Sacramento*



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## I. 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 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. Bishops in the Diocese of Sacramento have opened the ministry of server to boys and girls, men and women for several years. In the wake of the re-evaluation of liturgical ministries that has accompanied the implementation of the third edition of the Roman Missal, these guidelines have been prepared to assist pastors and all who coordinate parish liturgies in training and guiding those who serve in this important liturgical ministry.

## II. NAME

The ministry of server, like all ministries, arises from our Baptism and is rooted in a call to service. Servers minister to the worshipping assembly 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 name “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 this ministry with the instituted order on the path to diaconate or priesthood.

## III. FUNCTION

Since the role of server is integral to the normal celebration of the Mass, at least one server should assist the priest. On Sundays and other more important occasions, two or more servers should be employed to carry out the various functions normally entrusted to these ministers.

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 missal or rite book when the priest or deacon is not at the altar (see #100, #187-190 and #193 of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM)). Additional functions may be required during other rites and popular devotions.

The server is a member of the assembly who assists the priest and deacon during the Eucharist and other liturgical ceremonies so that the liturgy can be conducted with grace and reverence. Servers should be active and full participants in the celebration with the understanding that they are first and foremost members of the assembly. The server expresses this by singing, praying and keeping silence along with the rest of the assembly.

Servers may not distribute holy communion unless they are Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion 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 presider 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.

#### IV. REQUIREMENTS

Ideally, servers are fully initiated Catholics. Altar servers must have received the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist; youths who have not been confirmed may serve. Servers normally receive the Eucharist whenever they participate in the liturgy. The minimum age and scheduling procedures are left to the pastor's discretion. Recommended minimum age for youth is roughly the fourth grade.

Servers are expected to be appropriately prepared, committed to giving their time and talent to their parish community, and willing to serve God's people. They should be able to understand the Eucharistic celebration and the other sacred rites.

Servers should be mature enough to understand their responsibilities and to carry them out with the dignity, grace, and reverence which is befitting the liturgy. They should have already received holy communion for the first time and normally receive the Eucharist whenever they participate in the liturgy. They should actively participate in the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church.

#### V. ATTIRE

In parishes 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 by lay ministers. All servers should wear the same liturgical vesture.

#### VI. 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. 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 (see *Book of Blessings*, #1847-1870). His/her

commission is renewable with the expectation that continuing formation and discernment is provided and obtained.

## **VII. VOCATIONS**

Care should be taken so as not to neglect the vocational aspect of the ministry. Servers (along with all young people of the parish community) 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.