
Altar Server Handbook

Parish of St. Thomas More

115 Kings Highway
Hauppauge, NY 11788

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We're so glad you want to serve our parish as an altar server! This handbook is meant to give guidance to both new and seasoned servers on various aspects of the ministry. The roles in the Mass are spelled out in detail in the first sections, but there is a quick reference guide plus tips at the end to help you remember certain things after you have learned them.

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PREPARATION

Arrival

Before you arrive at church, be sure to dress appropriately. Depending on the alb you wear some of your clothing may show. Please refrain from wearing torn jeans or bold colors. Be sure to wear presentable shoes you can easily walk in without tripping. Flip flops and sneakers are frowned upon. If you have long hair, you may want to wear it in a ponytail so that it does not get caught in anything especially if you are carrying a candle.

Arrive at church at least **15 minutes** before the Mass begins. Sign in on the schedule hanging in the sacristy. The earlier you arrive the more time you will have to prepare. You need to vest (put on alb and cincture), determine the job you will be doing at the Mass, and take care of anything connected to that job. So you need time to do these things. Coming at this time also helps the deacon and priest know the jobs are covered as they prepare for the Mass as well.

Alb and Cincture

Albs are found in the sacristy in the first closet. The albs we use at STM simply go on over your head. If any of the albs are ripped or torn, let the priest or deacon know. Remember to choose an alb that fits you. It should be no more than a few inches above your shoes.

The cincture is the rope that is worn like a belt over the alb. Be sure to check with the deacon or priest as to what color is being worn for the Mass. The cincture should be tied with a simple knot. The knot should sit over the left hip and the long ends should drape down on the outside of the left leg.

Mass Roles

Decide who will be doing which jobs. If you are unsure which jobs need doing, ask the deacon or priest or a seasoned altar server. If candles are being carried by servers, be sure they are lit safely in the sacristy. Ask an adult or seasoned server for help if needed.

Candles must be carried in pairs. Therefore, if there is only one altar server available for a Mass, that server should carry the Cross. If there are only two servers, each carries a candle and there is no Cross carried.

Prayer Before Mass

Wait for the priest or deacon to leave the sacristy. Then gather in a prayer circle in the Narthex. The priest or deacon will lead altar servers, Eucharistic Ministers and lectors in a prayer before lining up to process into the church.

All who are gathered for Mass (the assembly and the ministers, which includes servers) need to be in the right frame of mind for Mass, so that God will speak to all of us most effectively. Praying helps us be calm and attuned to the Lord.

ENTERING THE MASS

Procession Order

After the prayer, line up on the carpet in the Narthex just behind the main doors to the church.

Very rarely (special Masses) will we use incense. If incense is used, the thurifer (the server that carries the object known as the thurible, or incenser) and the boat bearer (carrying the boat, which holds the incense grains) lead the procession. Otherwise, the Cross bearer comes first.

Candle bearers line up behind the Cross. Other servers line up behind the candle bearers (in pairs unless there is an odd number of other servers).

Entry Into The Church

Wait until the cantor has begun singing the entrance hymn before proceeding. The Cross bearer should lower the crucifix until he/she clears the doorway, then it should be raised slightly above the head.

Once you arrive at the sanctuary, the Cross bearer will go to the baptismal side of the altar. The candle bearers will go to the front of the stationary candle stands, one on each side of the altar. The book bearer will stand behind the candle bearer on the organ side of the altar. Stay in place while the deacon (or lector if a deacon is not present) continues processing with the Book of Gospels and places it on the altar, then returns to the ministers at the foot of the sanctuary.

Everyone will bow before the altar, following the priest's lead. If you are holding something in your hands, just bow with your head. Otherwise, bow at the waist. If the priest kneels, you may either bow or kneel. Do not kneel if you are carrying something in your hands.

When the priest moves everyone can proceed to his or her seat but do not sit yet. The candles are left in the holders in front of the altar. The Cross is placed in the stand next to the statue of St. Thomas More.

INTRODUCTION AND LITURGY OF THE WORD

Opening of the Mass

The beginning of the Mass includes an introduction by the priest (including the Sign of the Cross which all servers should do) and continues with the Gloria. At many Masses this is sung. During special times of the year, the Gloria is omitted.

If you are the book bearer, pay attention to whether or not there is a Gloria. If there is, as the Gloria is concluding, the deacon should be getting the Roman Missal ready for you to hold. When the deacon looks at you, even if the Gloria is not finished, approach the deacon and take the Missal from him. If there is no Gloria, the deacon will still look at you to approach and take the Missal.

This all should happen before the priest says "Let us pray." When the priest says these words, the book bearer will approach the priest and hold the book at a good height for the priest. It is easiest if you hold the book from the bottom and bow your head with the book at your chin. If you are very tall, it is ok to stand to the side of the priest. The priest may adjust the position of the Missal or your spot, so just go with the flow. The priest then prays the prayer from the Missal called the Collect. He will close the book when he is finished, or if he does not, the deacon will signal to you for the Missal so he can close it. Bring the Missal back to the deacon and then take your seat.

Once the Collect is finished, the assembly will be seated. All servers should sit at this time.

Liturgy of the Word

We then will listen to readings from Scripture. There are always two readings with a Psalm Response (either recited or sung) in between. Listen attentively to the readings and respond to the Psalms along with the assembly. Jesus is present to us in a special way when the readings are proclaimed at Mass.

There is a special message for all of us in these readings that God wants us to hear personally to help

us in our daily lives.

When the second reading is concluded, the deacon will approach the priest for a blessing before the Gospel is read. At this time the candle bearers move to pick up the candles and stand to the inside of the candle stands at the foot of the sanctuary. Wait for the deacon to come down with the Book of Gospels. You will all face the altar and bow together. Remember to only do a head bow since you are carrying candles.

Candle bearers will walk together in front of the deacon to the ambo. Be sure to walk on the assembly side of the baptismal font. Do not move into place next to the ambo (where the Gospel is read) until the cantor has finished and stepped down. Candle bearers then stand on either side of the ambo, facing the deacon. When the deacon is done reading, reverse the process, once again walking to the assembly side of the baptismal font, and return to the stationary candle stands. Wait for the deacon to begin bowing, then all bow together. Place the candles back, and return to your seats.

Prayer of the Faithful

The Liturgy of the Word continues with the homily, then the creed (except in rare instances). When the creed gets towards the end, the deacon will reach down and pick up the blue binder with the copy of the Prayer of the Faithful for the priest. The deacon will then look the book bearer. The book bearer will come to the deacon and take the binder, then hold it in place until the priest finishes reciting the creed.

This needs to happen while the creed is going on so that the deacon can cross over to the ambo read the Prayer of the Faithful when the creed is over. Like with the Missal, bring the open binder to the priest and hold it in place for him. Continue to hold the binder under the prayer is concluded and he closes it and takes it from you. Return to your seat.

The Prayer of the Faithful is the last part of the Liturgy of the Word.

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Preparation of the Altar

At the conclusion of the Prayer of the Faithful, the priest will say a short closing prayer, the assembly will respond "Amen," and then all will be seated. This is the cue for those servers on the baptismal font side to approach the credence table. Be sure to walk up to the left of the large support structure covered in wood.

The preparation of the altar and the arrangement of the gifts on the altar after the offertory procession

need to run smoothly. Be sure to understand your role.

Keep alert for any directions from the deacon. Don't rush and fumble, but move gracefully. You'll get the hang of what needs to be done after you've done it a few times.

The deacon will remove the Book of Gospels and rearrange the wooden book stand as you pick up the items that need to be brought to the altar:

- Purificators
- Chalices
- Water Cruet

These items should be handed to the deacon. Only the deacon places objects on the altar.

Offertory Procession

Once all of these items have been taken care of, the Cross bearer goes to the Cross and takes it in his/her hands, and the candle bearers go to the candle stands and take the candles. A procession of Cross and two candles then moves down the aisle closest to the baptismal font to the back of the church.

The Cross bearer stands with his/her back to the altar, facing the candle bearers. Once the persons holding the gifts and collection basket are in line the Cross bearer will turn to face the priest to let him know that the gifts are ready to be presented. Usually the ushers will let you know also that you can turn around. The priest, deacon and book bearer will come down to the foot of the sanctuary to receive the gifts. The offertory procession, led by the Cross bearer, will then approach the altar.

The book holder will assist the priest and deacon in receiving the gifts. The people with the gifts will hand them to the priest. The priest may then hand a gift directly to a server, or to the deacon (who may then hand the gift to a server). As this is going on, the candles and the Cross are put back in their holders and the servers go back to their seats. If there are more gifts brought up than usual, the candle servers can also assist in receiving the gifts.

Once all the gifts have been handed off, all will turn and bow to the altar. If you have a gift in your hands, walk up to the altar with the priest and deacon. If you do not have a gift, walk around the baptismal font and go to the credence table, approaching it as you would when helping prepare the altar earlier.

Gifts at the Altar

At the altar, altar servers hand the gifts to the priest or deacon, but don't place items directly on the altar themselves. The servers will then go to get the finger bowl and towel. The deacon will hand the water cruet to one of the servers after he finishes with it. If there are enough servers, the deacon may also hand off the empty wine cruet or flagon (large wine flask) to a server. The wine cruet/flagon goes back on the credence table. The servers with finger bowl, towel and water cruet wait for the priest to finish praying over the gifts. When the priest turns to the servers, approach him.

The priest will hold his hands over the finger bowl. Pour a small amount of water over his hands. The priest will then dry his hands and return the towel to you. At this point, the priest will bow to you, and you should bow to the priest. Place the finger bowl, towel and water cruet back on the credence table and return to your seat, but don't sit down.

Eucharistic Prayer and Consecration

The priest will pray over the gifts and the assembly will stand. The priest continues the Eucharistic Prayer. Once the "Holy Holy Holy" is recited or sung, the assembly kneels. The altar servers should come forward to the first step of the sanctuary on whichever side they are and kneel. Pull up the alb slightly before kneeling. There should be a long black kneeling pad for this purpose. The deacon kneels a little later.

The priest will, after more prayers, say the words of institution over the bread and wine, changing them into the Body and Blood of Christ. This is the consecration. You will know this part is happening when you hear the words "Take this all of you and eat/drink..." as the priest elevates the bread or the wine. When the priest says "Do this in memory of me," the altar server assigned to the bells will ring them three times. This happens for the host as well as the wine. As the priest genuflects, the deacon will bow, and all servers should bow as well. After the consecration, the deacon will stand up before the Mystery of Faith (but the servers should remain kneeling).

Holy Communion

The Lord's Prayer and Sign of Peace follow the Eucharistic Prayers. When it comes time for Holy Communion, a Eucharistic Minister should come down and offer the host to the servers. If they forget, please go to the Communion line closest to where you are seated to receive.

If you wish to receive the Precious Blood, you will definitely need to join the line nearest to your seat.

Receiving Jesus in the Eucharist is a special privilege. Be sure to approach him reverently. After receiving, go back to your seat and pray quietly. Let Jesus touch you and prepare you for your week ahead.

CONCLUSION OF THE MASS

Final Prayer

After Communion, the deacon or priest usually makes a few announcements from the lectern. At this point, the priest will stand and say “Let us pray.” Just like in the opening of the Mass, the book bearer should approach the deacon and take the Missal, then hold it for the priest. When the prayer is concluded, the deacon will take the Missal from you.

Recessional

Once the deacon gives the dismissal and the assembly responds “Thanks be to God,” be ready to assume positions for the recessional. As the priest and deacon approach the altar to reverence it, the candle bearers should go to the candle stands and take the candles in hand. They should stand at the foot of the sanctuary facing the altar, leaving enough room in front of them for the priest, deacon, lectors and any other servers to stand. The Cross bearer needs to get the Cross and then stand behind the other altar servers. All will be facing the altar, but in the same procession order as at the beginning of the Mass.

Bow to the altar when the priest does, then turn and process out of the church into the Narthex. Wait in the Narthex until the deacon or priest dismisses you.

A server's job is not over at the end of Mass. After the 5 pm and 12:15 pm Masses, please make sure to extinguish the candles on the altar and return the handheld candle holders to the front of the altar. The Cross should also be returned to its holder in the church. For all other Masses, leave the Cross and candle holders in the sacristy. Hang your cincture and alb up neatly in the closet.

You may receive compliments and/or corrections, especially as a new server. Do not take corrections as criticism. They are meant to help. Your job is an important one to the church community and people will thank you for serving. Thank people for compliments.

HELPFUL TIPS

- Always go to the bathroom before Mass.
- Try to spread things out evenly between you and the other servers.
- When lighting candles or handling fire, keep the flame away from your vestments and hair.
- Remember to get a good night's sleep first. There's nothing worse for an assembly to look at than a yawning server!
- Be quiet in the sacristy and avoid making unnecessary noise. At this time you can say a prayer before Mass begins.
- If two servers need to move then they should move together.
- Be ready to help the priest or deacon, especially if he is a visitor to your parish. He may ask you some questions about how Mass takes place in your church. If he does, try to answer them clearly and concisely.
- When walking or sitting, hands should be held locked together either at the chest or waist.
- If something goes wrong, don't show it! Act as if everything is going on as normal as the assembly will not notice.
- If the weather is bad, remember to leave home a bit earlier than normal.
- Remember this is a commitment, if you are unable to serve at a scheduled Mass, please be sure to use the MSP program to indicate this, and do not wait until the last minute when possible.
- Remember that during Mass people are watching you. They do make comments to the priests and Deacons about the servers' behavior at Mass. Although most times it is praise, it is sometimes the opposite. To avoid this dress appropriately, and do not laugh or talk while serving. However, you may give instructions during Mass and help out servers if they are unsure what to do.

QUICK SUMMARY OF MASS ROLES

Cross Bearer

- Always leads a procession, unless there is incense.
- Helps set the altar after the Prayer of the Faithful by bringing chalices, purificators and water cruet to the deacon.
- Goes to the rear of the church to lead the offertory procession after the altar is set.
- Helps bring the finger bowl, towel and water cruet to the priest for the hand washing after the offertory procession.

Candle Bearer

- Always follows the Cross in procession.
- Only carries a candle if there is another candle bearer.
- When on the baptismal font side, helps set the altar after the Prayer of the Faithful by bringing chalices, purificators and water cruet to the deacon.
- Goes to the rear of the church to lead the offertory procession after the altar is set.
- When on the baptismal font side, helps bring the finger bowl, towel and water cruet to the priest for the hand washing after the offertory procession.
- When on the organ side, if there is no book bearer, acts in the role of book bearer.

Book Bearer

- Follows the candles in the opening processional and closing recessional.
- Watches the deacon for a simple signal to come up and receive the Roman Missal to hold for the priest at the start of Mass (Collect) and before the conclusion.
- During the creed, watches the deacon for a simple signal to come up and hold the blue binder for the priest for the Prayer of the Faithful.

Communion Bells

- Wait for the final words said by the priest during the consecration of both the bread and the wine: “Do this in memory of me”.
- Ring the bells clearly three distinct times, pausing very slightly between each.

TERMS TO KNOW

- **Ambo:** Place from where the Word of God is read and homilies are given.
- **Ambry:** Special boxes on the wall where the sacred oils are kept.
- **Boat:** Holds the incense.
- **Censer (Thurible):** Metal container that holds the hot charcoal for the incense.
- **Chalice:** Cup used to consecrate the wine and distribute the Precious Blood.
- **Ciborium:** Cup or dish used to hold the Eucharist (hosts).
- **Cincture:** Rope worn over an alb, which is tied around the waist .
- **Credence Table:** A table in the sanctuary where many objects used for Mass are placed.
- **Cruet:** Bottle-like container that holds water or wine.
- **Finger Towel/Bowl:** Used by priest to wash his hands during Mass.
- **Incense:** A mixture of leaves, bark and other natural materials which gives off sweet smelling smoke when burned. This smoke rises and represents our prayers to God.
- **Lectern:** The place from where the commentator reads and musicians sing.

- **Lectionary:** Large book containing the Scripture readings read during Mass.
- **Missal:** Book that contains prayers and instructions for Mass used by the priest.
- **Paschal Candle:** Large candle in a tall holder which symbolizes the Light of Christ. It is blessed at the Easter Vigil. It remains in the sanctuary during the Easter season and then is used at baptisms and funerals the rest of the year.
- **Paten:** Round metal plate which holds the hosts.
- **Purificator:** Small white cloth used to wipe the chalice and paten after Communion or after a person receives the Precious Blood from the chalice. Has a cross on it.
- **Sacristy:** The room where the celebrant and altar servers prepare for Mass. Vestments and other objects used for Mass are kept here.
- **Sanctuary:** Sacred area around the altar.
- **Tabernacle:** Where the Eucharist is kept.

Thank you for your service at Mass! May God richly bless you and your family! Always remember the Lord is present throughout your week to guide you and help you. Keep Jesus close to your heart.