

Guidelines for Altar Servers

Introduction

Altar Servers are part of a very ancient tradition in the liturgical life of the church.

Within the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, in accord with permission given by the Holy See, both men and women, some younger some older, may function as servers of Word and Sacrament. These Archdiocesan Guidelines are meant to benefit those responsible for implementing the Ministry of Server, providing helpful direction while allowing for appropriate pastoral discretion.

On the pastoral level it is most important that this ministry continue to be encouraged. Pastors should see to it that this ministry reflects the parish and that there is an appropriate balance of male and female servers. Pastors are reminded, especially in the recruitment and training of younger servers, that this ministry has in the past been a source of priestly and religious vocations. It could once more be the starting point for a young man to begin thinking about the priesthood or a young woman to develop an interest and love for the religious life.

Requirements

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.

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 fifth 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.

Responsibilities

Servers carry the cross and the processional candles. They hold the book for the priest celebrant when he is not at the altar. They carry the incense and censer and present the bread and wine

along with the water to the priest during the preparation of the gifts or assist him when he receives the gifts from the people. Servers wash the hands of the priest, and assist the priest and deacon as necessary. In the absence of a sacristan, the servers may prepare the altar and sacred vessels before Mass.

The number of servers varies according to the nature of the celebration. Since the tasks of the server can vary depending upon local circumstances, it is important that the pastor develop a Ministry Description for Servers so that they will be aware of their role and their responsibilities.

Training

As with other ministries, the ministry of server requires individuals to be trained so they can conduct themselves appropriately. The training needs to be adapted to the educational level of those who are participating, but at a minimum should include exposure to the following areas:

1. Ministry to the Assembly
 - a general introduction
 - the meaning of service
 - types of ministries
2. The Eucharist—sense of its theology and structure
3. Names and descriptions of books, vessels, vestments, locations, the seasons of the year and their importance, the vocabulary of liturgy
4. Procedures
 - Before the liturgy: what are the expectations and responsibilities of the server when arriving for liturgy? Arrival time?
 - During a liturgy: posture and deportment, order of processions, the Introductory Rites, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Concluding Rite?
 - Following a liturgy: what are the responsibilities of the server in the sacristy and in the worship space?
5. Other liturgies—Morning and Evening Prayer, Weddings, Funerals, Baptisms, Quinceañeras, Confirmation, etc.

It is recommended that a team be formed at the discretion of the pastor to oversee and provide for the training, formation and scheduling of youth altar servers. This team could include parents, deacons, sacristans and liturgy committee members, both male and female.

A significant responsibility of this leadership group is to model a sense of Church and ministry to the children. This modeling includes participation as full members of the assembly – responding to the prayers and dialogues of the liturgy and joining in the singing of hymns and acclamations.

Vesture and Position of the Server

Adult Servers should dress with decorum befitting the celebration of Eucharist. A professional style of dress is appropriate, or an alb may be worn. If both adult and youth are serving at the same liturgy all should wear similar attire appropriate to this ministry.

Youth Servers should vest in albs or cassock and surplice. Whichever is chosen, there should be an ample supply of sizes to insure all servers are properly vested in the same way at any given liturgy. At all celebrations, servers should be neat, clean and simply dressed.

Servers should be seated in a place from which they can assist the celebrant and deacon with ease. The place next to the priest is normally reserved for the deacon.

Conclusion

Serving in the church is a special privilege. It allows us to be close to the altar, to carry the cross, to carry the light of Christ, to wear the robe of baptism, to hold the book of the prayers – and to swing the thing that makes the smoke (the thurible)! How wonderful this is! (Philippart, *Serve God with Gladness*, 2)

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