MINISTRY OF PARISH MASTER OF CEREMONIES

“Just as each of our bodies has several parts and each part has a separate function, so all of us, in union with Christ, form one body, and as parts of it we belong to one another. Our gifts differ according to the grace given us.”

(Romans 12: 4-5)

DIOCESAN MASTER OF CEREMONIES

The diocesan Master of Ceremonies (MC) assists at ceremonies involving a bishop, such as ordinations, confirmations and cathedral liturgies. This is a highly specialised role, usually undertaken by a priest, that requires advanced skills and a detailed knowledge of pontifical rites. Our focus is not on the role of the diocesan MC but on the ministry of the local MC in parish-based liturgies. On occasion the parish MC may be called upon to assist the diocesan MC when the bishop comes to the parish for a special liturgy.

PARISH MASTER OF CEREMONIES

The parish MC is the person who is entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing and coordinating the liturgical rites of the parish, especially those that are more complex, to ensure that they are celebrated faithfully.

This means that MCs must be familiar not only with the general and particular norms that govern liturgical celebrations but with their pastoral purpose and inner spirit. In brief, the overall aim of liturgical directives is to facilitate the full, conscious and active participation of the whole assembly (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) 14; General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2010) 18).

More specifically, MCs serve as the operational link between the presiding priest and/or deacon and all the other liturgical ministers in both the preparation and conduct of the liturgy.

WHO SERVES AS MC?

Parish MCs are people who have extensive experience as liturgical ministers, are well versed in the church’s liturgical traditions, laws and customs, and have the confidence of all the other liturgical ministers, especially those who preside over the rites. In brief, they must combine liturgical expertise with good human relations skills.

The MC may wear a cassock and surplice to be distinguished from other servers, or the common alb.

LITURGICAL KNOWLEDGE

MCs need to be familiar with the diverse elements of and indispensable resources for the liturgy, including the following:

Key sections of official church documents, such as:

- Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
- General Introduction to the Roman Missal
- Lectionary for Mass: Introduction
• On Preparing and Celebrating the Paschal Feasts
• Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the General Roman Calendar
• Rite of Christian Initiation.¹

The rhythm of the church’s worship:

• the times of the liturgical year – Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Ordinary Time
• the Paschal Triduum in the annual cycle, Sunday in the weekly cycle, and Morning and Evening Prayer in the daily cycle
• the shape and dynamic of the Mass
• the particular characteristics of key annual liturgies, especially those of the Paschal Triduum, as well as Ash Wednesday, Palm/Passion Sunday, Christmas Day, RCIA rites, ANZAC Day and parish festivals
• the authoritative annual calendar and guide to liturgical celebrations in Australia, the Ordo – MCs must learn how to refer to this indispensable tool.

The variety of liturgical ministries:

• the fundamental role of the whole worshipping community
• the roles of all other liturgical ministers:
  o the presiding priest and/or deacon, readers, Extraordinary Ministers of Communion
  o the music ministers, i.e. the organist and other musicians, the cantor and/or song-leader, the choir
  o servers, e.g. thurifer, cross-bearer, candle-bearers, altar assistants
  o auxiliary ministers, e.g. commentator, gift-bearers, ushers, collectors

The liturgical space:

• the church building as a whole and its principal spaces:
  o the sanctuary, nave, transepts and processional aisles
  o the sacristies

The key liturgical furnishings:

• baptismal font, altar, ambo, paschal candle, priest’s chair, tabernacle
• supplementary items, e.g. credence table, and the lighting, sound and overhead projection systems

The liturgical objects:

• symbols:
  o bread and wine, oil, water, light

• vessels:
  o chalices, paten, ciboriums and/or bread bowls
  o containers for the sacred oils, pyx, monstrance
  o baptismal jug, cruets, holy water bowl and sprinkler
• cloths:
  o altar cloths, purifier, corporal, pall, finger towel

• vestments:
  o alb and cincture for all ministers
  o stole and chasuble for the priest, stole and dalmatic for the deacon
  o cope and humeral veil, cassock and surplice

• books:
  o Roman Missal, Lectionary, Gospel book
  o supplementary items, e.g. hymn book, folder for intercessions and announcements

• other symbols and objects:
  o processional cross, thurible and incense boat, candlesticks, tabernacle key
  o tapers for the Easter Vigil, palm branches for Palm Sunday, ashes for Ash Wednesday.

LITURGICAL EXPERTISE

In addition to their liturgical knowledge MCs must display a set of skills to enable them to fulfil their responsibility for the proper performance of the liturgy as a whole.

They not only ensure that individual elements are effectively celebrated, but that the whole rite is experienced as an organic unit of worship. To achieve this they must attend to the “flow” of the celebration so that it proceeds smoothly, without awkward delays or distracting intrusions.

MCs have a clear understanding of the hierarchy of values in the liturgy, ranging from what is essential and important, through what is secondary and supplementary, to what may be adapted or omitted.

MCs combine a mastery of practical detail with a global understanding of the rite. As well as knowing what each minister is meant to be doing and where they are meant to be at any given moment, MCs must be aware of what the next phase of the celebration is and what will be required for it.

The more that MCs are involved in the preparation of the liturgy, the better equipped they will be to coordinate the service. Thus MCs will need to communicate in advance with the principal liturgical ministers, especially the presiding priest and/or deacon and the sacristan, plus music ministers, readers, and those who have unique tasks in annual or special liturgies.

Skilled MCs move freely with reverence and grace, never with haste. They give no more than necessary directions to other ministers and do so with restraint and discretion. Thus they exercise a sure authority without drawing attention to themselves. While they closely accompany the presiding priest, they never take the deacon’s place beside him.

PERSONAL QUALITIES

To complement their liturgical expertise, good MCs have a range of personal qualities:
• an assured self-confidence that has no trace of self-importance
• the capacity to win the trust and cooperation of all liturgical ministers, from the presider right through to the most junior server
• the ability to exercise authority without being authoritarian
• good communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal
• good organisational and practical skills
• the ability to adapt quickly, competently and calmly to unplanned changes and events
• the capacity to train new and continuing liturgical ministers
• good conflict resolution skills
• the willingness to learn and improve
• the humility to admit mistakes and be corrected.

Obligatory conditions

MCs cannot be involved in the training of young servers unless they have a current Working with Children clearance and all the conditions for ensuring a safe environment for children are fulfilled.

AN EXAMPLE: GOOD FRIDAY

MCs will know that the annual Good Friday service is the second of the three solemn liturgies that make up the Paschal Triduum and that it is usually the most well attended.

It has a very simple and strong structure, beginning and ending in silence:

• a Liturgy of the Word that includes the proclamation of the Passion according to John, a homily, and a set of solemn intercessions
• the Showing and Adoration of the Cross
• the distribution of Holy Communion.

While it includes Holy Communion, it is not a Mass.

Advance preparation for the Good Friday service will require meetings to ensure the MC is fully informed about such things as:

• who the liturgical ministers will be
  o presiding priest or deacon, readers, minister of the cross, Extraordinary Minister of Communion, servers
  o what training sessions and rehearsals will be needed for the different ministers and who will conduct them
• who will be responsible for the musical elements of the service, what will be sung and by whom
• how the Passion of John will be proclaimed
  o by one reader, three readers, or more
  o what posture will the congregation adopt
• exactly where and how and by whom the solemn prayers will be proclaimed and what posture the congregation will adopt
• for the Showing of the Cross
o what cross will be used, who will be the minister, which form will be used

• for the Adoration of the Cross
  o noting that only one cross is to be used
  o whether individual veneration of the cross can be catered for within the liturgy or
  o whether will there need to be a general veneration followed by individual
    veneration after the service has concluded
  o where the cross will be placed after the veneration

• for Holy Communion
  o the location of the altar of repose
  o how and when and by whom the consecrated hosts are brought to the altar
  o how many Extraordinary Ministers of Communion will be needed and what their
    stations will be
  o where the remaining hosts are to be placed

• the order of the silent processions in and out

• if there is to be a collection for the care of the Holy Places, when it will be taken up and by
  whom.

In the light of all that has been decided, the MC arrives in ample time on Good Friday to liaise with
the sacristan and ensure that everything is in place. This will include such things as:

• checking the light and sound systems
• putting out the Roman Missal, Lectionary and other books
• making sure the cross and its stand are ready and in place
• checking that the altar is bare and that candlesticks, the altar cloth and enough plates or
  bowls for Holy Communion are on the credence table
• checking that the tabernacle key for the place of reservation is in place
• checking that all ministers are in attendance
• confirming arrangements with the presiding celebrant.

With all the advance and immediate preparations that have taken place, the MC is now able to
proceed with confidence and give the signal for the liturgy to commence.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE


Laughlin, Corinna, Robert D. Shaddock, Paul Turner and D. Todd Williamson. Guide for Servers. The


The Liturgy Documents: Essential Documents for Parish Sacramental Rites and Other Liturgies.

1 All the above and many other documents are available in *The Liturgy Documents Volume One & Volume Two* (see references).