MINISTRY OF SERVING AT MASS

“Each one of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards responsible for all these different graces of God, put yourself at the service of others. . . . so that in everything God may receive the glory, through Jesus Christ, since to him alone belong all glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.”

(1 Peter 4:10)

THE SERVER WORSHIPS WITH THE COMMUNITY

The first role of the server is to pray with the whole community. All present – parishioners, liturgical ministers, and the priest presider – are called to pray with all their heart and mind and soul and body. Servers join in and sing and listen and respond along with everyone else.

THE SERVER IS CALLED FROM THE COMMUNITY

Servers are those who are called forward from the community to help everybody pray well. Their special role, along with all the other ministers, is to assist the priest presider to lead the community in prayer. Serving with reverence and care is a ministry, a service to be given, not a job to be done.

Servers, lectors, commentators, and members of the choir also exercise a genuine liturgical function. They ought, therefore, to discharge their office with the sincere piety and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected of them by God’s people. Consequently they must all be deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy, each in his own measure, and they must be trained to perform their functions in a correct and orderly manner. [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) 29]

LITURGICAL SERVICES

The primary liturgy at which servers assist is the parish Sunday Mass.

They may also be required at weekday and school Masses, at Confirmation and First Holy Communion Masses, and at funeral services, but rarely at baptisms and weddings.

Well-trained and experienced servers are especially needed at the liturgies for Palm Sunday and the Paschal Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil). These require extra practice sessions, as do any ceremonies led by a bishop.

WHO MAY SERVE?

• Servers are baptised Catholics, male or female, who have made their first Communion.
• It is preferable that they reflect the diversity of the parish community.
• They may be young or old:
  o young servers need to be old enough to understand and carry out their tasks with confidence
  o mature age servers need to be able to manage the physical demands of the role.
THE ROLE

- The ministry of servers is not spelt out in any detail in the church’s official documents. The local bishop may issue guidelines, but much depends on the guidance and direction given by the parish priest [General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2010) 107, 111].

- Servers may be called upon to act as thurifers, cross-bearers, candle-bearers, book-bearers and altar assistants [GIRM 100].
  - The thurifer’s role is summarised below.
  - The cross-bearer carries the cross in processions in and out of the church, places it safely in its stand and retrieves it when needed.
  - Candle-bearers carry candles in a variety of processions during Mass, eg for the Entrance, the Gospel and the Procession of Gifts.
  - Book-bearers hold the Missal open for the priest to read from.
  - Altar assistants help the priest with his actions at the altar.

- The role of acolyte is distinct from that of server; it is reserved to men who have been formally approved by the bishop.

- The Master of Ceremonies is the person who oversees servers at more complex liturgies.

- The proper vesture for servers is an alb (a white robe signifying baptism that reaches down to the ankles and may be tied around the waist with a cincture) and neat footwear [GIRM 336, 339].

QUALITIES OF SERVERS

Servers are:
- keen to be of service to God and the community
- willing to be trained for their role and to keep on learning
- good team players who are happy to work with others
- punctual and reliable
- not attention-seeking
- able to move quietly and with reverence.

WHAT SERVERS NEED TO KNOW

Servers need to be familiar with:
- the times of the liturgical year – Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Ordinary Time – and the importance of Sunday
- the parts of the Mass and all the responses and acclamations
- when and how to stand, sit, kneel and process
- the layout of the church, especially the sacristy, the main aisle, and the sanctuary area
- the major furnishings: the baptismal font, the altar, the ambo, the priest’s chair, the tabernacle, the paschal candle, the credence table
- the vessels: chalice(s), paten, ciborium and/or bread bowls, cruets, holy water bowl and sprinkler, pyx, monstrance, containers for the sacred oils, baptismal jug
- the cloths: purifier, corporal, pall, finger towel
- the vestments: alb, cincture, surplice; and for the priest: stole, chasuble, cope, humeral veil
- the books: Missal, lectionary, Gospel book, prayer folder, hymn book
• the symbols and objects: bread and wine, processional cross, candlesticks, thurible and incense boat, tabernacle key, tapers.

**SUNDAY MASS**

Serving customs will vary from parish to parish. The following are general guidelines. Since incense is not always used at Sunday Mass, the role of the thurifer is described separately.

Servers should arrive well in time to prepare for Sunday Mass. After vesting in their albs they attend to their tasks, guided by the priest or sacristan. They may light the candles, prepare the credence table, put out bread and wine for the procession of gifts, make sure the priest’s books are in place, check that the lights and microphone are on, and get ready to carry the processional cross [cf. *GIRM* 117-119].

**Introductory Rites**

The entrance procession is led by the cross-bearer and candle-bearers, followed by other servers or acolytes, the readers, the deacon (if present), and the priest [*GIRM* 120].

Whatever their role in a procession, servers move at a moderate pace with reverence and grace.

On arrival at the sanctuary, all bow profoundly together towards the altar. If the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, all genuflect, except those bearing a liturgical object. No reverence is given to the tabernacle during the Mass [*GIRM* 49, 274, 275].

The cross-bearer puts the cross in place [*GIRM* 188], the candle-bearers place the candles on the altar or near it [*GIRM* 122], and the remaining servers go their place.

One server holds the Missal open for the priest for the Introductory Rites [*GIRM* 189]. If the Penitential Act is replaced by a sprinkling rite [*GIRM* 51], a server may accompany the priest around the church with the holy water bowl.

**Liturgy of the Word**

All servers sit and listen attentively to the readings and join in the response to the psalm [*GIRM* 128, 129].

If there is a Gospel procession, the candle-bearers accompany the priest to the ambo. They stand on either side of the ambo while the gospel is read [*GIRM* 133]. Then they return to their places and sit for the homily.

After the homily, one server holds the Missal for the priest during the Creed, and then, if required, the prayer folder for the General Intercessions.

**Liturgy of the Eucharist**

*The Preparation of Gifts*

While the collection is being taken up, servers take the corporal, chalice, purifier and Missal to the altar [*GIRM* 139]. Extra chalices may be placed at the sides of the altar.
Candle-bearers may take their candles down to where the gifts of bread and wine have been placed and accompany the gift-bearers to the sanctuary.

Servers assist the priest in receiving the gifts of bread and wine and the proceeds of the collection [GIRM 140], then bring the cruet of water to the altar [GIRM 142].

After the gifts have been presented, they bring the water and finger cloth for the priest to wash his hands, then return to their place.

*The Eucharistic Prayer*

Servers join in the responses for the Eucharistic Prayer and adopt the same postures as the congregation.

At the elevation of the host and chalice, a bell may be rung if this is the local custom [GIRM 150].

*Holy Communion*

Servers normally receive Holy Communion after the priest and the Extraordinary Ministers of Communion. They sit in prayerful silence while Holy Communion is distributed and join in the singing if there is a communion song.

After Holy Communion, if the sacred vessels are purified at the altar, servers bring water to the priest, then take the purified vessels and Missal to the credence table.

One server holds the Missal for the priest for the Prayer after Communion.

*Concluding rites*

After the announcements have been made, one server holds the Missal for the priest to pray the Solemn Blessing.

Once the priest has given the Dismissal, servers prepare for the procession out. The cross-bearer collects the cross and the candle-bearers their candles. All those who have taken part in the entrance procession line up and wait for the priest to give the signal to move. The procession out follows the same order as at the beginning of Mass [GIRM 193].

After Mass and under the sacristan’s guidance, servers extinguish the candles carefully, bring the cruets, purified vessels, and Missal back to the sacristy, and hang their albs up neatly. Then they return to their homes and families to live what they have celebrated.

**THE ROLE OF THE THURIFER**

The role of the thurifer is more complex and requires careful training by the parish Master of Ceremonies, a priest of the parish, or a senior server. The thurifer must learn how to prepare the burning coals, how to open and close the thurible competently, and how to handle it safely and gracefully for processions and incensations.

The thurible may be used:

- in the entrance procession
• to honour the gospel
• to honour the gifts of bread and wine
• to honour the priest, ministers and people
• to honour the Body and Blood of Christ.

A PRAYER FOR SERVERS

God of glory, your beloved Son has shown us
that true worship comes from humble and contrite hearts.
Bless our brothers and sisters,
who have responded to the needs of our parish
and wish to commit themselves to your service
as altar servers.
Grant that their ministry may be fruitful
and our worship pleasing in your sight.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
R. Amen.

[Book of Blessings (1989) 1854]

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE


