

A SCHOOL'S GUIDE TO ALTAR SERVERS AT MASS

WHAT ARE THEY?

Altar servers, by their skills and knowledge, serve the assembly and the priest by helping the smooth-running of the Liturgy. They carry, bring and fetch the things needed at the altar, they carry candles in procession.

They can also help prepare the altar, and the credence and offertory tables, before Mass begins.

WHO CAN SERVE AT THE ALTAR?

In theory any of the baptised can serve at the altar. In our diocese there is equal access to the ministry for male and female servers. However, it is usual to reserve the ministry to those who have also made their first Holy Communion.

It is important that anyone who is asked to serve already has acquired the skills to serve with understanding and attention. These skills will only be obtained by careful and sustained training.

The assembly and priest are not well served when this ministry is entrusted to those who do not know what to do. Neither are the servers themselves, who are shown in a poor light if they are confused and ineffective.

It is not a difficult thing to train servers in the school, and probably one of the local clergy would be happy to arrange a couple of after-school sessions to work with volunteers.

That said it is probably simpler to make use of servers who have already been trained for service in parishes. However, these, too, will require additional help to adapt themselves to the often very different circumstances of serving in a school setting.

WHAT SHOULD THEY WEAR?

It is usual for an altar server to wear a white alb and cincture, or a cassock and cotta. It would be practical for a school to hold sufficient stock in a range of standard sizes for the children who will serve. Otherwise it is usually a simple matter for the priest to bring sufficient albs, or cassocks and cottas, from the parish. Alternatively, servers may assist wearing their own school clothes.

HOW MANY SERVERS SHOULD THERE BE?

The right number for what they need to do!

This flip answer is the only really sensible one. For example, if you are having an entrance procession with thurible and boat, processional cross, and two candles, then you need four. On the other hand, if all the server is being asked to do is bring chalices from the credence table and assist in receiving the Offertory gifts then only one (or two) are needed.

So, agree on the degree of ritual that is to feature in your celebration and note the maximum number of servers you need at any one time, (probably it will be the number carrying things in the Entrance Procession), and that is the number of servers you need. Below is a list of things that the servers might do which will help you make your calculation.

You could have more, using different sets of servers for different parts of the Mass, but that can get cumbersome. Servers who are under-occupied can get bored. It is better to go for the minimum number needed than the maximum number you can 'find jobs for'.

VALUE OF RITUAL

In recent decades there has been a tendency to downplay the importance of ritual relative to the spoken word. This is unfortunate, for liturgy is essentially a symbolic action, and symbols work best when we allow them proper time and space. It is then they are most expressive and most effective.

Careful use of the given symbols of the Mass allows the Liturgy to 'speak' to us at all sorts of different levels, and helps us respond to the presence of the Lord in all sorts of different ways. Children especially will respond well to the effective use of the symbols of the Mass.

ROLES OF ALTAR SERVERS AT MASS

[Don't worry! You don't need to have this many servers – it is not usual to have thurible and boat at a school Mass – the table below just indicates possible roles and should help you to decide how many altar servers will be needed].

- **INTRODUCTORY RITES**
ENTRANCE PROCESSION
Thurible
Boat
Cross
Candle 1
Candle 2

- **PENITENTIAL ACT**
Book for Collect

- **LITURGY OF THE WORD**
Gospel Procession
Candle 1
Candle 2
Thurible
Boat

- **LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST**

Preparation of Altar

Bringing chalices to the altar

Server 1

Server 2

- **OFFERTORY**

Receiving Offertory Gifts

Bringing Wine/Water to the altar

Washing priest's hands

Server 1

Server 2

Thurible

Boat

- **EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER**

Bell

Thurible

Boat

- **FINAL PROCESSION**

Thurible

Boat

Cross

Candle 1

Candle 2