

St. James Community of Faith

The Ministry of Acolyte

Fall, 2016

*Ministry, is first of all, receiving God's blessing
from those to whom we minister. What is this
blessing? It is a glimpse of the face of God.*

~Henri Nouwen

Acolyte Ministry

You are volunteering as a server at church. You light candles, hold the books, handle the vessels, and arrange the cloths. You help the other ministers focus on their work by simplifying their motions and eliminating distractions. You help the entire community celebrate Eucharist by your humble service.

Your actions may seem routine, but everyone depends on you to do them without flash. When you serve well, no one notices you. People only notice when things go awry.

Still, the Church relies on the assistance of adult servers. Whether in parishes, convents, monasteries, or chapels, adults serve Mass. They join in the prayer, and they assure the smooth execution of the liturgy.

1. Theology and History of the Server

The word *Eucharist* means "thanksgiving". It comes from a Greek word. To this day, when modern Greeks say, "Thank you," they say *Eucharisto*." It is one of the most used words in the language.

Mass is an act of thanksgiving. Through it we call to mind the great deeds God has done for us, and we express our gratitude for them. We do this especially in the prayers.

The word *Mass* means "sending". It comes from the Latin words that conclude the service: *Ite, missa est*. It has been translated many ways, such as "Go forth, the Mass is ended." Or, more freely, "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." "Go, you have been sent."

We call this part of Mass the dismissal, but it is not just a "sending from." It is a "sending to." We are not just ending our time of prayer together. We are beginning our time of service. The very word *Mass* implies that something follows. We do not celebrate without also being sent. We spend the Mass praying for transformation, and we spend the week putting our refreshed selves to work for the sake of the reign of God.

Sunday, the Lord's Day

Sunday is the day we set aside for this worship. It is the Lord's Day, the day on which we celebrate the rising of Christ. Because he rose from the dead on the first day of the week, we gather on that day to give thanks.

A Place for Worship

The place for our Eucharist is a church set aside for this purpose. This building is where the faithful gather. We fill it with our conviction. It takes its personality from those who gather. When a single building is used from one generation to the next, it becomes a storehouse of the faith of ages past. It is infused with the spirit of our ancestors and enlivened by the Communion of Saints in heaven and on earth.

The People of God as Church

The people who gather there on Sunday morning are the Church. The word *church* ultimately derives from a Greek word meaning "the house of the Lord," but we use it to translate a different Greek word, *ekklesia*, which refers to the gathering of the faithful. It comes from a word meaning "the building," but it refers to a word meaning "the people."

WE GATHER: We each hold individual faith in our hearts, but we are connected to one another.

WE SERVE: Everyone has the responsibility to worship, and everyone has the responsibility to serve. Service makes us think less of ourselves and more of the common good.

History of the Server

At the Last Supper, someone had to set the table and prepare the meal. The servers are not mentioned, but unquestionably the very first Eucharist would have relied on servers. When the early Church gathered for the breaking of bread in homes, someone had to perform the same functions. In time the liturgy became more stylized, and so did its ministers.

The role of acolytes had become so important to the Church by the tenth century that the Roman-Germanic Pontifical included a ceremony for ordaining one. Around the same time, it was becoming customary for a priest saying even the simplest Mass to have the assistance of an acolyte who would proclaim the reading, make responses to the dialogues, and join in saying the chants.

After the Second Vatican Council the responsibilities of servers shifted. They were no longer required to learn the many responses in Latin because these were typically said in the vernacular.

Perhaps the most dramatic visible change was the admission of girls to the ranks of servers. The 1917 *Code of Canon Law* permitted women to serve Mass only at a distance when no men were present and for a just cause. The revised *Code of Canon Law* implicitly gave girls permission to serve in 1983. Canon 230 §2 allowed all laypersons to perform a variety of liturgical functions.

2. Spirituality and Formation of the Server

Ministry comes from inside out. People will see you perform external actions, but these will have meaning only if they are accompanied by the internal action of prayer. While you serve Mass, keep a prayerful spirit about you. Let your ministry move from the inside out.

Think about some of the things you do as an acolyte. Reflect on the sacred objects you hold and the actions you perform. Reconnect with their purpose and rededicate yourself to their mission.

- During Mass you may join in a procession. The Entrance Procession brings all the ministers toward the altar. The Gospel Procession prepares for the solemn proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The procession with the gifts brings the bread and wine to the altar. The Communion Procession invites the faithful to share in the Body and Blood of Christ.
- As the procession forms, you move. You go from point A to point B. You move from the door of the church to the sanctuary, from the altar to the ambo, from here to there.
- Jesus moved around. Throughout his ministry he went to several towns and villages to meet the people, to proclaim his message, to heal the sick, and to recruit disciples. Then he went on the next town.
- You sing when you process. The cantor, musicians, and choir will invite you and everyone to praise God in song. You won't be able to hold the music in your hand if you are carrying a cross, a candle, or incense, but you can still carry a song in your throat.
- At times the acolyte holds the book for the priest standing at his chair. The book, known as *The Roman Missal*, contains the main prayers of the Mass. The main reason you hold this book during the service is so that the priest is free to extend his hands when he prays. Whenever the priest address God, he extends his arms in a position called *orans*, or praying.
- As you serve at Mass, come to a deeper understanding of the work you do, the signs and symbols you represent, and the objects you hold. They all have a deep spiritual meaning, and you can never completely explore them.
- When you serve Mass your "office building" is the church. You work in God's house, and in a house made holy by the faith of many generations. Respect the church building. As a server you will come to know the building, the closets where things are stored, and the function of public spaces. The building is flexible enough to house public prayer and private devotion, to celebrate the joy of a large wedding or to experience the healing power of God's love and forgiveness at reconciliation. Your respect and love for the building will demonstrate your respect and love for the other people who use it.

Be familiar with the layout of your church

- The Church
- The Nave
- The Sanctuary
- The Altar
- The Ambo
- The Presidential Chair
- Credence Table
- Tabernacle and Sanctuary Lamp
- The Baptism Font
- The Paschal Candle
- The Ambry
- The Sacristy
- Vestments
- Linens
- Ritual Books
- Vessels
- Candles
- Incense
- The Sacramentarium

The Role of the Acolyte

Acolytes have a number of significant liturgical responsibilities. You may serve on your own during daily Mass; more frequently, you'll be part of a team during Sunday Mass or other special rites such as Confirmation, weddings, or funerals. Depending upon the nature of the celebration, the team could number as few as two or three, or as many as seven - or even more.

A dedicated acolyte should arrive early enough to prepare spiritually, do the setup of the worship space.

Before Mass begins, the **credence table** should be prepared with the following:

- The corporal
- Chalice and paten, Communion cups, and purificators
- additional ciboria
- The cruets
- The bow and towel for the washing of hands
- A vessel of water and aspergillum, if there is to be a Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water

Offertory Table

- Ciboria, with the proper amount of hosts to be consecrated
- Cruet or carafe with the proper amount of wine to be poured in the Communion cups for consecration

After Mass

After Mass, acolytes usually return to the sacristy. Don't forget to prepare whatever is happening next - extinguishing the candles, bringing in the books, purifying the chalice, patens and vessels.

The Liturgical Year

- Sunday
- Solemnities
- Feasts
- Memorials
- Optional Memorials
- Advent
- Christmas Time
- Lent
- Sacred Paschal Triduum
- Easter Time
- Ordinary Time

Questions:

1. Why have you agreed to help as an Acolyte at your church?

2. Who encouraged you to serve the Church in this way? Who are your role models for service?

3. You "serve" Mass. In what other ways do you "serve" outside of Mass? Who receives your care? What do you do for them?

4. How would you define service? What does this mean in relationship to the Christian community?

5. Do you feel prepared to serve your community? Do you understand your responsibilities, the parts of Mass, and other rites?
