

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church Altar Servers' Handbook

What is an altar server? An altar server is one who helps the priest in the celebration of the Mass and other liturgical rites. Altar servers should learn about all that pertains to their important role in the Mass, and they should strive to grasp the inner spiritual meaning of these things. In this way, servers will be examples to all of reverence for sacred things and sincere love for the Church. It is an extreme privilege to serve at the altar.



What are the qualities of a good altar server?

Individuals are chosen to be altar servers based on their goodness, common sense, faithfulness, and willingness to assist at the sacred ceremonies. Moreover, one must never forget that serving at the Mass is prayer. A server should **participate in Mass fully** by singing in a moderate voice and saying the prayers with the rest of the assembled community. A server has a solemn responsibility to do the assigned duties with attention, dignity, and especially with great **reverence. Remember that Jesus Christ is truly present in the Blessed Sacrament.**

How should altar servers move and act? Servers should develop a natural sense of “what is appropriate,” so that nothing they do at Mass will ever distract or disturb others. It is helpful for servers to think about their actions from the point of view of the people. For example, servers should sit and stand up straight, not crossing their legs or lounging. At the same time, actions should not seem nervous or mechanical. In general, servers should move slowly and calmly, but always knowing exactly what they are doing and why. Servers should work as a team, all carrying out their actions in the same manner and style as their companion servers.

How should altar servers hold their hands? Hands are to be joined palm to palm in front of the chest with the fingers pointed upward in prayer and readiness to serve. When something is in one hand, the other hand should rest flatly against the chest. When the servers sit, the hands should rest folded, or with palms flat on the knees, fingers together, elbows bent in a relaxed way. It is also a good idea for servers to wash their hands thoroughly before Mass.

Where should the servers' eyes be? The servers' eyes and attention should follow the action of the Mass, unless it is necessary to concentrate on some other function being performed. The eyes should not wander.

When should servers genuflect? A genuflection is appropriate whenever the server crosses in front of the tabernacle before or after Mass. The server should also genuflect whenever he/she passes in front of the altar after the consecration. Servers should also genuflect at the beginning and at the end of Mass facing the tabernacle.

When should servers bow? A reverent bow to the altar is appropriate whenever the server passes in front of it (except when the Body and Blood of Christ are present, and thus a

genuflection is appropriate). Servers should bow *slightly* (a “head bow”) to the priest after each time they approach him, since the priest acts in the person of Christ. In general, in the Roman Rite bowing is reserved for the altar, the crucifix and the priest.

How should altar servers dress? Altar servers wear an alb with a cincture, or cassock and surplice. These vestments should be treated with respect and they should ***be put away neatly*** after Mass. It is important that servers wear clean and dressy shoes with socks. Sneakers, sandals, are not appropriate for altar servers, because these may be a source of distraction to others. Black pants, socks and shoes are preferred.

ALTAR SERVERS' DUTIES AT ST. FRANCIS XAVIER'S CHURCH IN GENERAL

1. If servers are unable to serve at the Mass for which they are scheduled, they ***MUST CALL FOR A SUBSTITUTE*** from the list of servers. If they cannot find a replacement by the Friday before the Mass, they should telephone the parish secretary at 498-3518 (Monday-Friday, 9:00 – 4:00 p.m.).
2. Servers who consistently strive for excellence in serving will be rewarded by God. The parish greatly appreciates those who serve at the altar of God.
3. Servers who show a lack of reverence, or a lack of respect for others, or fail to show up for their scheduled Masses, may be asked to stop serving altogether.
4. If servers are attending a Mass for which they are not scheduled to serve, they may check in the sacristy ***five minutes*** before Mass begins. If there are not enough servers, they should vest and serve.
5. Servers ***should not leave the sanctuary*** during Mass unless they are sick or are retrieving or returning the thurible (incensor).
6. Servers should know where things are kept in the Sacristy.
7. In general, servers participate in the Mass as the people do (sitting, standing, kneeling, responding) unless indicated otherwise in the directions that follow.

BEFORE MASS

1. Arrive on time (***15 minutes before Mass***).
2. Get vested (and wash your hands if necessary). The vestments are arranged by size – smallest to largest. Please be careful with the snaps as they break easily. After Mass be sure to neatly hang up your surplice and cassock and put it back in the same order.
3. Make sure that:

- Candles at the tabernacle and the processional candles at the altar are lit. Advent wreath candles or the Easter candle may also need to be lit.
 - Hosts, water and wine, and basin and finger towel, are ready.
 - If incense is used, make sure the charcoals are burning
4. *Be reverent and prepare yourself in silence and prayer for Mass.*
 5. Greet the priest when he enters the sacristy.

DURING MASS

ENTRANCE PROCESSION

1. Line up according to the roles assigned.
2. Once the opening hymn has begun, process in at a reasonable pace (reverent but not dragging). The cross bearer leads, followed by two candle bearers, who are followed in turn by the lector holding the Book of the Gospels, and then the priest. If there is incense, the thurifer will lead the procession.
3. Candle bearers should hold the processional candles in the following way. The arm holding the upper part of the candle should point toward the people. The other arm holds the base of the candle.
4. As the servers approach the altar steps, the cross bearer moves to the far right, the lector moves to the far left, and the candle bearers move to the inside right and left while leaving room for the priests (and deacon). All wait for the priest to genuflect and genuflect with him at the same time (with the exception of the candle bearers and cross bearer who bow).
5. The cross bearer puts the cross in its stand next to the altar, and the candle bearers return their candles to their stands on the altar and go to their chairs. The lector takes his place.

OPENING PRAYER

1. After the Penitential Rite and Gloria, the priest says, "Let us pray." By this time the book bearer should have the Sacramentary in hand and takes it to the priest.
2. The server should stand to hold the book in such a way that the priest can both easily face the people and clearly see the text.
3. If the server is tall he should hold the Sacramentary to the side so that the priest can see the people as well as the book when he looks up.
4. After the priest reads the Opening Prayer, the book bearer, waits for him to close the Sacramentary. Once it is closed, the server puts the Sacramentary down and sits for the readings.

READING OF THE GOSPEL

1. If there is incense the thurifer heads towards the sacristy during the second reading (before the Gospel), retrieves the thurible, and brings it to the priest while the Alleluia is sung.
2. After the priest or deacon says “A reading from the Gospel.....” the thurifer is ready to pass him the thurible.
3. The thurifer waits till the Gospel is read and then heads to the sacristy where the thurible is left. At this moment another charcoal may be added.

PRESENTATION and PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS

1. After the homily and after the Creed and Prayers of the Faithful, the priest (and deacon) may sit. At the appropriate time the servers place the book stand on the altar and place the Sacramentary on it. The servers should then take the chalice and other vessels from the credence table to the altar.
2. When the priest goes down to the steps to receive the gifts, the altar servers go with him.
3. The servers take the gifts from the priest (the altar servers never take the gifts, but rather wait for the priest to hand them to them) and turn to go up the altar steps. The hosts are handed to the priest at the altar. The basket containing the money is placed beneath the altar.
4. The servers prepare to take the water and wine to the priest (or the deacon) by going over to the credence table and removing their tops. When the priest (or deacon) turns to prepare the chalice (to pour in the water and wine), the servers should already be there ready to assist him. The altar servers should stand by the altar one holding the cruet of water and the other the cruet of wine with the handles turned toward the priest.
5. After the priest (or deacon) hands back the water and the empty wine cruets, the servers bow together to the priest, and return the cruets to the credence table.
6. If there is incense, the thurifer gets the thurible from the sacristy and then approaches the priest. After the priest puts incense into the thurible, the thurifer hands the thurible to the priest. The thurifer waits behind the altar for the priest to incense the gifts around the altar. Then the thurifer (or the deacon) receives the incense from the priest. The thurifer (or the deacon) then incenses the priest three times (2 swings each time). The thurifer (or deacon) walks down in front of the altar and proceeds to incense other priests if present bowing to them first, and then bows to the people and incenses them with 2 swings to the left, 2 swings to the center, and 2 swings to the right. The thurifer leaves the thurible in the sacristy afterwards.

7. The servers then prepare to take the basin and finger towel to the priest for the lavabo. The server who holds the towel should unfold it and present it to the priest so that he does not need to reach for it. If there is only one server, then he puts the towel over his forearm so he can hold the water cruet in one hand and the lavabo basin in the other.
8. The servers again bow together to the priest after he is finished with the towel.
9. After returning the lavabo bowl and towel to the credence table, the servers return to opposite sides of the steps.
10. All servers remain standing throughout the entire Offertory of the Mass.

“HOLY, HOLY, HOLY”

1. The servers kneel after the Holy, Holy, Holy, during the Eucharistic Prayer, until the great Amen.

CONSECRATION

1. Kneeling on the step, the server rings the bells once at the epiclesis (when the priest holds his hands over the gifts.)
2. The server rings the bells again three times when the priest raises the host, and again three times when he raises the chalice. It is appropriate to say during the elevation in inaudible voice *“My Lord and my God,”* following the example of Thomas the Apostle.

SIGN OF PEACE

1. The servers stay in the sanctuary during the sign of peace. They greet the priest, each other and the lector.

COMMUNION

1. The servers wait to receive Holy Communion. They receive Holy Communion with the Lector after the Extra-ordinary Ministers of Holy Communion have received Communion. Then they step forward and receive Communion from either the priest or the Extra-ordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.
2. After receiving Communion the servers go to their respective seats and kneel.

AFTER COMMUNION

1. One server gets ready to take the water cruet to the priest.
2. The server takes the water to the priest as soon as he turns with the chalice. Normally, the server pours water into the chalice for the priest and *keeps pouring* until the priest lifts the

chalice slightly as a signal to stop. The server should then bow to the priest and return the water cruet to the credence table.

3. After the priest has purified the vessels, the server moves the sacred vessels from the altar back to the credence table after they have been purified. The other server should take the Sacramentary from the altar and prepare to hold it for the closing prayer.
4. The servers do not sit until the priest (*and* deacon) does. All servers should move to *sit down at the same time*.

CLOSING PRAYER

1. At the words "Let us pray," all the servers stand. The book bearer takes the Sacramentary to the priest and holds it in the same way as during the Opening Prayer.
2. The server should again wait for the priest to close the book. This is especially important because the priest often needs the book for the final blessing.

RECESSIONAL

1. After the dismissal, the servers remain in their places until the priest (and deacon) moves toward the altar.
2. Once the priest begins to move, the candle bearers get the candles and the cross bearer takes the cross.
3. All servers move to the foot of the altar lined up as during the entrance procession.
4. All servers genuflect to the tabernacle (except the cross bearer who bows) with the priest and then begin the recessional toward the back of the church (cross bearer followed by candle bearers, etc.).

AFTER MASS

1. The servers extinguish all candles in the Sanctuary and return the chalices, ciborium, and the water and wine cruets to the sacristy. **Never rinse or wash the chalices** as they may contain the Precious Blood of Jesus and so may only be properly cleansed by a priest. The Precious Blood of Jesus may never be poured down the drain and into the sewer.
2. The servers should carefully take off their vestments, and *hang them neatly* (with the top snap fastened) on the rack. They should pick up any other vestments that may have fallen to the floor. Servers should always treat church property and sacristy items with great care and respect.
3. Ask Father if there is anything else that you can do. Tell him goodbye and thank him.

CATHOLIC WORDS A SERVER SHOULD KNOW

Advent - the four-week season of preparation for Christmas (Violet vestments).

alb - a white robe worn by priests and also by servers (see also cassock).

altar - the sacred “table” where the sacrifice of the Mass is performed.

ambo - the place from which the readings, gospel, and homily are proclaimed (also lectern or pulpit).

Aspergillum –the Holy Water sprinkler used by the priest in procession when blessing the people. The altar server holding the bucket of Holy Water follows the priest as he sprinkles the people with Holy Water to remind them of their baptism and their baptismal promises.

Benediction - a special blessing with the Eucharist, which is usually displayed in a monstrance.

Book of the Gospels – A book placed on the altar at the beginning of Mass that contains the Gospel Readings for all Sundays.

candle extinguisher - a special tool designed to light as well as “snuff out” the altar candles.

cassock - a robe worn by priests and also by servers, usually black or red in color.

chalice - the sacred cup used at Mass to hold the wine changed into the Blood of Christ.

chasuble - the outer vestment of the priest, colored according to the liturgical season.

ciborium - a large container with a lid for holding and/or storing the Eucharistic hosts.

cincture - a rope tied around the waist used when wearing an alb.

consecration - the part of the Mass at which the bread and wine are changed to Christ’s Body and Blood.

cope - a special cape worn by the priest for Benediction and other ceremonies.

corporal - a large linen napkin unfolded on the altar. The bread and wine offerings are placed on this.

credence table - a side table where the vessels are kept before and after they are needed at the altar.

cross bearer - the altar server who carries the cross in procession.

cruets - special containers for the water and wine used at Mass.

Eucharist – The consecrated host that has been transubstantiated at the consecration by the priest into Jesus' Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.

Eucharistic Prayer - the long prayer of the Mass during which the consecration takes place.

Gloria - a prayer near the beginning of the Mass based on the hymn of the angels at Christ's birth.

Lavabo bowl and towel - the bowl and towel used by the priest for the lavabo.

Homily - a reflection preached at Mass after the reading of the Gospel.

Sign of Peace - the part of the Mass right before the reception of Communion wherein the faithful exchange peace.

stole - the strip of cloth worn over the shoulders of priests to signify their God-given authority. A stole is always worn for the celebration of Mass and usually for Confession.

surplice - a ceremonial white garment worn over a cassock at Mass and other rites.

tabernacle - the holy cabinet wherein the Eucharist is reserved outside of Mass.

thurible and boat - the censer and the container which holds grains of incense.

thurifer - the server who carries the thurible.

vestments - sacred clothes worn by the priest only at the Mass or other liturgical functions.

host - a communion wafer that has been or will be transformed into the Body of Christ.

humeral veil - a long veil worn over the priest's shoulders at Benediction and Eucharistic processions. It is so named because it covers the humerus or upper arm bone.

lavabo - the ceremonial washing of the priest's hands at Mass.

Lent - a special season of prayer and penance which precedes Holy Week and Easter (Violet vestments).

Lectionary - the sacred liturgical book containing the readings of the Mass.

Liturgy of the Word - the first part of the Mass from the Opening Prayer to the Prayers of the Faithful

Liturgy of the Eucharist - the second part of the Mass with the Offertory, Consecration, and Communion.

monstrance - a large vessel made to hold and display the sacred host during Eucharistic adoration.

Ordinary Time - the thirty four weeks outside of special seasons of the Church year (Green vestments)

pall - a square linen “cover” for the chalice, or the white cloth draped over the casket at a funeral.

Paschal candle - a large candle blessed at Easter and lit throughout Mass during the Easter Season and at baptisms and funerals which symbolizes the light of Christ’s presence throughout the year.

paten - a golden dish used for holding hosts or for catching falling particles of the hosts at communion.

Pentecost - the fiftieth day after Easter, which celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit (Red vestments).

prayers of the faithful - a series of intercessory prayers offered at Mass after the recitation of the Creed.

Presentation of the Gifts - the part of the Mass where the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar and prepared.

Presider’s or president’s chair - the special chair where the priest sits during Mass. No one else should sit in the presider’s chair.

purificator - a small linen towel used for purifying the sacred vessels used during Mass.

pyx - a small container for hosts that are to be taken to the sick or shut ins.

Sacramentary - the large sacred book containing all the prayers of the Mass.

sacrarium - a special sink that drains into the earth rather than septic systems, only to be used by the priest for the appropriate reposition of the consecrated species if necessary..

sacristy - the room or rooms used to store sacred vessels and vestments for Mass.

Sanctuary – The part of the church where the altar is located and the priest celebrates the Mass.