

## History and Graces received from Altar Serving



For hundreds of years, the usage of altar servers has brought about countless priestly vocations. In the words of the Archbishop of Westminster, Bernard Cardinal Griffin, "To serve at the altar, as to sing in the choir, is next to the priesthood the highest privilege which a human can enjoy. He represents the faithful and takes a most intimate part in the rich treasures of the church's liturgy and ceremonial. Those sacred ceremonies should be carried out with devotion, dignity and attention to detail."

### History:

An altar server is a lay assistant to the priest during the Mass or to other members of the clergy in other religious functions including Benediction and Eucharistic Adoration. An altar server is not to be confused with an acolyte. Before the Second Vatican Council, the acolyte was the highest of the minor orders, having duties including the lighting of the altar-candles, carrying the candles in procession, assisting the subdeacon and

deacon, and the ministering of water and wine to the priest at Mass. Acolytes wore either the alb or the surplice over a cassock.

The order of acolyte was conferred on a seminarian at a minor ordination. After the reforms of the minor orders in 1972, the acolyte survived but became one of two lay ministries (along with that of lector) instead of an order. Today, Indult Catholic societies such as the Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest and the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter are still permitted to ordain seminarians to all the minor orders, including the acolytate. Therefore, the acolyte is not to be confused with the altar server even though the altar server can do the already mentioned duties of the acolyte.

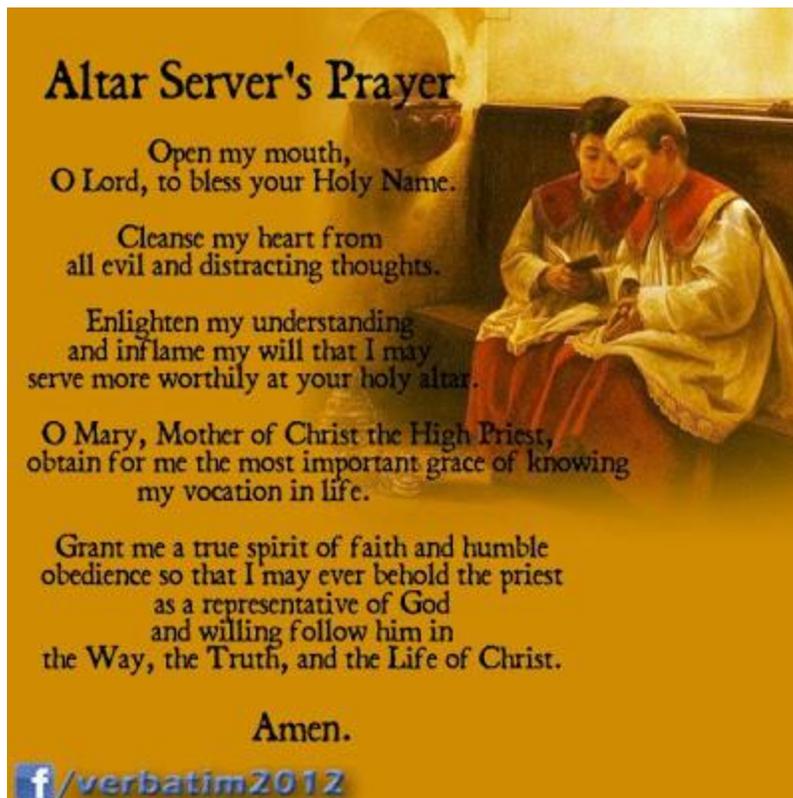
In the post-Vatican II Church, an acolyte has all the responsibilities of an altar server except a few additional ones. The acolyte is also permanent extraordinary minister of Holy Communion and can also be entrusted with celebrating Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. He is also the only lay minister who can do the purification of the vessels at Mass. Furthermore, an acolyte is given a priority to lead blessing ceremonies (Book of Blessings, Introduction, n. 18). In the absence of both a priest and deacon, the acolyte has priority to lead Sunday Celebrations (Directions for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest, 1988, n. 30).



Traditionally, the role of altar server has always been reserved to males and rightfully so. By having males serve at the altar, a young man is better able to discern the priesthood since he is involved with the Liturgy. Personally, I support the return of an all-male group of altar servers for the entire Catholic Church. Some parishes are even returning to the practice of all-male altar servers. Historically, the role of altar server has always been reserved to males. In the Encyclical *Allatae Sunt* on July, 26, 1755, Pope Benedict XIV stated in paragraph 29:

Pope Gelasius in his ninth letter (chap. 26) to the bishops of Lucania condemned the evil practice which had been introduced of women serving the priest at the celebration of Mass. Since this abuse had spread to the Greeks, Innocent IV strictly forbade it in his letter to the bishop of Tusculum: "Women should not dare to serve at the altar; they should be altogether refused this ministry." We too have forbidden this practice in the same words in Our oft-repeated constitution *Etsi Pastoralis*, sect. 6, no. 21."

In 1970 the Vatican condemned female altar serving in *Liturgicae instaurationes* as well as in 1980's *Inaestimabile donum*. Not until a circular letter from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to presidents of episcopal conferences on March 15, 1994, did the Vatican officially allow female altar serving.



#### Graces:

To serve at the altar as an altar server is one of the greatest sources of graces. The altar server assists the priest at the Sacred Liturgy; he is privileged to walk into the sanctuary. Remember, the Mass is the Sacrifice of Calvary. It is not a memorial but rather the Mass truly is the Sacrifice of Calvary. For that reason, all altar servers must display the utmost respect and reverence. For example, each and every single time that the server walks past the Tabernacle, he is to genuflect on his right knee to our Lord who is truly present in the Eucharist (**GIRM 274**).

All altar servers must listen attentively during the Mass and should remain in a state of prayer with their hands in a prayer position. Talking amongst each other is absolutely forbidden. Likewise, all altar servers should wear proper shoes and never flip-flops, sandals, boots, or gym shoes. An altar servers must also learn the proper name to all of the items used during the Liturgy. Such items are listed at the bottom of the webpage of the **Altar Server Manual**. Altar Servers must ensure that no particle of Our Lord's Body or Blood falls to the ground. With the use of the paten, altar servers perform an extremely important sacred ministry. They must ensure that no particle of the Eucharist is desecrated accidentally at any portion during the Mass. Furthermore, altar servers must know the basic prayers of the Mass at least in the vernacular and perhaps some of them in Latin. The altar server must have a basic understanding of the Catholic Faith and understand the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Traditionally, lay people including altar servers were also **forbidden to touch the sacred vessels including the Chalice**. If they had to touch the paten they would hold it with a purificator. Likewise, they were only to carry the Chalice by touching the chalice veil covering it. It is a still a pious practice and one that I support.

To all altar servers, please take these suggestions to heart. I strongly suggest you read the words expressed on the article **Advice for Altar Servers**. Remember, as an altar server, you stand next to the priest who stands at the Cross of Calvary. At the Consecration, you stand near the altar on which the Bread and Wine become Jesus Christ. You should humble yourself and bow your head before the power of God. You are assisting at the Holy of Holies. Display reverence and worship Our God. Undoubtedly, altar servers receive countless blessings from Almighty God from serving devoutly at Mass. Even attending Holy Mass is the **source of numerous graces**. It is certainly more grace-filled for altar servers.



**Prayer before Serving:**

Heavenly Father, we ask your blessing upon us, that we may serve at your altar with reverence, attention, and love, in order to draw others to do the same. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.