



**SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE**  
CATHOLIC CHURCH

**Saint Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church**

**Altar Server Handbook**

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## **I. Welcome**

Thank you so much for volunteering your time and talent to the service of St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church. We are so excited to have you as an Altar Server. After completing all training sessions, you are welcome to serve as a substitute at any mass. Just check in 10 minutes before Mass to start and see if you are needed.

The Mass is the center of our Catholic lives, and nothing is more important. Through this holy sacrifice the Lord is made present in our midst, and we give worship to our Creator. When we understand this, we can see why altar servers should strive to show the greatest reverence whenever serving the Holy Mass. Keep in mind that altar servers fulfill an ancient service to the Church, and for centuries young people have learned piety and responsibility through serving the Mass. The most important thing an altar server can learn (and the most important thing an altar server can demonstrate to others) is a deep respect for the Mass.

By their service, altar servers can mature and grow in grace. This is an opportunity to learn more about God, to learn more about his Church, and to become more confident as a Catholic. Our altar servers are true leaders amongst their peers and within our parish. We owe a great debt of gratitude to our altar servers, who honor our Lord and who are the pride of our parish.

## II. General Responsibilities

1. **Attendance**: It is your responsibility to know when you are scheduled to serve. If you cannot attend a mass to which you are scheduled, it is important for you to find a replacement. Please do not wait until the day of mass to find a replacement.

2. **Timeliness**: You need to arrive at church at least 15 minutes prior to the start of mass to allow enough time to properly prepare for serving.

3. **Dress Code**: Remember, servers are representing their Christian dignity. A general neatness in appearance is appropriate

- Jeans and shorts are unsuitable
- Trousers should ideally be dark and clean
- Shoes (never sandals) should be ideally black or at the very least dark. A server's shoes should also be polished and clean, and the heels of the shoes should not be high. Tennis shoes or sports shoes are inappropriate.
- Lady servers should choose discrete and sensible shoes
- Shirt or blouse collars should not extend conspicuously beyond the alb.

### **Nothing should draw attention to yourself.**

4. **Behavior**: Remember that you are serving God and your church when you serving at the altar. Therefore, you should carry yourself with dignity when serving. Horseplay and laughing are not appropriate during mass. Please only talk when discussing your responsibilities during mass.

5. **Volunteer**: Please volunteer to serve at any mass you attend if you are not scheduled. This is especially important on holy days and during holiday season masses.

### III. General Rules and Procedures

1. **Hands**: Your hands should always be pressed together as in prayer unless you are performing a task. Your fingers should be straight and not interlocked. Your hands should be up at chest level.
2. **Standing**: When standing, stand straight and still. Do not shuffle your feet, sway your body or otherwise exhibit excess movement. Also, please do not “lock” your knees.
3. **Sitting**: When sitting, your feet should be still and flat on the ground. Your hands should be folded in your lap.
4. **Walking**: When walking around the altar to perform tasks, walk with a slow, smooth pace. There is no reason to act like you are in a hurry.
5. **Bowing**: Altar servers must bow each time you cross in front of or behind the altar (unless you have something in your hands). When you bow, come to a complete stop and face the altar. With your hands pressed together as defined above, bend forward at the hips.
6. **Nodding**: Servers must nod (a single nod), as a show of respect to the priest anytime there is a direct interface with the priest. This is required even if the server has something in his/her hands and is required whether or not the priest nods to the server. When nodding, the only part of the body that should move is the head.
7. **Sitting in unison**: When servers take their seats, they must always sit in unison. There are times some servers are already at their seats while other servers are still performing tasks. When this happens, the servers at their seats must remain standing until all servers arrive at their seats, then all must sit at the same time. Remember, you are a team.
8. **Candles**: On special occasions Altar Servers are required to carry or hold the Candles. Please be very careful not to get burned with the candles. Always be aware of how close the flame is to your face, hair, and clothes. Because the candles are top-heavy, keep your hands spread apart on the candle poles to keep them from tipping over when carrying a candle. When standing still (for example, during the gospel reading), servers may rest the base of the candlestick on the ground. Also, please remember that the candle stands can slide on the altar step when putting in or taking out the candles, so be sure that the stands are securely seated on the step so that the candle does not fall over when placed back in the stand.

## IV. Liturgical Vocabulary

### **Altar Server Dress**

Alb - White robe

Cassock – Black robe with buttons

Cincture - Rope

Surplice - White garment that goes over the cassock

**Ambo** - The stand from where the lector proclaims the readings and the priest or deacon proclaims the gospel.

**Boat** - The small container that holds the incense.

**Book of the Gospels** - The book that contains the gospel readings for every Sunday and feast day. It is normally beautifully decorated to emphasize the importance of the gospel.

**Chalice** - The cup used on the altar by the priest during the Mass, which will hold the Blood of Christ. It is made of precious metal.

**Ciborium** - A special covered bowl for keeping ["reserving"] the Body of Christ.

**Corporal** - The white linen square that is spread out on the altar over the place on which the Blessed Sacrament is to be placed.

**Credence Table** - The table on which are placed the cups, purificators, the chalice, the ciboria, cruets, and anything else needed for the celebration of the Mass.

**Cruet** - Small glass pitchers that hold the water and wine used in the celebration of the Mass.

**Flagon** - The large pitcher that holds the wine which is brought forth during the offertory procession.

**Lavabo** - The pitcher, bowl, and towel used to wash the priest's hands.

**Lectionary** - The book that contains the readings from sacred scripture for every Sunday and feast day.

**Pall** - The thin square piece of cardboard covered with cloth which is placed on top of the chalice.

**Patten** - The thin metal plate, which holds the single large host used by the priest for the celebration of the Mass

**Purificator** - A small cloth used to wipe the edge of the chalice as the Blood of Christ is distributed during communion.

**Roman Missal** - The book that contains the prayers and rituals for the Mass.

**Taper with Snuffer** - The long metal tube that holds a wax lighter used for lighting candles. Some tapers also have a bell-shaped portion used to cover a candle flame and extinguish it (snuffer).

**Thurible** - The special bowl in which incense is burned on charcoal

## V. Mass Procedures

**Altar Servers:** The optimal number of Altar Servers is three (3). Each Altar Server has a unique role in the Mass. These roles are as follows:

1. Leader Server:
  - a. Tasks are to:
    - i. Make sure candles are lit and everything is on the credence table;
    - ii. Carry the Cross;
    - iii. Hold the Mass Binder or Missal for the Priest;
    - iv. Lead Server Sits on the left hand side of the presider;
    - v. Watch setting up Altar and provide guidance, if necessary.
2. Altar Server #2:
  - a. Tasks are to:
    - i. Setting up the Altar
    - ii. Holding the Towel during the Absolution
3. Altar Server #3:
  - a. Tasks are to:
    - i. Assist in the setting up of the Altar
    - ii. Lead the Procession of the Gifts; and
    - iii. Hold cruet and bowl and pour water onto Celebrants hands during Absolution

If only two (2) servers are available, Leader Altar Server takes the role of Altar Server #3. If only one server is available, they will take all roles.

Please note that if there is a deacon at the Mass, they may assist in setting up the Altar, as necessary.

### **Opening Procession:**

The **cross bearer (Leader Server)** leads the procession and others follow. The cross bearer sets the pace. Proceed at a normal pace.... there is no hurry. The cross bearer proceeds directly to right of the altar steps and the others stand to their left, allowing room for the priest at the center of the altar, waits for all participants to arrive. The priest leads the group with a bow, and then all servers proceed to their seats and remain standing for the opening prayer.

### **Opening Prayer:**

The opening prayer takes place immediately after the "Glory to God." About half way through the "Glory to God", the **Lead Server** should wait for the cue to take the priest's Mass Book. The cue can differ: the priest may nod to the server or may simply look at the server. If the priest gives no physical cue, the cue should be when the priest says, "Let us pray." Hold the book as high as comfortably possible, leaning it against your chest to help hold it still. It is more important to hold it still than it is to hold it high. You will want to leave about 2 feet between

you and the priest. If he needs you closer, he will ask you to move forward. Once the prayer is complete, the priest will take it from you. All servers sit in unison.

### **Gospel:**

The cue to begin is when the gospel "Alleluia" begins and the congregation rises. Servers should face the same direction as the priest. After the gospel reading, the servers bow in unison and sit in unison.

### **Setting the Altar:**

After the homily, profession of faith and the general intercessions, the entire congregation sits.

**Two altar servers (Altar Server #2 and #3)** are required to set the altar and the cue to begin is when the offertory hymn begins. The two servers proceed to the credence table and take the following items to the Altar:

1. One (1) corporal in the center of the altar. One (1) corporal should already be placed on the right side for the cups.
2. The Priest's chalice
3. A Purificator
4. The Roman Missal
5. The communion cups.

The **Deacon of the Altar** will lie out the corporal. However, if a deacon is not present, it should be unfolded, with creases pointing downward, and centered along the back of the altar. The **small cross**, embroidered in the corporal, should be positioned towards the priest. The chalice is placed on the right side of the center corporal and the Roman Missal on the left.

### **Gifts:**

All servers (**Altar Server #3 leads the procession**) are required for this task. After setting the altar, the two Altar Servers proceed to the right of the altar steps (as at the procession), bow and go to the Gifts Table. Once they get a cue from the Priest/Deacon, they will proceed to either side of the Priest/Deacon. They will be handed the wine, bread and possibly the Prayer Book. The priest and server will turn in unison and ascend the steps to the altar. The prayer book is placed on the front right corner (when facing the altar). The bread and wine are given to the Priest /Deacon. The servers return to the credence to get items for absolution (lavabo).

### **Absolution (washing of the priest's hands):**

Two servers will retrieve the **lavabo** (large cruet, bowl, and finger towel) from the credence table. **Altar Server #3** takes the large cruet, and the finger bowl and **Altar Server #2** takes the finger towel. When the priest turns toward the servers,

proceed to the priest.

- **Altar Server #3**, with the large cruet and bowl, pours water onto priest's hands.
- **Altar Server #2** holds out his hands with the finger towel folded over his/her hands and the Priest takes it to dry his hands. The priest places the towel back on the servers folded hands.

After the absolution, all servers **nod** in unison, return all items to the credence table and proceed to the steps of the Altar, next to the credence table. They remain standing at this point---the rest of the congregation stands soon afterwards.

### **The Lords Prayer:**

Prior to the beginning "The Lords Prayer", the altar servers proceed to the back of the altar for the recitation of the Lords Prayer. They will join hands behind the priest unless the priest makes a gesture that he will join hands with them as well. After the Lords Prayer, the altar servers will step back two paces to make sure they are behind the priest.

### **Sign of Peace:**

During the sign of peace, all servers give the sign of peace to the priest and deacon. This should be done prior to shaking hands with any of the other servers or with any of the congregation. After the sign of peace with the priest and deacon, servers should return to their place at the steps of the altar.

### **Communion:**

During communion, all servers remain at the altar steps to receive communion. There will be Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion around you, so politely let them know that you need to be able to return to your places. After receiving communion, the servers remain in place until the Eucharistic Ministers descend the steps to give communion to the congregation. Servers then begin to clean the altar.

### **Cleaning off the Altar:**

The same two servers that set the altar should clean off the altar. All items are returned to the credence table, **with the exception of the corporals placed on the altar**. All servers return to their chairs and sit.

- Once communion has ended, the priest/deacon will return to the altar and combine the remaining Body of Christ into the ciboria for placement into the tabernacle.
- Once the priest/deacon leaves the altar to return the Blessed Sacrament to the tabernacle, **Altar Server #2** will remove the center corporal from the altar and place it on the credence table. The corporal on the right side is not removed.

**Closing prayer:**

The priest will cue the altar server in the same fashion he does for the opening prayer. The same rules apply for this task as for the opening prayer. All servers remain standing for the closing prayer.

**Closing procession:**

The cue is when the closing hymn begins. The cross bearer immediately gets the cross from the stand and returns to their place. Once the priest goes to reverence the altar, the servers proceed to the same place as he/she did for the opening procession, at the foot of the altar steps. The priest leads the group with a bow and the cross bearer turns to lead the procession up the main aisle. As before, the cross bearer sets the pace. The other servers follow directly behind the other servers and the rest of the participants follow.

**After mass:**

You will put the cross back on the altar stand. Please remember to hang your alb up properly on the hanger that is marked with the correct size of your albs. This really helps other servers to be able to quickly find their size.