



The Catholic Archdiocese of
Canberra and Goulburn

Ministries at the Altar

Ministers at the altar include servers and instituted acolytes. Acolyte means attendant or companion.

Historical background

Special assistants at liturgy have a long tradition many centuries prior to Christ. Even before King Solomon had the great Temple built in Jerusalem, boys were dedicated to the service of God in certain holy places. 1 Sam 2-3 records the service of Samuel in the shrine at Shiloh. The sacred role of the Levites (men in the Levi family) emerged during the time of wandering in Sinai.

Their roles became more precise with the completion of Solomon's Temple. They seem to have been preparers and servers at the altar of sacrifice, also assisting in the ceremony and music of worship.

The acolyte ministry existed in the church as early as the third century, as a lay office. There were 42 acolytes in Rome in 251 and some were present in the Council of Nicaea (325) and later in Carthage (North Africa). By the sixth century there were acolytes in Gaul (Arles and Lyons). It seems their duties were flexible, including both liturgical and extra-liturgical responsibilities (such as acting as couriers and secretaries).

In effect, the ministry of acolyte arose from the division of the deacon's ministry. The chief duties of the acolyte were to assist the deacon and priest in liturgical celebrations. It is a ministry instituted by the Church.

The ninth century Synod of Mainz decreed that every priest should have a cleric or young man to read the epistle, to give the responses at Mass and to partner him in chanting the psalms. Altar servers came to substitute for clerics. From the tenth century, the minor orders of acolyte, lector, porter, exorcist, (and in some areas: musicians, sacristans and grave diggers) lost their

independence as ministries. Their roles were taken over by sub-deacons and clergy (all of whom who had received the clerical tonsure), so they ceased to be lay offices.

Eventually, men seeking priesthood undertook the minor order of acolyte. Later on in the Western Church, the practice of using young males (incorrectly called "altar boys") to serve in parishes was introduced. In fact, "altar boys" (the official name was acolythus) were actually a substitute for acolytes. In the major centres of worship, the original tradition continued, and only men or youths served at liturgy.

The presence of competent servers and acolytes makes a difference to the celebration.

In 1972, Pope Paul VI, in *Motu proprio Ministeria quaedam*, suppressed four minor orders for those preparing for priesthood and replaced them with the ministries of acolyte and lector (or reader). A woman may perform the duties of a reader but they may not be formally instituted. Candidates for the diaconate must receive the ministry of lector and acolyte at least six months before ordination.

As can be seen, for more than a thousand years, only men or youths were permitted to be altar servers. In 1983 qualified laymen were permitted to be instituted as acolytes (as they were in the early Church). In 1994, an instruction from the Roman Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments permitted the local bishops to allow women and girls to serve at the altar. In some parishes in the archdiocese, there are men and women "senior servers."

While there is no particular age limitation, young servers must be old enough to carry out their ministry appropriately, and acolytes would usually be 18 or older. (Historical information from Thomas E Crane "The Restoration of the Acolyte Ministry." *Australasian Catholic Record*, Volume 57, January 1980, 26-32.)

Theological considerations

- This ministry exists:
 - to serve at the altar,
 - to assist the priest and deacon,
 - particularly to prepare the altar and the sacred vessels, and
 - if necessary, as an extraordinary minister, to distribute the Eucharist to the faithful.
- A fervent faith and active membership in the local Church are important prerequisites for this ministry.
- Acolytes and servers need to keep expanding their knowledge and appreciation of the celebration of the Eucharist as a source of their spiritual life. Formal education in this ministry is a priority.
- Ministers strive to have the flow, sequence and movement of the liturgical action internalised enough to know what action is coming next. Such knowledge frees the minister to listen, sing along and pray with the whole assembly. Before being a server or acolyte, the minister is a member of the praying assembly (people gathered).
- It is important that servers and acolytes study the rites and rituals of the Church; know the names and meaning of vestments, sacred objects, and parts of the church; understand the nature of liturgical seasons and major feasts; are familiar with the Ordo and Lectionaries. Such familiarity will assist ministers to be alert to changes or omissions.
- As well as being reverent and prayerful, ministers must be seen to be so. Casual or careless behaviour is inappropriate. Unobtrusive service and good poise, sincere devotion and decorum are vital to this ministry.
- Team work is a special aspect of serving. Ministers do not “perform”, draw attention to themselves or serve as individuals. In many practical ways, acolytes and servers support and expedite the roles of other ministers.
- Empowering others is a life-giving activity. Acolytes and senior servers need to be alert and internally check that other ministries are being carried out smoothly, e.g. they might need to retrieve a forgotten book, switch on a microphone or recorded music etc.
- Sensitivity to other ministers and the liturgical action can help ensure that all those present are encouraged to engage in the liturgy.

Some practical considerations

- During the liturgy, the physical presentation of ministers adds to the meaning of prayer and symbolic action. Deportment and poise are crucial. Gentle smiles, physical confidence, unobtrusive movements and a reverent manner can contribute to the liturgy. Tense body language, fidgeting, rapid, overdone or inappropriate movements detract from an atmosphere of prayer.
- Acolytes and servers care for and deal with artefacts (e.g. cross, candles, chalice), sacred objects (e.g. consecrated bread and wine, water, oil, ashes) and the environment (e.g. light, sound system, heating, fans, foyer). It is important to be comfortable using and holding the sacred objects.
- Special or major feasts will generally require a rehearsal for those ministries involved.
- Special vesture is necessary. In the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, acolytes and servers are to vest in an alb (the symbol of the baptismal garment) and cincture, or surplice and soutane.

Before the liturgy

- Arrive at least thirty minutes before the liturgy begins. Ministers need time to then: pray; collect their thoughts; vest; consult with the presider and other ministers to coordinate any last minute modifications to the ritual or ministries; check that candles are lit, the processional cross is ready, the credence and other table set, the sacramentary and lectionary are in place, the bowl and sprinkler located and the thurible and boat are prepared (if necessary).
- Necessary items should be prepared in an unhurried and respectful way: e.g. candles need to be lit from a taper rather than with a series of short matches. If Eucharistic gifts have to be placed, it is better to make several trips rather than juggling them all in one attempt.

During the liturgy

- An entrance procession may include candles, banners, cross or other symbols. Acolytes and servers should carry these with pride and joy, and hold them high enough to be seen and respected. When ministers reach the altar, they should reverence the altar in an appropriate manner (this is determined by what they are carrying in the procession).
- A kind and courteous manner will help servers and acolytes. When they need to give directions, a friendly approach that invites cooperation is appropriate. Practice will enable ministers to form processions and lead off confidently.
- As the presider requires hands free to give gestures, acolytes and servers are needed to pick up the appropriate ritual book, ensure it is the right side up, if possible at the correct page and hold it steady at a suitable eye level for the presider. Ministers need to check they are not blocking eye contact between presider and the assembly.
- After the general intercessions (when no deacon is present) and while the priest remains at the chair, the acolyte or senior server places the corporal, purifier, chalice, pall and Missal on the altar. If necessary, s/he will assist the priest in receiving the gifts of the people. If incense is used, the acolyte or server gives the censer to the priest and assists him incensing the gifts and the altar.
- The acolyte or senior server may assist the priest as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion and give Communion to the people, with special attention being paid to those in the community who cannot approach the altar. If no deacon is present, an instituted acolyte can take the vessels to the credence table, purify and arrange them.
- Acolytes or senior servers, as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, may also take Holy Communion to the sick.
- Servers and acolytes need to be sensitive to, and anticipate the needs of, the presider. A glance or gesture from the priest should be all that is needed to indicate that action is needed.

- As the function of these ministers is to assist the flow of the liturgy and in that way promote uninterrupted prayer, they should avoid distracting gestures and coordinate their movement with that of others.
- As with other ministers of liturgy, the attitude, example and participation of servers and acolytes speak volumes.

After the liturgy

- Acolytes and senior servers assist the priest/deacon to put away vessels, sacred books and objects, and perhaps tidy and lock the sacristy/church (depending on the local custom).

Overall

The presence of competent servers and acolytes makes a difference to the celebration. Long term commitment is required, as is good organisation for arranging substitutes when necessary.

