

Tridentine Community News

October 22, 2006

Sacred Ministers and Altar Servers

Appropos for this week and next, when St. Michael and St. Josaphat Churches are both hosting special Solemn High Tridentine Masses, today we will examine the roles of the various sacred ministers and altar servers whom you see in the sanctuary.

Altar servers fall into several defined roles: Acolytes are the two principal servers. The one on the right as you are facing the altar is called Acolyte 1; it is his responsibility to ring the Sanctus Bell. The one on the left is Acolyte 2; he moves the Missal before the Gospel and after Holy Communion.

Historically, these servers were called Acolytes because their roles were filled by men who had at least received the minor order of Acolyte. Current Tridentine rubrics specifically allow laymen to fulfill this role, thus one needs to distinguish the Order of Acolyte from the use of the same term to designate a server role. These same rubrics permit laymen servers to wear the cassock (black robe) and surplice (white outer garment), which are traditionally clothes reserved for clerics.

At a Low Mass, the priest is assisted by at least one, but no more than two, Acolytes. If there is only one Acolyte, his position is on the opposite side of the altar from where the Missal rests, thus his position, like the Missal's, changes during the Mass.

A sung Mass, or *Missa Cantata*, may also be celebrated with only one or two Acolytes. If there is to be incense, another server is the Thurifer, or bearer of the censer. The Thurifer can work alone, or may be assisted by a Boat Bearer, who carries the container of incense. In practice, a Thurifer without a Boat Bearer can find it challenging to perform his duties as well as carry the boat. For processions, such as on *Corpus Christi*, a second Thurifer may be called for, to ensure that the Blessed Sacrament is continually incensed. As a practical matter, the two Thurifers take turns incensing during the procession.

One server may take the optional role of Master of Ceremonies, to assist the celebrant. One of this person's most important and symbolic duties is to turn the pages of the Missal during the Canon after the Consecration: The priest holds the thumb and index finger of each hand together until Communion, and is not supposed to touch any profane object while there may be particles of the Host on his hands. Unlike the other servers, the MC's role is rather loosely defined in the rubrics, allowing for some freedom of movement in the sanctuary to assist in whatever manner may be appropriate. If incense is called for, but there is no Thurifer available, the MC is permitted to fulfill the role of Thurifer as a secondary duty. For more elaborate Masses, such as Solemn High and Pontifical Masses, a second MC may direct the servers, while the first MC directs the sacred ministers.

Up to six additional servers fulfill the roles of Torch Bearers. Strictly speaking, a "torch" is a candle contained within a glass or plastic enclosure. In practice, regular processional or altar candles are often used instead. Torch Bearers kneel in front of the altar from the Sanctus until after Holy Communion, sentinels in front of our Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament.

The Crucifer, or Cross Bearer, carries the Crucifix in procession.

Other roles particular to a specific church, such as closing and opening the Communion Rail gates, flipping over the Communion Rail cloth, and ringing the tower bell at the consecration, may be handled by certain servers. These are considered elements of local custom and are not dictated by the rubrics.

Priests are allowed to concelebrate Mass in the Novus Ordo rite. Sacramental concelebration means that additional priest(s) gather around the altar to co-consecrate the bread and wine, and to share

the recitation of the Eucharistic Prayer. The Tridentine Rite does not permit concelebration, except during a Mass of Ordination, when the new priests recite the Canon along with the bishop. Instead, the Tridentine Mass offers the option of a Solemn High Mass, in which additional sacred ministers fulfill the roles of Deacon and Subdeacon. The Deacon must be an ordained deacon or priest. The Subdeacon should be someone who has at least received tonsure, or its Novus Ordo equivalent, Admission to Candidacy or simple religious profession. Laypeople thus serving are restricted in handling the chalice and ciboria.

The Deacon chants the Gospel and assists the priest at the altar. The Subdeacon chants the Epistle and stands at the foot of the altar during the Canon, holding the paten under a humeral veil as a symbol of respect for the sacred vessel, until it is required later in the Mass.

In a Pontifical Solemn Mass, there are additional roles: An Assistant Priest helps the bishop with the ceremony. There may be two Assistant Deacons at the throne. A Subdeacon Of The Cross, along with a Crosier Bearer server, handle the bishop's symbol of authority. Additional servers are the Mitre Bearer, who handles the bishop's headdress; the Bugia Bearer, who carries the small hand-candle that is held next to the Missal and Pontifical (book with the Ordinary of the Mass); a Train Bearer, if the bishop is wearing a *Cappa Magna*; a Gremial Bearer to handle the silk veil spread across the bishop's lap; and a Book Bearer, who holds the Missal and Pontifical in front of the bishop.

The structured movements of sacred ministers and servers are almost all prescribed in the rubrics. Far from being distractions, they are yet another aspect of the Tridentine Mass designed to focus one's mind on the sacred presence of our Lord on the altar.

