

# Tridentine Community News

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## Altar Cards

A standard feature of an altar prepared for a Tridentine Mass is the presence of three “altar cards,” which contain fixed prayers said at Mass. Sometimes these cards consist of solid pieces of wood, while in other instances they are framed sheets. Portable Tridentine “Mass Kits”, which priests can carry with them if they are to celebrate Mass at a special location such as a nursing home, often contain foldable altar cards.

Have you ever wondered just what was on these cards? The two cards at the ends of the altar are the easiest to explain: On the right, or Epistle, side is a card containing two prayers: The “*Deus qui...*”, which the priest recites during the Offertory as he pours wine and water into the chalice; and the *Lavabo* prayer, which he recites as water is poured over his hands as a symbolic cleansing before the Preface and Canon.



On the left, or Gospel, side is a card containing the standard Last Gospel read at the conclusion of Mass. On the few occasions that a proper (different) Last Gospel is read, the text of that Gospel is placed on the left side of the altar, but the regular Last Gospel altar card is still placed in the usual position.



When the Last Gospel is announced, the celebrant makes the sign of the cross on the altar card before reading the Gospel passage, just as he does on the altar missal before he reads the Gospel of the day. If the altar card is too far away for him to reach, he makes the sign

of the cross on the *mensa* (table) of the altar, in front of the card. Unlike the Gospel of the day, the Last Gospel text is never incensed.

The center altar card contains many of the prayers from the Ordinary of the Mass: the Gloria, Credo, several of the Offertory prayers, portions of the Canon, and the *Pláceat* prayer recited at the end of Mass.

Presumably, priests who celebrate the Tridentine Mass with some frequency eventually memorize these prayers, thus the cards may not strictly be required. However, their generally excellent artistic quality contributes to an ornate and sacred appearance of the altar. Their presence is also a silent statement about the consistency of the Tridentine rite of Mass: Why would there be a need for altar cards in a liturgy whose components have multiple options? Or whose contents might be improvised on occasion?

An excessive focus on memorization, and reciting prayers from memory, can distract from the essential task of praying the Mass. All of us occasionally forget basic things we should remember; altar cards remove the possibility that a priest may momentarily forget a particular prayer. Better to say the Mass precisely with aids such as the altar cards, than to make errors without them.



One might ask why the center card needs to exist at all, since all of the prayers on it already exist in the altar missal book. The answer is threefold: First, since so many prayers are in one place, the priest can conveniently locate them without paging through the book. Second, many of the prayers on the center card are to be recited in a bowed posture, from which it may be impossible to have a clear line of sight to the missal. Third, in Masses celebrated without an MC to turn the pages of the missal, after the consecration of the Mass, the priest must minimize contact with profane objects, one of which is the missal.

In a Pontifical Mass, that is, a Mass celebrated by a Bishop “as a Bishop,” a large-format book is placed in front of the tabernacle instead of the center card. That book is (also) called a “Pontifical”. Like the center altar card, the Pontifical contains prayers from the Ordinary of the Mass, with certain wording appropriate for a bishop.

To this writer’s knowledge, the only church that uses altar cards for the Novus Ordo (and only for Latin Masses) is the Brompton (London) Oratory. Only one card is used, at the center, as the Novus Ordo offertory prayers are very short by comparison, eliminating the need for a card containing them; and there is no Last Gospel. Because the Oratory offers so many Masses throughout the day at its multitude of side altars, many of which are not even on the official schedule, the number of cards on a given altar provides the indication whether a certain Latin Mass will be Novus Ordo or Tridentine.

You are welcome to come to the sacristy after Mass to take a close-up look at our altar cards. They are works of art in their own right and have merit quite apart from the sacred text they contain.

Questions? Comments? Ideas for a future column? Please e-mail [info@windsorlatinmass.org](mailto:info@windsorlatinmass.org) with your thoughts.