Guide for Altar Servers and Masters of Ceremony at St. Thomas Aquinas Church

Last updated November 15, 2026

General Principles

- ✠ The first rule and priority for any minister at Mass is **reverence**: showing proper honor and respect for God and His sacred mysteries. An altar server's *interior* reverence, expressed and strengthened by various *exterior* signs—including full participation in the liturgy itself—forms the basis of his or her excellence in assisting at the altar. This is more important than worrying or obsessing over the various details outlined in the table below.
- ✠ Some general manners of showing reverence:
  - ✝ Outside of Mass, **genuflect** (briefly touch your *right* knee to the ground) toward the tabernacle when entering or departing from the sanctuary and when passing in front of the tabernacle itself. Our Lord is truly present!
  - ✝ During Mass itself, however, make a **profound bow** (a bow at the waist) toward the altar whenever passing it. Also make a **bow of the head** when placing something on the altar table or removing something from it (at least before leaving the altar). A bow of the head before departing from the Priest Celebrant or an assisting Deacon is also customary.
  - ✝ When your hands are not otherwise occupied, keep them held together with palms flat and fingers outstretched, pointing upwards. (Traditionally, the right thumb is placed over the left.) When seated, place your hands, palms down, on your thighs.
- ✠ When the "left side" or "right side" of the altar is indicated below, these refer to the side as seen looking toward the altar and tabernacle. In other words, the "left side" of the altar is the side closer to the Blessed Virgin Mary's side altar, while the "right side" is the side closer to St. Joseph's side altar.
- ✠ When moving between the credence table and the altar, or between the altar and your pew, servers should move in pairs, not alone (whenever feasible), and should turn inward toward each other each time they reverse course.
- ✠ The chalice should always be held or carried with two hands: one hand grasping the "stem" of the chalice, and the other placed, open palm downward, upon the corporal.

Before Mass Begins

- ✠ Plan on arriving at least 15 minutes before Mass is scheduled to begin. Enter the "work sacristy" (on St. Joseph's side), wash your hands at the sink, and put on an appropriately sized alb and cincture.
- ✠ The 4 candles at the altar and 1 candle near the ambo should be lit 5–10 minutes before Mass begins. This should be done with a candle lighter, not directly with a "modern" fluid-fueled lighter.
- ✠ If incense is used, one charcoal should be lit and placed in the thurible 5–10 minutes before Mass begins. The boat holding the incense should be checked and incense added if it is low.
- ✠ Ensure that positions are assigned and understood. One server should be assigned to handling the Roman Missals and another to ringing the bells during the Eucharistic Prayer. [Possibly in the future, a third server may carry the processional Cross.]
- ✠ Please be attentive to any other ways in which you can provide assistance before Mass.

During the Mass Itself

Part of Mass	Crossbearer (typically an adult)	Candlebearer 1 ("Book")	Candlebearer 2 ("Bells")	Thurifer/MC
Entrance Procession	leads the procession (if no incense), standing between the candlebearers	hold processional candles on either side of the crossbearer		holds thurible and boat at head of procession, swinging the thurible lightly; or (if no incense) stands behind cross/candles
Upon reaching the sanctuary	pause at the entrance to the sanctuary, make a bow of the head, place the cross and candles in their places, and take their place at their pew			pauses at the entrance to the sanctuary, makes a bow of the head (if holding thurible) or genuflects, [stands near the left side of the altar to hand the thurible to the celebrant and receive it from him]
Introductory Rites, [Gloria]				
Collect (Opening Prayer)		takes the small Missal ("Book of the Chair"), holds it open in front of the celebrant until the doxology ("Through our Lord Jesus Christ…")		
First Reading, Responsorial Psalm				
Second Reading *(on certain Sundays)*		upon hearing the conclusion ("The Word of the Lord") immediately retrieve the processional candles and stand behind the altar platform		(if incense) retrieves the thurible and boat and kneels in front of the celebrant, handing him the boat
Gospel Acclamation *(on certain Sundays)*		lead the Gospel procession side-by-side (if no incense) around the front of the altar and to the ambo; the candlebearer closer to the main altar stands at the right side of the ambo and the other at the left		leads the procession with thurible swinging lightly

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Gospel Reading *(on certain Sundays)*		face the ambo throughout the reading, returning their candles to the credence table after "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ" and returning to their seats		stands slightly behind the deacon on his right to give him the thurible, swings the thurible lightly during the reading
Homily, Creed, Universal Prayer				(adds another charcoal to the thurible if needed)
Offertory		remains standing, retrieves the Missal on its stand and places it on the far left side of the altar, assists other server with tasks described to the right →	goes to the credence table, brings the chalice to the right side of the altar, then the two small chalices and their purificators, as well as any pyxes present	
At the Offertory procession		stands to the right of the celebrant and receives from him the wine cruet	stands to the right of the celebrant and receives from him the paten with bread	
As the celebrant returns to the altar		goes to the credence table, removes the cruet stopper, and approaches the altar, cruet in hand with the handle facing the celebrant	approaches the altar and gives the celebrant the paten; then goes to the credence table, removes the stopper from the water cruet, and approaches the altar, cruet in hand with the handle facing the celebrant	(if incense) retrieves the thurible and boat and stands near the left side of the altar
Before the lavabo *(hand washing)*		returns the wine cruet to the credence table and replaces the stopper	returns to the credence table and retrieves the *lavabo* dish	presents the boat and thurible to the celebrant
At the lavabo		brings the *lavabo* towel to the celebrant, holding it unfolded with both hands	brings the *lavabo* dish and water cruet to the celebrant, holding one in each hand and pouring water over his fingers	returns the thurible and boat to their stand

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Prayer over the Offerings		return cruet, dish, and towel to the credence table and take their places at their pew		
Eucharistic Prayer			rings the bells: once, briefly, at the *epiclesis* (when the celebrant holds his hands extended over the offerings), and three distinct times at each of the two elevations	
The Lord's Prayer, Embolism, and Sign of Peace	remain at their chairs with hands joined, returning the celebrant's and deacon's sign of peace (probably a bow of the head) at the proper moment			
***Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God)**	retrieves the empty ciboria from the credence table and places them on the altar	take their place in a row behind the altar platform		
Communion Rite		receives Communion, retrieving the Missal on its stand from the altar once the celebrant leaves the altar	receive Communion and return to their seats	
After Communion to the assembly concludes		return to the credence table; one brings the water cruet (with the stopper removed) to the altar, accompanied by the other		
At the purification		retrieve from the altar anything that is placed on its far right side (e.g. chalices, pyxes, spare purificators) and return them to the credence table		
Prayer after Communion		retrieves the small Missal ("Book of the Chair") and holds it open in front of the celebrant, closing it at the conclusion unless there is a Solemn Blessing		

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[Solemn Blessing] and Dismissal		(for a Solemn Blessing) holds the Missal open for the blessing, closing it when the priest says, "And may the blessing of Almighty God…"		
"Recessional"	line up in the center aisle, side by side and facing the altar (two by two, if there are more than two servers); genuflect with the celebrant, turn, and move up the aisle toward the exit			

After Mass Ends

- ✠ Do not immediately remove your albs; assist first with extinguishing candles and bringing vessels and cloths from the credence table to the sacristy. Be sure to continue showing proper reverence, especially genuflecting toward the tabernacle when entering the sanctuary.
- ✠ If you have any questions or would like any feedback from the deacon or priest celebrant, don't be afraid to ask.