

## THE MINISTRY OF ACOLYTES

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Since the early days of the Church, God has called men and boys to assist with the celebration of the Holy Eucharist in a special way. It is a tremendous privilege to be at the Altar of God, serving Him there, and assisting the celebrant and the people in the offering of the Holy Mysteries. During the persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire it was especially dangerous to be an acolyte, or anyone associated with the bishops and clergy. The Roman soldiers could appear suddenly on Sunday morning as the Eucharist was being celebrated, to round up Christians, and especially their leaders, to drag them off to prison and torture. It has been said that some acolytes wore red cassocks to symbolize their readiness to shed their blood to protect the celebrant as bodyguards, and to protect the Blessed Sacrament from profanation. Today more Christians are persecuted throughout the world than ever before, and so being an acolyte, or a doorkeeper, in many parts of Africa, the Middle East, South-east Asia or China carries the same risk as in the Church's early days.

The ministry of acolytes has been considered, in some traditions, a "minor order." The "major orders" are bishops, priests and deacons. The "minor orders" are doorkeepers, (ushers) lectors, acolytes, exorcists and sub-deacons (lay-readers). In our parishes today, the Rector provides a period of training and preparation to serve at the Altar, to learn the Liturgy and the ritual pertaining to it, and to develop a Rule of Life, that is, a growing, personal relationship with our risen Lord. Both the rituals and the Rule go hand in hand and reinforce each other. We learn not only about the Church's Liturgy but also about private prayer, Bible reading and quiet time with God. Since the Liturgy is directed "to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit," we desire more and more that our entire lives should be so directed. The Holy

Spirit is whetting our appetite for times when we can prepare for Holy Communion and give thanks afterwards, and take the Scriptures and the prayers, and make them our own, and turn the entire Book of Common Prayer, the Liturgy of our Church, into our personal manual for daily living.

And so an Acolyte will have a Rule of Life: attendance at the Holy Eucharist every Sunday and major holy day (even when you are not on duty as an Acolyte), daily morning and evening prayers, however brief, a method of reading the Bible, and tithing of one's income to the Church (giving 10% to God of what he has given us). Ask your Rector for guidance with all this. He will be glad to talk with you about how to pray, and how to read the Bible thoughtfully and prayerfully, and how to meditate. He can help guide you in a closer walk with the Lord, and when need arises, hear your confession and pronounce over you the joyful words of our Lord's absolution.

There are various duties for Acolytes during the Service: lighting the candles, carrying the Cross or the torches, holding the Prayer Book for the Deacon or Priest, assisting at the Offertory or the Ablutions, ringing bells or handling the censer. Whatever your assignment, always do what your Rector wants done, and in the way he wants it done. Whatever your assignment, do it joyfully and gratefully, as unto the Lord, "decently, and in order." (I Corinthians 14: 40) If you are carrying the Cross, carry it as though you are doing the most important thing in the world. Because what we say and do at the Altar of God is the most important thing in the world. We are worshipping the Lord "in the beauty of holiness." (Psalm 96: 9) We are, in the Holy Communion, pleading "the Blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God (to) purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God." (Hebrews 9: 14)

So as you serve before the Throne of Grace, which is what the Altar is, show great attention, awe, devotion and dignity. Serve, and worship the Lord, with all your might. You will find yourself on an

amazing learning curve, because nothing is more fascinating than Jesus' mighty Resurrection, and the work of the Holy Spirit, and the glory of God the Father, and all that He has in store for us. "Christ is in our midst." This is true, because the Holy Spirit makes it so. You know yourself to be in His Presence, and it is the purpose of icons and stained glass windows and statues to remind you that He is here, with us. When we worship at the Eucharist, we are in heaven, with the most holy Trinity, the angels, the saints, and our Lord's Mother. In the Holy Spirit, "God has raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places, in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2: 6)

Every word and every action during the Liturgy has a meaning. Everything points us to the Father: His Presence, His Glory, His infinite goodness, His forgiveness of our sins and His acceptance of us, His transfiguration of us, through the Blood of His dear Son, in the Holy Spirit. When Jesus died on the Cross, the Veil of the Temple, that covered the Holy of Holies, was torn open, from the top to the bottom. Previously, access to the Holy of Holies was carefully restricted. In the Old Covenant, the motto might be "touch God and die." Moses "was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." (Exodus 40: 35. Cf. also I Kings 8: 10-11)

Man, in his sinfulness, cannot approach an infinitely holy God. Jesus is the warrior King who comes to free His Bride from sin and death. He does battle with the devil on the Cross, and undoes sin and death by taking them upon Himself so that all sin and death dies with Him on the Cross. From His wounded side, the second Adam sheds Water and Blood: the Water of Baptism and the Blood of the Holy Eucharist. These elements constitute the new Eve, the Church. Jesus rises victorious from the dead, the life of His Bride. For her he has opened up Heaven, and given us boldness of access to the Father's throne, and to

fellowship with Him. The motto of the New Covenant might be "touch God and live."

The Revelation of St. John the Divine, the last Book of the Bible, shows us, on many of its pages, the worship of Heaven, and the worship of the Eucharist, which are one and the same. We rejoice forever in the cosmic triumph of the Lamb of God, Jesus, the Saviour and Lord of all. It is exciting and awe inspiring to realize that when we receive Holy Communion, we are receiving the very Flesh and Blood of our Lord. We are receiving, fully and literally, in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, Jesus whole and complete risen Life. The risen Lord, dazzling in the glory of the new creation, (Revelation 1: 13-18) comes to you, in Holy Communion. Or to put it the other way around, we are all lifted up to be with Him, to sup with Him, at His table, in His Kingdom. Since you are receiving the victorious Passover Lamb of God, Who has triumphed over every obstacle to the Father's love, you can experience your own passover from the bondage of sin to the new life of the Kingdom, and from death to life: abundant, never ending life, caught up into the infinite love of the most holy Trinity.

"Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb." (Revelation 19: 9) The Eucharist is the marriage of heaven and earth, of time and eternity, of man and God. If we catch but an inkling of this astounding reality, we will want to be there as often as possible. We will want serve the Lord with robust faith, solid hope and ardent love, like Joshua, who said, "but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24: 15)

Sometimes today the question arises about why only men and boys serve as acolytes. This ministry is actually for men, but the Church lets boys in on the job, as one more way to help boys become men-in-Christ. Boys need Christian men as mentors, to learn how to worship Almighty God, "in Spirit and in Truth" (John 4: 23), to learn how to take spiritual initiatives, to someday take responsibility for the spiritual lives of their wives and children. Boys need to learn from men

what Christian fatherhood is. G. K. Chesterton said, in the early 20th century, that the time was soon coming when the most radical thing in society would be Christian fathers. Boys need to learn from Christian men Christ's way of sacrifice and suffering, in small matters and great, for the sake of the Bride, the Church and the community. It is the Christian man's responsibility to do battle with sin and evil... "to constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake." (Collect for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, Prayer Book, p. 242)

This is a lot to take on, and boys need to bond with other boys, and be mentored by men, to know that the Church, in her wisdom, reserves to men ministries that are unique to them, especially ministries that point to the Priesthood or fall within its aura. To sidestep this is to, in the end, build more and bigger prisons, and to inculcate in our boys the ways of the ant-hill and the bee-hive.

As boys and men serve as Acolytes they come to love the Church, which is feminine before God. The Church is our holy Mother. The icon of the Church is Mary, the Mother of believers, the new Eve, the Vessel of the Holy Spirit. The Priesthood is masculine because Jesus is the Bridegroom. The role of the Priest is to reveal to each man his priesthood - the one who provides, protects and offers the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for his family. The role of the Church is to be the Bride of Christ, who, like Mary, becomes fruitful in the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist reveals the ultimate mystery of God's love for us to be the nuptial mystery, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. And this is the real reason why those ministering at the Altar are to be men. The attendants of the Bridegroom are always men, at every wedding. All the Bride's attendants are women. And so it is at the Altar of God, where we gather to reveal the ultimate mystery for which God made everything: the love of Christ for His Church, the Bride of the Holy Spirit.