ALTAR SERVER THEN-AND-NOW

ABBREVIATIONS

CCCG   =   Catechism of the Catholic Church Glossary
CCT   =   Catechism of the Council of Trent
CMRR   =   Ceremonial of the Modern Roman Rite: The Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours (by Msgr. Peter J. Elliot, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1995.)
GIRM   =   General instruction of the Roman Missal: July 2000 (An English Language Study Translation by the Secretariat for the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

I. THE ROLE OF THE LAITY IN THE EUCHARISTIC LITURGY

CCC #901: …In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshiping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God, everywhere offering worship by the holiness of their lives."

CCC #903: …"When the necessity of the Church warrants it and when ministers are lacking, lay persons, even if they are not lectors or acolytes, can also supply for certain of their offices, namely, to exercise the ministry of the word, to preside over liturgical prayers, to confer Baptism, and to distribute Holy Communion in accord with the prescriptions of law."

CCC #910: "The laity can also feel called, or be in fact called, to cooperate with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community, for the sake of its growth and life. This can be done through the exercise of different kinds of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord has been pleased to bestow on them."

II. SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

CCT, PART II, Holy Orders, Number of Orders: That the number of ministers was wisely established thus may be proved by considering the various offices that are necessary for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the consecration and administration of the Blessed Eucharist, this being the principal scope of their institution.

CCT, PART II, Holy Orders, Number of Orders: …The major or sacred orders are priesthood, deaconship and subdeaconship; while the minor orders are those of acolyte, exorcist, lector and porter…

CCT, PART II, Holy Orders, The Minor Orders, PORTER... The function (of porter) is to guard the keys and doors of the church, and to allow no one to enter there to whom access has been forbidden. Formerly the porter used to assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, to see that no one approached too near the altar, or disturbed the priest during the celebration of the divine mysteries... For the office of treasurer, which is still numbered among the more honorable functions of the Church that was entrusted to porters, and carried with it also the guardianship of the sacristy.

CCT, PART II, Holy Orders, The Minor Orders, READER...The second degree of orders is the office of reader, whose duty it is to read in the church in a clear and distinct voice the books of the Old and of the New Testament...

CCT, PART II, Holy Orders, The Minor Orders, EXORCIST...The third order is that of exorcists, to whom is given the power to invoke the name of the Lord over those who are possessed by unclean spirits...and have the power of imposing hands over the possessed, whether baptized or catechumen.

CCT, PART II, Holy Orders, The Minor Orders, ACOLYTE... The fourth degree is that of acolytes, and it is the last of the orders that are called minor and not sacred.   Their duty is to attend and serve the ministers who are in major orders, that is, the deacon and subdeacon, in the Sacrifice of the altar. They also carry and attend to the lights during the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass, and especially during the reading of the Gospel, from which fact they are also called candle-bearers.   Therefore at the ordination of acolytes the Bishop observes the following rite: First of all he carefully warns them of the nature of their office; then hands to each of them a light, saying: Receive this candlestick and candle, and remember that henceforth you are given the charge of lighting the candles of the church, in the name of the Lord.   Then he hands them empty cruets in which are presented the wine and water for the Sacrifice, saying: Receive these cruets to supply wine and water for the Eucharist of Christ's blood, in the name of the Lord.

III.   CURRENT STATE OF ACOLYTE/SERVER

CCCG: Acolyte: A liturgical minister appointed to assist at liturgical celebrations…

GIRM #98: …In the ministry of the altar, the acolyte has special duties...which he alone ought to perform.

GIRM #100: …In the absence of an instituted acolyte, lay ministers may be designated for service at the altar and to assist the priest and the deacon. They may carry the cross, candles, ashes, censer, bread, wine and water.   As well, they may be designated to distribute Holy Communion as extraordinary ministers.

CMRR #177: …He may distribute Holy Communion, taking precedence over other extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist…

IV.   THE VARIOUS ROLES OF AN ALTAR SERVER

CMRR #163:   The "ministers" or servers are those whose role is derived from that of the instituted acolyte. They assist in the sanctuary.   Their ceremonial duties are essential to good liturgy.   However, the proper exercise of their ministry at the altar depends on regular training and discipline, together with spiritual formation and encouragement.   As noted above, they wear an alb, or cassock and surplice, or some other approved vestment, but not secular dress. They sit in the sanctuary.

CMRR #165: THURIFER & BOAT BEARER...The thurifer must be trained in the art of using the thurible: how to assist efficiently when incense is prepared, how to incense people and things and how to use the thurible in processions.   The thurifer comes first, in procession, in front of the cross.   A boat bearer may assist, on the left of the thurifer. The thurifer must also know how to prepare, maintain and extinguish the thurible.

CMRR #166: CROSS BEARER....The cross bearer carries the cross so that the figure of the crucifix always faces forward. The cross should be held firmly, reasonably high. The staff should be held away from the body. The lower part of the staff is held by the left hand; the upper part held by the right hand, preferably at eye level. The cross bearer places the cross in its bracket or stand and never leaves it leaning against a wall. If necessary, the cross bearer may also be the book bearer.

CMRR #167: CANDLE BEARER... The two candle bearers, as they are described in this book, are also known as "acolytes", or the first and second server. They assist at the altar and credence table. They sit near the credence table. They carry their candlesticks with both hands, the inside hand holding the base, the outside hand holding the knob or a midpoint of the candlestick. The dish for collecting wax is best kept at eye level. They move with coordination and thus should be trained to bear the candles at the same level, and to take them up and put them down at the same time. These candles remain burning throughout the liturgy.

CMRR #168: BOOK BEARER: The book bearer plays an important role in all celebrations, particularly at the presidential chair or bishop's cathedra. The missal or other book is carried in both hands, resting flat against the chest. When a book is held open, the level is adjusted to help the celebrant to read the text.

CMRR #169:…However, servers without a specific role are superfluous. At Masses on Sundays and other major occasions, at least two or three should assist, dividing or combining their roles as thurifer, cross bearer, candle bearers, book bearer and ministering together at the credence table. At a weekday Mass, one well trained server is adequate, acting as book bearer at the chair, then ministering at the credence table, however, others may carry out the duties of cross bearer (book bearer) and candle bearers according to the nature of the occasion.

CMRR #170: MITER & CROZIER BEARERS...A miter bearer and, usually, a crozier bearer assist the bishop. Their hands are covered with a white veil, or "vimpa", when they hold the miter or crozier. Together with the book bearer, they are the immediate attendants of the bishop, walking behind him in procession...