

On Serving at the Altar

I was in the fourth grade when I first became an Altar Server. Sr. Mary Paulinus, RSM was in charge of the Servers and just as she had taught my brother, she gathered us all together in the first few pews of the enormous church and began her instruction.

“You are among the very blessed young people,” she said. “You get to be involved in the liturgy in a very special way.” She went on to explain that when she was younger, which I assumed was when the dinosaurs roamed the earth, she watched her own brothers serve at the altar and explained that, in those days, learning Latin was a requirement. My classmates and I breathed a sigh of relief that this was no longer necessary.

As Sister went through the primary parts of the liturgy – the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist – she emphasized how it was the Altar Server’s role to assist Father as he celebrated Mass. “Your job is to be invisible,” she challenged us. “You are to help without anyone seeing you and you are to be so gentle in your service that people will forget you are even there.”

I have to tell you, that this is not what we wanted to hear. Part of the reason we wanted to serve, truth be told, is that we got to wear the cassock and the surplice and, more importantly, get out of class a little bit early. Plus, we had heard that people tipped at weddings and funerals, so there was real money in this endeavor.

Because I lived close to the parish and could ride my bike back and forth, I got called for a lot of Masses. Plus, Sr. Paulinus had it in her head that I would be a priest, so I had that in my favor. Still, it was not until I was a year or two into being an Altar Server that Sister’s challenge made sense. If people noticed the Servers, they might not notice Jesus. If the Server is not stealth-like in his or her movements, reverential in his or her posture, or punctual in his or her duties, there runs the risk that the focus will shift from the altar to the Server and this is never, ever okay.

What was true for me is true for many young people who answer the call to serve at the altar: I got more out of Mass when I participated. I listened to the homily not just because I needed to know when to stand, but because if anyone happened to glance up and see me, they could tell very quickly what *they* should be doing. Over time, Mass became more engaging and my prayer life grew more fruitful. In time, I became the coordinator of the Altar Servers and, eventually, even worked at the parish full time. Indeed, it is because of Sister’s invitation that I still work for the institutional Church and, ironically, it is because I work for the Church that I met my wife.

The last time I served Mass, I was 27. I saw no reason to stop doing what I enjoyed when I went to high school or college. The only reason I stopped was because I was moving. All that time, I knew that being on the altar kept me focused. It kept me grounded in prayer. Most of all, it kept me focused on Christ in the Eucharist.

My son is fourth grade now. He cannot wait to serve. Neither can my daughters – a gift that was not available to the young women in my fourth-grade class. In the coming weeks, my children will begin their own formation. They will learn how to simultaneously serve and be invisible. They will learn to sit and fold their hands and carry the processional cross carefully. It will be an adjustment not to have them in the pew beside us, but it will please my wife and me to see them serve in such a special way.

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