

ALTAR SERVERS GUIDE

St. Michael Orthodox Church
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Portions of this guidebook were taken from the *Altar Servers Guide* of St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church, Toronto by Rev. Fr. Konstantinos Tsiolas, Rev. Fr. Theodore Paraskevopoulos and Tim Prattas.

Etiquette

Arriving on Time

As an Altar Server you must be in the Altar, ready to serve, before the Divine Liturgy begins. This ensures that you are ready to begin your duties right away. When you are there on time, the priest can concentrate on the service, instead of worrying whether he will have help for the Divine Liturgy. Another reason is so you are there for the beginning of the Liturgy and do not miss out on any parts. Think how rude it is to show up late for an appointment or a dinner at a friend's house. Imagine how rude it is to be late when God calls us to His Table. Punctuality is also a good character to have for the rest of your life. Being punctual shows maturity and responsibility on your part.

On Sundays always arrive by 9:45 AM.

Entering the Church and the Altar Area

When you enter a church, you not only enter a building of worship, but you enter the Kingdom of God – Heaven. Before you enter the church, you must concentrate on why you are there. Any worries and thoughts that have nothing to do with the Divine Liturgy should be left outside the church. You should not make any loud noises, start conversations, or try to get someone's attention. The time to chat with others is after the end of the Divine Liturgy. The only thing on your mind should be Christ and your prayers. Venerate the icons, light candles if your wish and above remember that you are entering God's house.

As serious as it is to enter the church properly, so much more serious it is to enter the Altar properly. The Altar area is where the Altar Table is located. On that table the most important service takes place: the Divine Liturgy. As Christians, our whole lives revolve around this Mystery, the Communion of the Holy Body and Blood of Christ. During the Liturgy, the Bread and Wine change into the Body and Blood of Christ, which we all consume, so that we will be one with Him. Serving in the Altar where this Mystery takes place is a great blessing and privilege.

Make a metania or bow and find your robe.

Getting a Blessing to Serve

Fold your robe carefully and present it to the presiding priest (whoever is standing at the front of the Altar). If that priest is busy, you may get a blessing from another priest. Simply approach the priest, bow (but do not do a metania) and say, "Father, bless."

If the bishop is present, ALWAYS get your blessings from him. Approach him as you would a priest and say, "Master, bless."

During the Service

The role of the Altar Server is to assist the priest and lead processions during the Divine Liturgy. It is very important that during the Liturgy, you pay attention to the priest. When you are not doing anything, you stand on the side as directed by your captain, deacon or priest. You may follow along the Liturgy with a book but do not get buried in it—the clergy might need you.

Serving in the Altar is a serious matter, and you shouldn't be joking around and letting your mind wander. Altar Servers are also responsible for the cleanliness and organization of the Altar.

Do not however, clean or touch anything on the Holy Altar. That is reserved for clergy.

Remember, if you are unsure about something, just ask.

At the End of the Service

After the dismissal and the priest blesses with Holy Bread or the hand cross, there is still be work to be done. Go immediately to the prothesis table and say the post-communion prayers with the Deacon and priests consuming the Holy Gifts. The deacon will likely give you specific tasks to complete. After you are done with these, take initiative and clean, replace or fix up anything that seems out of sorts.

Please DO NOT LEAVE until you have permission by the Deacon.

Exit the Altar area and Church building with the same respect and care that you entered.

Liturgical Items

Robes

The robe you wear symbolizes your commitment to serving the Church as Altar Server. They robe also distinguishes you from the rest of the congregation, as you have a specific role in the Church. When you wear the robe, you are not only a Christian, but specifically a servant of God at His Altar. Regular Altar Servers only wear the robes. The belts are only worn by those tonsured as sub-deacons. In Greek, the robe is called the *stikharion*, and the belt is called the *orarion*.

You must treat your robe with care and respect so it will last and will look presentable when you serve. After you leave the Altar, you should make sure your robe is neatly folded or hanging, so it will not wrinkle. If you feel your robe needs repair or cleaning, you should speak with your priest or the head of the Altar Servers.

Candles (or Torches)

The candles are what you use most of the time during processions, readings and special services. As we said, candles represent our prayers to God. The candles you carry also symbolize the light of Christ shining for those who believe in Him. When you carry a candle at the front of a procession, you also announce the beginning of the procession to the people, so they may stand still and pay attention. You should not play with your candles or swing them from side to side.

Torches are larger—more elaborate candles. They serve the same purpose but are visually distinct.

When you are walking, you should not drag the bottom of the candle pole. When you are standing still, most of the time it is okay to rest the pole of the candle on the floor.

When you stand in front of the Altar with the candles, you face the Altar Server across from you. The same goes if you stand in front or on the sides of a table. Try to never turn your back to the Altar or the priest. In a procession, the candles always lead.

Censer

The censer is what we burn incense in. It hangs from chains, and on the chains are attached bells. Incense is a gift to God. That tradition was used by the Jews when they would burn incense at the Altar as a gift to God. We continue that tradition. Incense also symbolizes our prayers to God. The lower part of the censer symbolizes the earth. The top part of the censer symbolizes Heaven, where the smoke rises, like our prayers. Normally, there are twelve bells on the chains, and they symbolize the Twelve Apostles of Christ. The sound of the bells symbolizes the Apostles glorifying God.

Although it is fun to use the censer, you must make sure that it is properly lit and cleaned at all times. A dirty censer starts to smell bad after a while. Make sure the charcoal is lit and there is plenty left. Every time the priest uses the censer and gives it back to you, you should clean out

the remaining burning incense and put it in the small container next to the censer stand. You should also clean out any ash left over from the burning charcoal.

When you give the censer to the priest, hand it to him so that he may grasp it naturally. Each priest might have slightly different preferences. Learn them. Most of our censers are “Indian Style” with hooks for the clergy’s hands. A few only have rings. For either of them, hold the top of the censer with one hand and the chains with the other hand. Make sure there is enough space between your hands, because that is where the priest will grab the censer.

If the priest censes you, when he gives you the censer, you cense him twice. If it is a bishop that gives it back to you, you cense the bishop three times. If a deacon hands it to you, cense him once. When the priest censes you, you don’t cross yourself. You simply bow towards the priest.

In a procession, the censer always goes ahead of the deacon or first priest in line.

Processional Cross

The Processional Cross and Fans are usually located in the side room where the robes are kept. The Cross is used during the Great Entrance and on special services and occasions. The Cross has two sides to it. One side shows an icon of Christ crucified on the Cross. This side faces forward when the Cross is taken in a procession on weekdays. The other side of the Cross has an icon of Christ resurrecting. That is the side that must always face forward on Sundays. That is because on Sundays, we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

In a procession, the cross follows the candles and torches.

Banner

The banner is used only on special occasions and important feasts. It is carried on a pole and features an icon of the feast or service.

In a procession, it follows the clergy (but precedes the Fans).

Liturgical Fans

The fans represent the angels specifically the seraphim. They are so called because in times past they would fan the Holy Gifts to keep away insect and pests. Now they serve to remind that our Liturgy mirrors a heavenly Liturgy served by the Angelic Hosts.

In a procession, the fans are always last although they may exit the deacon’s doors *first* and join the rest of the procession once it has exited.

Hot Water

The hot water or *zeon* is heated during the Divine Liturgy and is brought to the priest right before he gives Holy Communion. The Zeon is always brought to the priest on his right side. The priest will take the Zeon and pour it into the chalice with the wine and return it back to the altar boys.

Processions

Little Entrance

The Little Entrance is a short, circular procession to the *solea* (the raised area outside of the altar and in front of the iconostasis). The altar boys line up with Candles (and maybe the Processional Cross) at the north door and begin the Entrance by proceeding down the right side of the solea. They immediately turn left and flank the center of the solea and face each other.

The clergy follow. When the last clergy passes and goes into the altar, altar boys immediately turn to face the altar, make the sign of the cross, bow and then enter through the doors on their own side.

DO NOT TIP THE CANDLE WHEN YOU BOW.

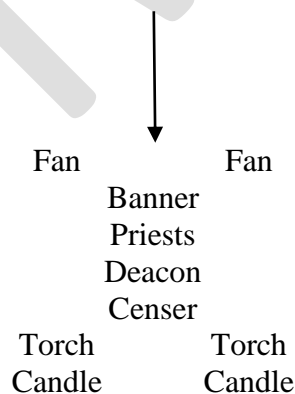
Epistle and Gospel Readings

During the Trisagion, the altar boys exit for the readings. They will split into two groups, each exiting from each side door of the altar. They are to come out and line up on each side of the Royal Doors facing each other. They are to wait there until the Gospel is read and then turn, bow, and enter through their respective side doors (just like in the small entrance).

Only candles are taken out for the Gospel reading.

Great Entrance

The Great Entrance is when the priest comes out with the Holy Gifts that are to become the Body and Blood of Christ. The procession is much longer than the Little Entrance. The Altar servers lead by going out the North door and circling the pews on the right hand side of the Church. They end up on the Solea as at the Little Entrance. The order should be:



Whoever is holding the Censer is to cense the priest as he walks around the whole church and all the way up to the Royal Doors, standing off to the left side allowing the priest to pass and enter the Altar. NOTE: The censer bows and enters first before anyone else as it has to go in and help the priest immediately. The rest of the servers wait until the last clergy have entered.

Teams and Scheduling

Teams

Each team has both an adult captain and youth “Captain-in-Training” (CIT). Our goal is to make teams so well-trained and organized that the teams are led by the youth captains.

Scheduling

Each of the teams will serve once every three weeks. See the Altar Server’s Calendar on our website for up-to-date schedule: <https://www.orthodoxky.com/altar-servers>

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