

Servers

I began serving mass when I was in the fifth grade. Among other things, I wanted to be on the winning side of the traditional altar boy-choirboy fight at the annual picnic.

Serving Mass was more difficult back then. You had to memorize Latin prayers and you had to learn a lot of signals, set procedures, bows, genuflections. Furthermore, all these had to be synchronized with your partner. And then there was the trauma of trying to light all those towering candles before mass while the whole congregation watched.

A priest friend of mine recently reprimanded the altar boys because of their sloppy job. He told them how easy they had it. When he was an altar boy, he had to learn long Latin prayers. To impress the boys, he started reciting some of them: "*Ad Deum qui laetificat, juventutem meum ...*" They listened in awe. After some moments of silence one of the boys piped up, "What country did you live in?"

How time flies.

Nowadays there is a wide variety in servers among parishes. Some have adults, some have youngsters. Some wear cassocks and surplices, others alb-like garments, still others secular clothing.

I think there is room for all these possibilities. I would simply like to offer some reflections that would apply no matter what approach was taken in a particular parish.

Reverence Is for Servers, Too

Formerly we confused reverence with rigidity and fear. Servers acted stiffly, out of fear of reprisal from the "altar boy sister" or the priest at early Mass who hadn't yet had a cup of coffee. Ceremonies were stiff, like the movements of a Prussian drill team.

Now, however, I think we have overreacted. We are developing a generation of servers who have lost touch with a long tradition of reverence in the sanctuary. Most servers, in my experience, are not reverent enough.

We must not forget that the Mass is a ritual. This does not mean doing things mechanically, but it does mean doing them in a way that is special. No one has to march around stiffly, but no one should amble either—any more than a bride ambles down the aisle. Liturgy is something special.

It makes a difference how we carry the candles, whether and how we genuflect or bow, what kind of posture we have while sitting or standing, whether we seem to be prayerful and interested when we are not performing any actions. Many servers today seem to have little awareness of this.

Neatness Counts

The cassock and surplice covered many scrubby outfits (especially on Saturday mornings). But the cassock and surplice themselves had to be neat – or a boy would hear about it. Lately, I've noticed some pretty sloppy cassocks and surplices – wrinkled, dragging on the floor, necks unbuttoned. If servers are going to wear them, they should be an improvement, not a deterioration.

If servers don't wear cassocks or some other kind of liturgical garment, their clothes really should be "special." I'm the last person in the world competent to talk about clothing styles; I wouldn't even dream of prescribing what should or shouldn't be worn. But it should come across to the people that you dressed with special care today because you were going to be part of something very important to you.

Taking the Job Seriously

I like the idea that things are much less fearsome in the sanctuary. Except for excesses that seem irreverent, it is good that servers can be at ease (rather than stiff), can smile, and do not have to worry every moment about making a mistake.

Servers, like so many others mentioned so far, are *ministers*. They should know a lot about the Eucharistic celebration so that they can make a major contribution toward its effectiveness. They need training – more on the meaning of the liturgy and ritual than on synchronized actions.

Earlier I mentioned how conspicuous ushers are at Mass and how their attitude and involvement can be a real witness for everyone else. The same is true of servers. They are up there in front of everyone. Nowadays they don't have a lot to do, which means that during most of the Mass they are participants like everyone else. Part of their ministry should be to help "set the pace" for others. It really does have an effect on me when I see another person who is prayerful during a quiet moment or who is fully engaged in what is taking place. A major part of the ministry of the server should be to become involved in the Mass so that others will too.

If I were a pastor, I would gather the servers together at least once a year (besides the annual picnic) and I would impress on them their importance as *ministers*. I would make sure that they sensed an obligation to know more about the Mass (not simply choreography) than other people their own age.

As with so many other changes, we have a great opportunity here. If we take serving Mass seriously as a ministry, we could be 'way ahead of the days when the altar boys had to prove their worth by beating up the choir boys."