

2024

ALTAR SERVER GUIDE & HANDBOOK



Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church

Rochester, NY

Altar Server Handbook

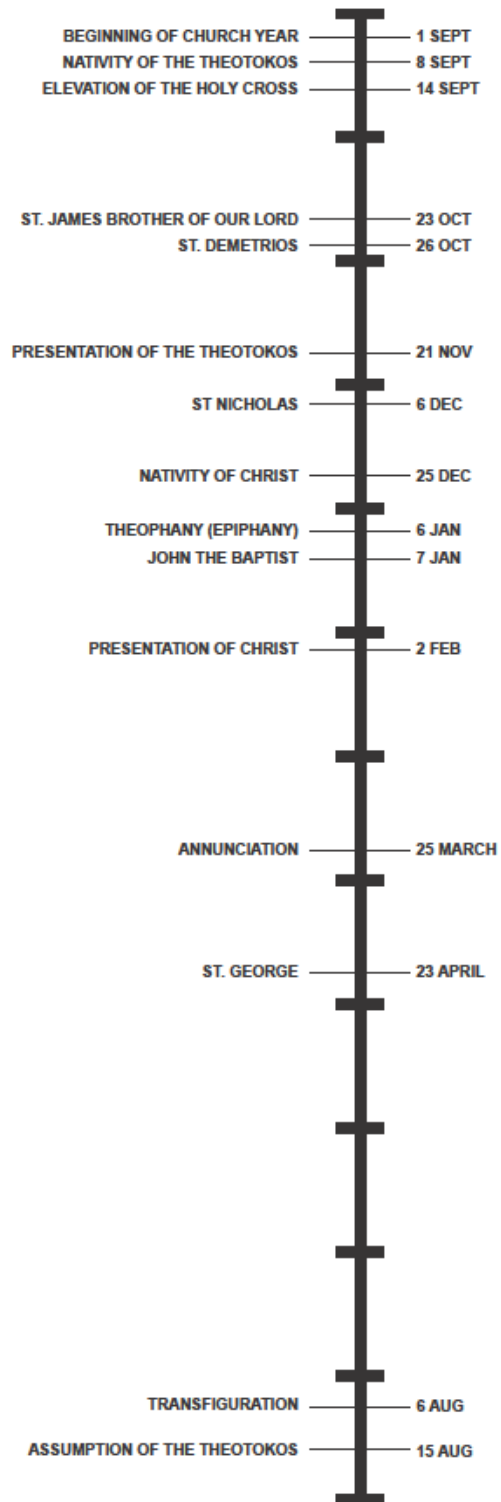
Altar Server Handbook

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1. Timeline of the Orthodox Feast days of the Liturgical Year



THE LITURGICAL YEAR THE FIXED MAJOR FEASTS

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2. Church Interior

To properly serve as an Altar Server you will need to know the different areas of the church that you will be serving in. Below is a picture of the front part of our church with each number corresponding to a specific area.



1. **Royal Gates** These doors are reserved for entry only by the deacon, priest or bishop. The icons on these doors of the four (4) Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
2. **Solea** This is a Latin word meaning of a higher level or elevation. This raised platform or area in front of the inner sanctuary is where the choir and the chanters stand and it is also where the people receive communion. The Solea extends out from the Iconostasis either in a square or semicircle into the nave, and often is made of marble. All Orthodox services and sacraments are conducted from the Solea. This is also where the deacon stands there to lead petitions.
3. **Deacon Doors** These doors are used to enter the Altar area by all non-clergy, acolytes, altar servers, chanters, etc. The priest, accompanied by the Altar servers will exit the North side door during the Great Entrance.

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Below is a picture of our Altar located behind the Iconostasis



1. **Altar Table** The altar is always located at the rear of the church and behind the Iconostasis. The Altar Table represents two things, a) a reminder of the table where the Ancient Jewish priests made their sacrifices for the people but now represents the final sacrifice of Christ b) the Table of the Last Supper where Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion.

The shape of the Altar table is either square or rectangular to remind us that Jesus commanded us to spread the Gospel to the four corners of the earth and is almost always made of marble or stone. The columns in the front of the Altar represent the four Evangelists upon whom Jesus gave the responsibility to carry on the mission of building His Church.

The only items that should be on the Altar table are the Antimension, Gospel, Artophorion (Tabernacle) and the Candlestands.

2. **Artophorion (Tabernacle)** The Artophorion houses the reserve Sacrament which the priest replenishes each Holy Thursday during the Liturgy of St Basil. The priest uses this for Holy Communion to those in the hospital, sick at home or those who unable to attend church.

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In the front of the Artophorion you will see a lighted candle always present to remind us that Jesus is always ready to forgive us when we repent of our sins.

3. **Candlestands** In Orthodox Churches there are usually six (6) candle stands on the Altar table. The purpose of these candles is the same as the lanterns held by the Altar servers. (refer to page 13)

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3. Altar Server Vestments

The Altar server robe is very similar to what an Orthodox Deacon wears and is a reminder that the serving in the Altar is a great and important responsibility. However unlike the deacon vestments the Altar server wears only 2 pieces of vestment. The Robe and the Orarion (Stole).



Altar Server Robe

It is the responsibility of each Altar server to care for his robe which means that he must make sure it is clean. Robes must be hung up properly after the service and Orarions must be rolled up and placed back in the appropriate drawers.

The most common color is white (shown) but during Great Lent the color changes to match the priest's vestments of purple.

The Orarion or stole is a long piece of matching cloth that is worn similar to how a deacon would wear.

The Orarion symbolisms that the Altar server is a servant of God and should be willing and attentive during the services.

There is also a gold Altar server robe that indicates those who are assigned as Altar Captains.

For those who are 17 years or older they would wear the black Acolyte robe.



Orarions

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Altar Captain



Altar Server Robe - Lent



Acolyte Robe

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4. Altar Server and Altar Captain Responsibilities

a. Altar Server

To be eligible to serve in the Altar the following three (3) things are required.

1. Be at least eight (8) years or in the 3rd grade
2. Know the Lord's Prayer by heart
3. Willingness to attend services on a regular basis

Since Altar servers are performing a sacred duty they must be of good behavior during the services. His actions outside the church, such as school, sports, and play must show that he reflects Christian values of honesty, loyalty, good sportsmanship and avoiding behavior that could reflect poorly on his family and his church.

Altar servers should arrive for their duties at the beginning of Divine Liturgy. During the services Altar servers should be focused on the priest, Altar Captains and the senior acolytes so as to be ready to assist when needed. This means he should not be looking outside the Altar to see what is going on in the pews.

Altar servers should be dressed appropriately with dress pants and shirt, or polo shirt and dress shoes. Do not wear sneakers, crocs or sandals when serving in the Altar.

Altar servers should in addition to Sunday Divine Liturgy know when the 12 major Feasts of the Church occur and, whenever possible, attend these services. (see page 2)

Altar servers should prepare for and receive Holy Communion at least once per month.

b. Altar Captain

Requirements to become an Altar Captain are

- Be 14 years old
- Served at least 3 years as an Altar server
- Attend Religious Education (Sunday School) regularly
- Be willing to accept the additional responsibilities of an Altar Captain

In addition to the duties of Altar Server, the Altar Captain has the added responsibility of leading and assisting the Altar servers. This includes teaching, being a good mentor and example and ensuring that the Altar servers are ready to meet the needs of the priest.

Duties of the Altar Captain include

- Making sure that the Altar candles are lit for the Divine Liturgy.
- Prepare the antidoron and assign who is to cut it up.
- Help and instruct new Altar Servers in their duties.
- Light charcoals in the censer when needed.
- Ensure that there is water in the kettle.
- Be attentive to the priest at all times during the Divine Liturgy.

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- Ensure that all Altar Servers not assigned to a specific duty stand on the line between the tile and the granite.
- Responsible to verify that after Liturgy is over everything has been put back into its proper place (especially the robes), that all the candles are extinguished and that the area where the antidoron is cut is clean and orderly.

The following tasks are ones which the Altar Captain(s) will need to assign:

- Carrying candles during the Small and Great Entrances.
- Carrying the fans, cross and lanterns during the Small and Great Entrances.
- Determine who will handle the censer during the service.
- The cutting of the bread for antidoron or assigning the cutting of bread.
- Ensure someone is preparing and delivering the Zeon to the priest.
- Who will hold the antidoron during Communion and at the end of the service.
- Taking antidoron to Sunday School and the attendance list to the Sunday School office.

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5. Altar Server Actions during Divine Liturgy

Proskomide and the sacred instruments

Since the early Church, the Office of Oblation (Proskomide) has been a service of offering gifts to God in preparation for the Sacrament of Holy Communion in the Divine Liturgy. The service of Proskomide occurs during Matins and is completed in time for Divine Liturgy.

The Table of Oblation (Prothesis or sometimes Proskomide) is located to the left of the Holy Altar table. This area represents the cave or stable of Bethlehem where our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was born which is why the icon of the Nativity is located there.

Parishioners bring wine and bread, called prosphoro as an offering to the Church. During the Divine Liturgy, the wine will be consecrated into the blood of Christ, while the bread will be consecrated into the body of Christ.

The wine we use is a sweet red wine from Cyprus and the prosphoro is made from pure wheat flour and water and is leavened (yeast is added) and baked.



Proskomide Table



Prosphoro with Seal

In the center of the top of the bread is a round seal. During the Office of Oblation, the priest, using a sharp knife called a *spade* or *spear* cuts portions of this seal when preparing Holy Communion. In the center of the seal are large Greek letters ΙΣ ΧΣ ΝΙ ΚΑ which translates to “*Jesus Christ is victorious.*” This portion is called the AMNOS or lamb.

The priest next cuts out the triangle with the letter M (for Mary). This is in commemoration of our Most Blessed Lady, Panagia, the Theotokos, Mother of God.

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Next the priest cuts out the nine small triangles to the right of the AMNOS. These nine triangles symbolize the nine orders of great Angelic Leaders Michael and Gabriel, prophets of the Old Testament, the Apostles, great teachers of the Church, the Holy Martyrs and and other saints of the Church, and of course St. John Chrysostom of whom the Divine Liturgy is named.

Lastly, the priest cuts two portions from the same prosphoron. From the one he commemorates the living by taking out particles and from the other takes out particles to commemorate the dead. Parishioners offer the names of the living and dead for whom they want the priest to pray. The priest then remembers each name, saying, "Remember, O Lord," and places them below the AMNOS, the living on the left side and the deceased on the right side. The last portion is for the Priest who prays for his own salvation.

Each of these items are placed on a paten and the wine is poured into the chalice.



The priest, assisted by the acolyte will then place a gold-covered metal stand called an *Asterisk*. The Asterisk prevents the cloth which covers the paten from touching the AMNOS and other items on the paten. The Asterisk is also known as a *Star* symbolizing the star that led the Magi to the manger in Bethlehem where Christ was born. The priest then covers the paten and the chalice with covers called Kalimata. Both the paten and the cup are then covered with the Aer. This is the cloth that the priest wears on his shoulders



during the Great Entrance.

Lastly the priest will cense the paten and chalice and recite the closing prayer which completes the Proskomide service.

The Censor

The censor is not only a practical item but a significant one. There is certainly religious significance but throughout Church history the censor has several practical purposes.

The smoke that rises from the censor represents our prayers rising to heaven. Censing is then performed at specific points during the service, with a deacon or priest swinging the censor to spread the smoke throughout the church.

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When the priest censens he typically censens all the icons of the church and then censens the people who are the living image and likeness of God and the smoke is a visible sign of the Holy Spirit's presence amongst the people.

The censor bowl and cap is often decorated with images of the four Evangelists or other sacred iconography. The four chains, from which it swings, represent the 4 Evangelists of the Bible and the 12 bells represent all 12 of Christ's original Apostles.

The censor plays a significant role in how the faithful connect with the God.

1. Creates a Focus: The distinct aroma of helps to center our thoughts on prayer and worship.
2. Symbolizes Prayer: As the smoke rises, it serves as a constant reminder that our prayers, like the smoke, should rise to the heavens.

May my prayer rise before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice. Psalm 141

3. Enhances Community Togetherness: When incense fills the church, it's not only a personal experience but one that connects the congregation together in a shared event. As we inhale the same holy fragrance, it underscores our unity in faith and worship.



Preparing the Censor

Typically, all Altar servers can prepare the censor for use by the priest, however the lighting of the charcoal, since it sparks when lit, is reserved for Altar captains or Acolytes. The charcoal can be lit in the censor bowl or can be lit outside and then transferred to the censor with the tongs.

Allow the charcoal to burn for several minutes after which incense can be added to the charcoal. Usually the Liturgy will require two (2) charcoals to be lit, once at the beginning of the Proskomide and then another just the Great Entrance.

When signaled by the priest or an acolyte to prepare the censor, scrape off the old incense and then add new incense (about 6 or 7 pieces). Then hand to the priest saying, "*Father bless the censor.*" After he finishes censings he will give the censor back to you and you can place it back in the censor stand.

Times when censor should be ready

Altar servers must be alert during the service to have the censor ready at the times needed by the priest. These are the times when the priest would require the censor.

1. Doxology (just before Liturgy begins)
2. Censing of the Gospel (While the Epistle is being read)

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3. After the Gospel is read (during the Cherubic Hymn)
4. The Great Entrance (this includes giving the censor to the priest when he returns to the Altar)
5. After the Consecration (For the censuring of those departed)
6. After the faithful have received Holy Communion (this includes censuring the Gifts as the priest returns them to Proskomide Table)

Processions

There are two major processions during the Divine Liturgy in which the Altar servers play an important role, the Small and Great Entrance. Both Entrances are done in remembrance of the practices of the Early Church.

Small Entrance Due to the persecutions of the Christians of the early Church, the Gospel was kept hidden for safety. At the end of the 3rd Antiphon the Deacon would bring the Gospel from the Skevofilakion (a room where all the church valuables were kept). It was not until the 14th century that the Gospel was placed on the Altar as it is today. The Small Entrance symbolizes the first coming into the world of the Son of God, Christ, as Man.

Great Entrance This is a procession with the *unconsecrated* Gifts (meaning they are still bread and wine). The priest will take the covered Paten and Chalice from the Proskomide table of Preparation and thru the Great Entrance will bring it to the Altar table. Historically, just as in the Small Entrance the Deacon would once again go to the Skevofilakion to bring the bread, wine and the other liturgical items into the church in formal procession. The Great Entrance symbolizes the journey of Christ to the Holy City of Jerusalem as He prepared for His Passion and the crowd's acknowledgement of Him as the Messiah who is "Blessed and comes in the name of the Lord!"

Items Used during the Processions

Items used by the Altar server during the two processions are

- Candles
- Censor
- Cross
- Exapteryga

Candles In the early Church Christians used candles in the caves and the tombs where Christians were buried to provide light for the reading of prayers and services as the caves and tombs were dark. Today the candles remind us the Christ is our Light and He leads us out of darkness and ignorance. These are also referred to as Lanterns to remind us of the chief priests and soldiers "*came with lanterns, torches, and weapons*" to seize Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Censor refer to page 7-9

Cross The Cross is the triumphant symbol of victory by which the devil and death was defeated. The Cross adorns the entire church and can be seen in many places. When the Cross passes by the people during the Great Entrance they are reminded of the great suffering that our Lord endured for us and the salvation that He brings to all of Mankind.

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Exapteryga Although sometimes we refer to these as fans their proper name is Exapteryga which is Greek word meaning “six wings” and represents the Seraphim and Cherubim who are the closest of all the heavenly powers to the throne of God and who “*soar on their wings singing, proclaiming, and shouting the victory hymn saying Holy, Holy, Holy Lord of Hosts, heaven and earth are filled with Your glory.*” (Liturgy Book page 23-24)

In the Early Church these were actually used as fans. During the Liturgy a Deacon or Acolyte would stand on each side of the Altar table and fan away the flies from the bread and wine.

Order During the Processions

Small Entrance As the priest finishes the 3rd Antiphon the Altar Captains should give each Altar server a candle and wait at the North Deacon Door. When the priest arrives with the Gospel they should exit the deacon door and lead the priest on the Solea and position themselves in front of the Iconostasis facing each other. The Altar servers remain there until the priest enters the Altar after which each Altar server would turn to face the Royal Gates, bow and return into the Altar by way of either the North or South Deacon doors.

Great Entrance After the priest reads the Gospel of the day he will re-enter the Altar and begin to cense while silently saying the 50th Psalm. While he is censuring, the Altar captain should begin preparing the Altar servers for the Great Entrance. The typical order for the Great Entrance is

- Candle
- Cross
- Exapteryga (Fans)
- Censor

It is the responsibility of the Altar Captain to alternate who carries each of these items to ensure that each Altar server has a chance to use each of these items.

Other Actions required by Altar Servers during the Liturgy

Preparing Antidoron – Antidoron (ἀντιδωρόν) is the name for prosphoro when it is cut into squares for distribution after Liturgy is finished. The name is a combination of two Greek words, Anti meaning “instead of” and Doron meaning “gifts.” Thus Antidoron means “instead of the Gifts,” because Antidoron is for those who have not received Holy Communion or is given by the Orthodox Church as a gift to our non-Orthodox guests.

Altar captains or the Acolytes will determine which Altar servers are able to cut the Antidoron due to safety concerns. Acolytes will determine the amount of Antidoron to cut depending on the expected attendance for the particular service.

Altar servers will receive the prosphoro from the priest when he finishes with it when conducting Proskomide.

Zeon - The word zeon comes from the Greek word ζέον, which means "boiling" or "fervor". The canons of the Orthodox Church require that water be added to the wine in the chalice "living water"

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so the Holy Fathers added to the Liturgy the practice of adding hot water or Zeon which symbolizes the heat of faith and the descent of the Holy Spirit.

After the Consecration the Altar Captain should ensure that the hot water kettle is on and after the Lord's Prayer is said the Altar server should fill the Zeon vessel with hot water. The Altar server should bring the Zeon vessel to the priest on the right side of the Altar as the priest says, "the Holy Gifts are for the Holy." Once the priest adds the hot water the Altar server can return the Zeon to the Altar server room.

Distributing Holy Communion – When the priest comes out of the Altar with the Holy Gifts saying "With the fear of God, faith and love, draw near," at least two (2) Altar servers should also come out for the purpose of holding the Communion cloth while Holy Communion is being distributed.

The Altar servers should take the communion cloth from the priest, unfold it with each Altar server holding one end. As each person approaches for Holy Communion the Altar servers should be sure that the cloth is placed underneath their chin to catch any Holy Communion that might spill. This is especially important when kids are receiving Holy Communion.

Typically Altar servers, Altar captains and Acolytes will receive last, in this order. After they have received Holy Communion the Altar servers will fold the communion cloth and drape it over the chalice and return to the Altar after the priest reenters the Altar.

Altar Clean up responsibilities

At the conclusion of Liturgy the Altar Captain will assign one of the Altar servers to hold Antidoron for the priest to distribute to the people. Once the distribution of the antidoron is complete, empty the bowl and tray and put any left over antidoron in small sandwich bags.

The remaining Altar Servers are then responsible to clean the Altar Server area which includes

- Wiping of the cutting boards and cleaning all bread crumbs from the table
- Sweep up all crumbs and any other debris from the floor
- Emptying the censor making sure that all charcoals are extinguished.
- Turn of the kettle for the Zeon and empty any remaining water from the kettle
- Turn of all lanterns used for the processions
- All Altar server robes are properly and neatly hung up and orarions are folded and put away in the roper drawers.

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