

THE HOLY TRINITY ALTAR BOY'S GUIDEBOOK

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I. INTRODUCTION

So you're an altar boy.

Perhaps you've been an altar boy only a short time, or perhaps for many years. You may know quite a bit about being an altar boy, or not. You may have lots of questions that you never got around to asking, or not. Whatever the case, this book has been prepared with you in mind.

The Holy Trinity Altar Boy's Guidebook will not answer all your questions—it's not meant to. Nor is it meant to teach you the best and only way to do things as an altar boy. The Holy Trinity Altar Boy's Guidebook will tell you some of the ways of doing things. It will help answer some of your questions. It is not so much a manual as it is a workbook, a guidebook. The Holy Trinity Altar Boy's Guidebook is a tool to help you learn.

II. WHAT IS AN ALTAR BOY?

Did you ever wonder why you're called an “altar boy”? Why don't we have any “altar girls”? Let's see whether we can find out.

During the early years of the Church, the disciples of Christ found that they were not spending enough time doing the job Christ chose them to do. They were so busy tending to the needs of the early Christians that they didn't always have enough time to go out and tell other people about Christ and the wonderful things He came to offer us. So they decided to choose some of the people to help them. They chose seven able men and ordained them to be deacons. These deacons helped the disciples so that the disciples could have more time to preach the good news of salvation to others. (See Acts 6.)

As the years went by, it was also found that it would be extremely helpful to have some additional people (besides the deacons) helping during the various services, especially during the Divine Liturgy. There were so many things that had to be done and prepared. And so, special people were chosen to do just that. They were called “acolytes.” The word “acolyte” is defined by the dictionary as an altar attendant, coming from the Greek word “*akolouthos*” meaning “attendant” or “follower.” In a very real sense, acolytes were the attendants to the bishops and priests. They helped them during the various services, much as you, as an altar boy, help the priest today. The word “acolyte” can also be traced to the Greek word “*akolytos*” meaning free (from stain or sin) to enter the Holy of Holies. It is proper and fitting for one to serve the Lord in the Holy of Holies to be “*akolytos*”—free from stain.

In the Divine Liturgy, the priest represents Jesus Christ, as well as God the Father. The altar boys, who are the priest's attendants, are really Christ's attendants. We know that the attendants of Christ are the angels. So you, as an altar boy, are symbolically an angel.

The altar, which is more properly speaking called the Holy of Holies, is the most sacred area of the church. That is where the bread and wine are offered to God as a sacrifice—a bloodless sacrifice. And God, accepting our

sacrifice, sends down the Holy Spirit to change the bread and the wine in a miraculous way into the Body and Blood of Christ. *Only bishops, priests, and deacons are allowed in the altar. Anyone else who may have a reason to enter the altar needs to receive a blessing from the bishop. Altar boys are specially chosen and tonsured as “readers,” and are therefore allowed into the altar. In special circumstances, bishops may give other people the blessing to enter the holy altar (e.g., some nuns at women's monasteries).*

When an altar boy is tonsured by the bishop as a reader, he becomes a member of the order of the clergy. To become a priest, a man first must be tonsured a reader, then a sub-deacon, then ordained a deacon and then a priest. So a reader is really the first step in the holy Priesthood. And, as we saw, only men are permitted to become priests.

To be an altar boy is a special honor. Before the bishop tonsures altar boys as readers (and only a bishop can do this), they go through a “trial period” to make sure that they are qualified and deserve to be altar boys. Not everyone *deserves this great honor*.

What made you want to become an altar boy?

Did you know that God chose you to become an altar boy and serve Him? Maybe one day you thought to yourself that you'd like to become an altar boy. Maybe your parents suggested that you become an altar boy. Maybe your friends who are altar boys suggested it—whatever it was, it really was God who called you. You see, God works through you and through other people. In His own way, He called you to serve Him.

You should be very happy that the Lord God chose you. He loves you very much. He wants you to love Him more and more each day. He has given you a great honor by choosing you to be one of His altar boys.

III. PREPARATION AT HOME

When it's your turn to serve in the altar, do you do anything different at home to get ready to go to church? If not, you really should. Remember, the altar is a holy place. You will be touching things that are holy.

When you're invited to a special party, you probably spend a lot of time getting ready—making sure everything is just right. Well, you should also make sure everything is just right when you go to church, and even more so when you know you will be serving in the altar.

Getting ready to serve in the altar should begin the previous day. Prepare your clothing to make sure you have appropriate, clean clothes. Read some prayers the night before, to help prepare yourself to receive Holy Communion.

Here are some things to watch for and ask yourself:

- Is your hair combed and well-kempt?
- Have you taken your bath or shower?
- Did you wash your hands with plenty of soap and water just before you left your home? Remember, you will be touching and holding things that are holy.
- Is your shirt clean? Is it buttoned to the collar button? (A tie would make an ideal addition to your shirt. The shirt should preferably be white in color.)
- What about your pants? Are they ironed and clean? (They should preferably be dark in color.)
- What about your shoes (preferably black)—are they shined?
- What about your socks? (These should be black or dark.)
- Remember that tennis shoes, sneakers, jeans, unbuttoned shirts, and other informal clothes are not proper for serving in the altar.
- Look in the mirror just before leaving home to make sure everything is just right. (Preparing your clothing and your spirit the night before will help.)
- Have you said some prayers before leaving home?

- Have you read the epistle and Gospel readings for the day?
- When was the last time you made an appointment for confession?
- Are you prepared to receive Holy Communion?

In short, you, as an altar boy, should be generally clean and presentable from the inside out. If there are any reasons why you cannot follow a dress-code item (e.g., a need for orthopedic shoes which may not be black), make sure to let the priest know as soon as possible. If this is a new condition, (e.g., a result of an injury), let the priest know during the week prior to your service in the altar.

Because you are an altar boy, you should not only be especially careful when preparing to go to church, but also during the rest of the week as well. You symbolize an angel and you should therefore be careful how you dress, how you act, how you speak, at all times.

Remember, God has chosen you to serve Him in His holy altar. He wants to be proud of you not just in the altar, but all the time.

IV. ARRIVAL AND PREPARATION AT CHURCH

What happens when you get to church? Well, first of all, when you walk into the narthex, you should:

- Place your offering into the tray;
- Take a candle;
- Light your candle;
- Make the sign of the Cross;
- Offer a silent prayer for your parents, your relatives, your friends, your enemies, and yourself;
- Kiss the icons in the narthex.

Why do all that? Because you are getting ready to leave the world behind you and enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. The narthex is your preparation area. When you enter into the church proper (the nave), you are transported away from the world into God's Kingdom.

You should be in the altar at the beginning of the Liturgy. If unable to do so, but arrive prior to the reading of the Gospel, follow the regular preparation routine. After the reading of the Gospel no new altar boys should enter the altar.

Quietly enter the side room used for the priests and sign in on the sheet. In the side room used for the altar boys, find your robe, fold it, and proceed to the proistamenos for the blessing. Please note that robes are organized by size and on the inside of the collar, each robe has a number. An orarion is also found on each hanger together with the robe. Each altar boy is assigned a particular robe and orarion. To receive the blessing for the robes, locate your robe in the South vestry. Drape the robe over your right arm (fold in half if necessary, so the robe does not hang on the floor) and place the folded orarion on top. Come to the North (left) side of the altar and wait until the priest is not reciting a prayer or petitions and is not censing to have the robe blessed. After vesting and prior to entering the altar, look in the full length mirror on the North vestry door to make sure everything is in place and your appearance is well kempt.

While the priest is offering the blessing, you should offer a silent prayer asking God to bless your service to Him that day so that it might be proper and acceptable. When the priest finishes the blessing, kiss his hand (which offers us God's blessing, Holy Communion, and so much more) and proceed to put your robe on. Then take your designated position in the altar. Please note that if the bishop happens to be visiting, then you would go to him to receive the blessing.

Why do you need to receive a blessing? There are a number of reasons.

First, by bestowing a blessing, the priest gives you permission to serve in the altar. No one enters to serve in the altar without the priest's permission—that includes altar boys and deacons (and even the chanters must receive

the priest's permission to chant). When the bishop is present, then even the priests, as well as the altar boys and deacons and chanters, etc., must receive permission from him to serve. This blessing occurs every time a service is to be celebrated.

Aside from granting you permission to serve, the priest, through this special blessing, imparts the grace of God upon you. That special blessing stays with you and not just for the service. Remember—it's an honor and privilege to serve as an altar boy, one filled with many blessings.

V. BEHAVIOR IN THE ALTAR

As an altar boy, you must be careful about your behavior in the altar. Remember—the altar is the holiest area of the church. Here are some things to keep in mind:

THINGS THAT ARE NOT PROPER FOR AN ALTAR BOY TO DO

- Chew gum.
- Talk (this should be done only when absolutely necessary and only for giving instructions for processions, etc.).
- Laugh; push; make faces; smile; wink; comb hair; play with your robe, incense, candles, or candle wax.
- Leave your position (unless to prepare for a procession or carry out your duties).
- Walk in front of the altar table.
- Walk through the (Royal) Beautiful Gate (Oraia Pele).
- Walk too fast while going to designated positions in the altar or preparing for a procession.
- Stand with your hands clasped behind your back.
- Drip wax from a candle onto the floor.

THINGS THAT ARE PROPER FOR AN ALTAR BOY TO DO

- Hold your hands by your side when standing.
- Make the sign of the cross whenever going behind the altar table.
- Kiss the priest's hand when he blesses your robe and whenever you hand him anything or take anything from his hand.
- Hold the censer by the top rings and not by the chains when handing it to the priest.
- Listen to the prayers of the priest.
- Pay attention to prepare things in time (such as the censer or candles).
- Make the sign of the cross at the appropriate times during the services (when the name of the Virgin Mary or the Holy Trinity is mentioned, at each singing of the “Agios O Theos” (Holy God), etc.).
- Neatly hang up your robe following services.
- Quietly help to clean up following services.
- Quietly recite the Creed and the Lord's Prayer at the appropriate times during the liturgy. Altar boys should have the Creed and the Lord's Prayer memorized either in Greek, English, or both. See the appropriate texts.

VI. THE ALTAR BOY'S ROBE

The Sticharion – This is similar to the deacon's sticharion. It is a long robe with wide sleeves and is called the “robe of salvation and the garment of joy.” It is symbolic of purity and of a spotless life.

The Orarion – Similar to the deacon's orarion, it resembles the form of a cross, over the sticharion. It is symbolic of the wings of angels.

An altar boy is a symbol of an angel. Your robe is a symbol of purity and wings of an angel. Your robe is really a symbol of the great honor you have from the Lord God.

VII. SERVICES

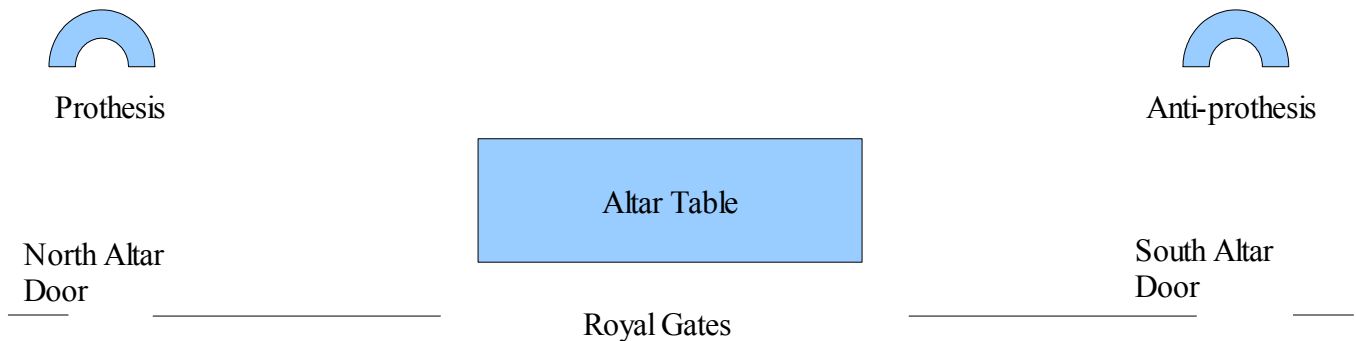
The Orthros - Also called Matins. It is the morning prayer service, usually held before the Divine Liturgy. On Sundays, during the Orthros and following the reading of one of the eleven Resurrection Gospels, the priest brings out the Holy Gospel Book for the people to kiss.

The Divine Liturgy - Liturgy means the "work of the people." The faithful gather together to re-enact the life of Christ and share in Holy Communion, in His Body and Blood. The bread and wine, once consecrated, in a mystical and miraculous way, actually become the Body and Blood of Christ.

Some points to have in mind concerning the celebration of services and the position of the priest:

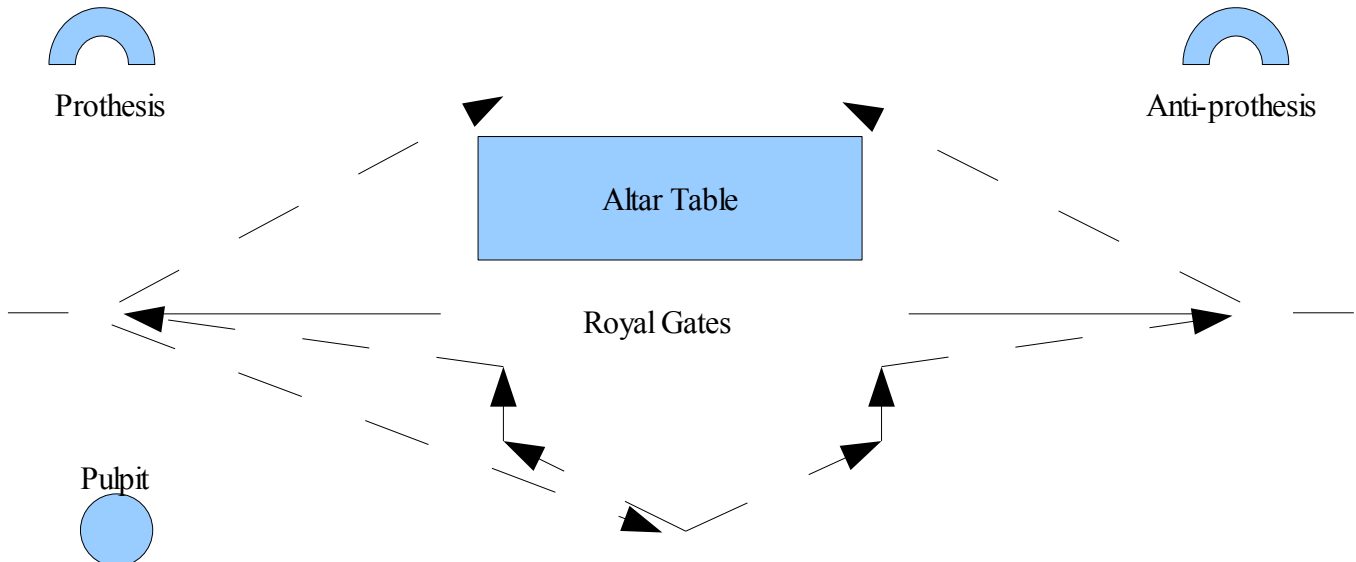
- Whenever the priest is facing the altar, he is representing the people before God. (Recall that the altar table is the Throne of God.)
- Whenever the priest is facing the people, he is representing God to the people—either blessing them (bestowing God's grace upon them) or proclaiming the Word of God (either by reading from the Gospel or preaching the sermon).

VIII. PROCESSIONS



You will probably know how to go out in procession during the various entrances and readings of the Divine Liturgy. While there are a number of different ways processions can be done, we will look at a few of them for you to consider.

The Small Entrance – The First Procession



This was, at one point, the entrance of the people into the church (prior parts took place outside the church building proper). The prayer of the entrance is an indication that the Church is coming before God, entering into His presence. The entrance is also a call to attention: we are about to hear the word of God.

Items to be carried – Two lamps (plus two candles if enough altar boys are available) *in honor of the Gospel.*

Directions – As the priest finishes the second series of petitions and the choir (or chanter) is singing 'O Monogenis Yios,' prepare for this procession. When the priest finishes the third set of petitions, kisses the Gospel Book, picks it up and proceeds to walk behind the Altar Table, the North Door is opened and the procession begins to exit the Altar.

Depending on the number of altar boys available, either two or four will accompany the Gospel Book in this procession. If only two altar boys will take part in the procession, each one will pick up a lamp. The two will then exit the altar ahead of the Gospel Book and proceed to the middle-back of the Solea. The lead altar boy will walk to the South side of royal gates, while the following one will remain on the North side. The two will turn together to face the altar and walk side by side until they are in front of the iconostasis. At that point they will bow and step to the side, turning to face each other. After the Gospel book has entered the altar, the two altar boys turn to face the altar, take a bow and enter, each one through the door on the side of the altar on which he finds himself. Upon reentering the altar, the two altar boys go behind the altar, take a bow and place the lamps back to their usual places. If there are four altar boys, the second pair will use candles for the procession and will imitate exactly the movements of the first pair.

The Gospel Lesson – The Second Procession

See the graphic for the small entrance.

The Gospel Book is the image of Christ, the chief icon of Christ, handled with very special reverence. It is held high, has coverings, displays two icons (crucifixion and resurrection), one on each side, and icons of evangelists. Two gestures are associated with the Gospel reading: the Gospel is censed, and is accompanied by two lamps and, if available, two lit candles. The censuring shows special honor to the Gospel. The use of tapers/candles, which precede the Gospel when it is carried and are held aside when it is read, is also a sign of honor for the Word of the Lord, and a symbol of Christ's light to the world.

Items to be carried – Two lamps. Two candles if enough altar boys are available

Directions – Prepare for the procession at the epistle reading. When the priest says, "*Sophia. Orthoi, akousomen tou agiou evangeliou. Eirini pasi*" ("Wisdom. Arise, let us hear the Holy Gospel. Peace be with you all"), then begin the procession. The procession is identical to the small entrance.

The Great Entrance – The Third Procession

The Great Entrance is the transfer of the gifts to the Holy Table.

Items to be carried – candles, exapteria (fans), thimiato (censer)

Directions – Upon re-entry from the Gospel lesson, prepare for the Great Entrance. While the priest is reading the prayers in preparation for the Great Entrance, the altar boy to take the censer should prepare the incense to be used. Following the censuring by the priest of the Altar, icons, and people, and upon his signal, the procession begins.

Slowly proceed down the steps to the last step, walking on that step until the middle of the church, then come up to the Solea. The altar boy holding the *thimiato* (censer), while walking backwards and censuring the priest holding the Holy Gifts, precedes the priest to the middle-front of the Solea, pausing there a moment. Then he precedes the priest to the middle-front of the Solea. Upon the priest's re-entry into the Altar, the altar boy at the middle-front of the Solea faces the Altar, bows, and returns to the Altar through the North Door; he proceeds to the left side of the Altar Table where he censes the 'Aer'—the covering the priest takes off his shoulders. Then the altar boy hands the *thimiato* to the priest (and kisses his hand) and takes it back (kissing his hand again) when the priest is finished.

The other altar boys return as they did following the Gospel lesson.

Special directions for great feasts – *Slowly* proceed down the side aisle, then up the middle aisle, to the middle-back of the Solea, turn to the Altar, bow, and proceed to your position. Follow the other guidelines for the Great Entrance.

Processions Around the Church

At times, most especially during special Feast days (such as September 14, the first and third Sundays of Lent, Holy Thursday, and Good Friday), one of the processions to be held that day (usually the one toward the end of the service) will circle the church. During some of these processions, it is customary for the processions to stop so that the priest can offer various petitions. Please be attentive and follow directions as to how these processions will take place. It is always best to check for the appropriate instructions as to where and when to stop.

There are also processions on other occasions (e.g., processions with icons at Vespers). These processions are similar to the Great Entrance for great feast days in the Liturgy, with one difference: instead of returning down the middle aisle, the procession goes all the way across the church in the narthex and returns down the side aisle.

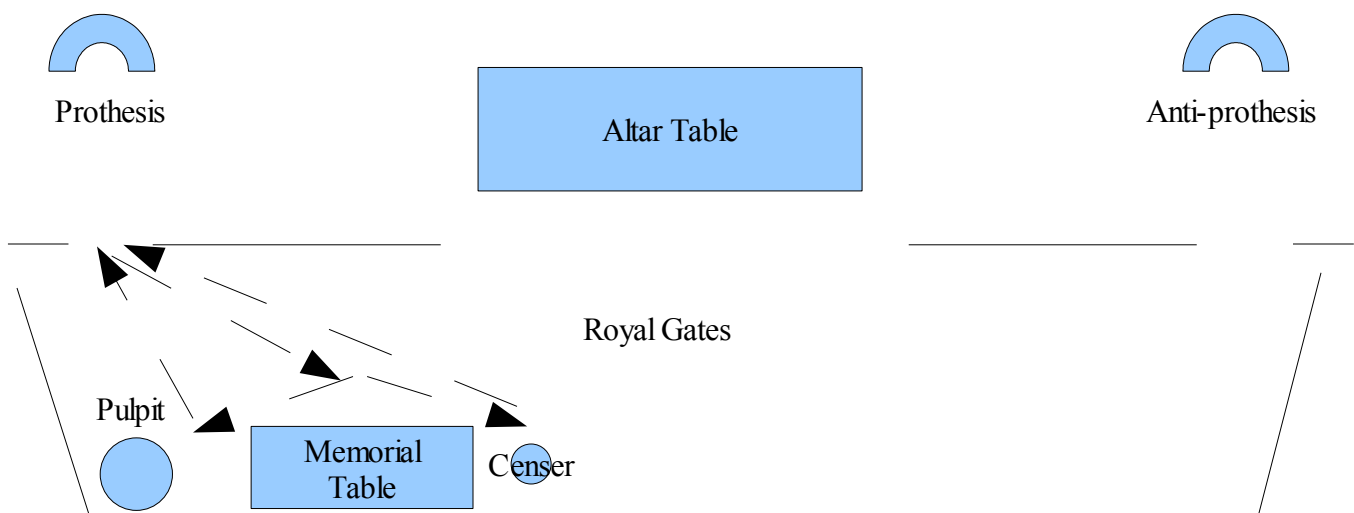
The Memorial Service – Mnemosino

In these prayers we ask God to be merciful and give rest to the souls of the departed.

Items to be carried – Two candles, *thimiato* (censer)

Directions – The procession exits the North Door at the priest's signal. All three of the altar boys proceed to the table on which the koliva (boiled wheat) has been placed. The two candles stand on either side, the *thimiato* on the right side of the table.

Following the service, the altar boys proceed directly into the North Door.

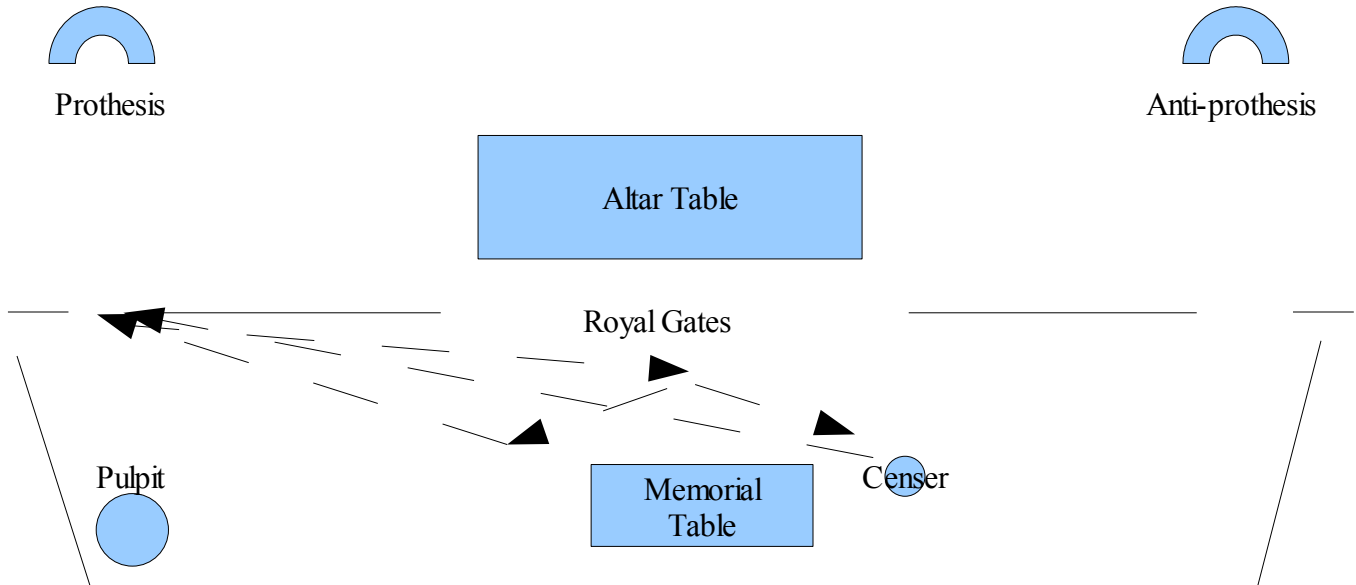


The Blessing of the Loaves Service – Artoklasia

These prayers are offered for the health and well-being of the family requesting the service, as well as for the people present. The five loaves of bread are symbolic of the five loaves Christ used to feed the 5,000 men on the Mount of Olives.

Items to be carried – Two candles, *thimiato*

Directions – The table on which the five loaves of bread are placed is positioned in the middle of the Solea. Proceed at the signal from the priest as for the Small Entrance, with the *thimiato*, taking up a position on the right side of the table, next to the priest. At the conclusion of the service, all three altar boys bow towards the altar and return through the North door.



IX. OTHER DUTIES OF AN ALTAR BOY

Aside from participating in processions, there are a number of other duties that you are expected to perform as an altar boy. Here are some of them:

The *Thimiato*:

The censer (*thimiato*) should be watched carefully. Make sure that the charcoal does not burn down so low that incense cannot be placed on it. If it does need a new piece of charcoal, carefully light one and place it quickly inside the thimiato. Incense should be carefully placed on the charcoal only when needed. Be careful how you use incense – too little will not produce any discernible smell, too much will create a lot of smoke, making it hard to breathe and sing. About five small pieces right before use are usually enough. Here are some times the priest will need the *thimiato*:

...Shortly after the Gospel lesson during the Sunday Orthros service.

...At the conclusion of the Proskomide service.

...At the conclusion of the Small Entrance.

...Following the consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ (right after kneeling)

...Immediately after the priest offers the Holy Communion to the people. (Keep in mind that after the priest returns the censer to you, you should wait and lead the way back to the Prothesis Table for him, while slowly and quietly censuring.)

Cutting the Prosforo into Antidoron:

Antidoron means “instead of the gift” and is the name given to the bread that is specially blessed and distributed at the end of the Divine Liturgy. Originally, this was given to the people who did not receive Holy Communion (“the Holy Gifts”). In time, the custom has become that everyone received the antidoron.

At Holy Trinity, the antidoron is cut prior to the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. Each Sunday, two senior altar boys are assigned to the cutting of the prosforo and need to be in their robes and ready to begin twenty minutes before the start of the Divine Liturgy. Following the consecration of the Gifts (after kneeling), bring in the antidoron and quietly stand by the left side of the Altar Table. The priest will take and bless the antidoron.

The Zeon:

After kneeling, also prepare the hot water—the *Zeon*—that will be used by the priest as he prepares the Holy Communion. After the Lord's Prayer, carefully pour it into the container to be used, making sure not to fill it to the very top—leave at least 1/8 of an inch. When the priest says “*proskomen*,” place the *Zeon* on the Altar Table. Leave the handle of the container towards the congregation.

Assisting at Holy Communion:

At Holy Trinity, members of the parish council assist the priest in the distribution of Holy Communion by holding the red cloth and making sure the people receiving Holy Communion place the cloth under their chins.

One or two altar boys hold the prosforo (blessed bread). Those receiving Holy Communion take a piece of the holy bread to help them make sure that all the little particles from the Holy Communion they received are swallowed.

If you are prepared to receive Holy Communion, it is a good idea to wait until the end of the line.

The Antidoron:

At the completion of the Liturgy, one altar boy brings the antidoron to the last step of the stairs from the nave to the solea. He needs to be alert should he need to bring more antidoron from the back. Once the antidoron distribution is finished, the altar boy needs to check with the priest to see whether he needs more water for consuming the gifts and cleaning the chalice.

At the end of the service, please make sure that your robe and orarion are properly hung up. If they are not, you will be forfeiting your privilege of serving as an altar boy the next time your group is scheduled for service.

There will be other tasks and duties that you will also be performing (like helping clean up after services). At all times, you are expected to follow the directions and orders of the priest and the captains of the altar boys. Following instructions immediately is absolutely necessary for an altar boy.

XII. EPILOGUE

Now that you have gone through The Holy Trinity Altar Boy's Guidebook, you have seen and read quite a bit about what an altar boy does and why. You may have had lots of questions. Hopefully, they were all answered. If you have questions that you think of in the weeks and months ahead, ask your priest after services—he will be happy to answer them for you.

Remember that you have been called by God to serve Him as an altar boy. You should do your best to serve Him faithfully and obediently. You have a special, important, and holy role to play, not only when you are in the altar, but also when you are at home or at school. You do not stop being an altar boy the minute you leave the altar.

That is why it is important for you to read the Bible regularly and discuss it with your friends, to pray as much as you can, and to behave properly wherever you are. It is also important for you to make fasting, especially on Wednesday (the day Judas betrayed Christ) and Friday (the day Christ was crucified), and receiving Holy Communion a regular part of your life. Being an altar boy means being concerned about serving God as much as you can, wherever you are—at home, at play, and school, at church.

It is a great honor to be an altar boy. Not everyone is chosen to serve the Lord in this special way.

Congratulations and God bless you.

May God the Father, Who has called you to serve His Son in proclaiming His Message of Salvation, inspire you always with the Holy Spirit, now and forever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Sources:

- *St. Vasilios Altar Boy Guide*, St. Vasilios Greek Orthodox Church, Peabody, MA.
- *Altar Boys Workshop Guidebook*, St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church, Euless, TX, and St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church, Fort Worth, TX.