



Why the church needs girl altar servers

When girls are barred from serving at the altar, they miss out on an important part of faith formation—and the church does, too.

IN THE PEWS

👤 Mary Kathleen Cahill 🕒 Published January 29, 2015

I recently went back to Mass at my home parish for the first time since returning from college. My eyes snapped to the altar servers, and I watched closely throughout Mass as they seamlessly executed their tasks—processed up the aisle, held candles during the readings, led the priest to the ambo for the gospel, and washed his hands. I was proud. I had served from fourth grade all the way through high school, and I had personally trained all of the servers who were on the altar that day.

The Easter Vigil, the church's most complicated and intricate ceremony, was always my favorite night of the year. Our parish's Mass usually runs roughly four hours, and in recent years I was in charge of making sure it went smoothly. Along with a college seminarian at our parish, I directed the 20-plus altar servers as we held the light for the priest, turned on the church lights at the Gloria, led the Alleluia procession, filled the buckets for the baptisms, and countless other tasks that kept us busy the whole night. I always knew suiting up before Mass meant I had a real responsibility—a role and a part in helping our parish joyfully celebrate and witness the resurrection of Christ.

Altar serving is a key tool in hooking children's interests and getting them involved in the Mass. The way to get kids and teens to take ownership of their faith is to give them responsibility, and altar serving does just that.

But there's a recent movement in some quarters to restrict altar serving, as was once the case, to only boys. Not an issue at your parish? Be on the lookout.

In August 2011 the bishop of Phoenix decided that his entire diocese would allow only boys to serve at the altar. A few months later, a pastor in Virginia decided to eliminate girls from the altar as well; this action raised an uproar among parents, parishioners, and Catholics statewide and even nationally.

But the parish still retains its boys-only server corps, as do, it turns out, about 60 percent of the parishes in the Diocese of Arlington, according to the *Washington Post*.

The official pronouncement from the Vatican allows, but does not require, churches to permit girls to serve at the altar. The decision is left up to individual bishops. Some of these bishops in turn leave the decision up to pastors.

Proponents of the restriction argue that altar serving is the first step toward priesthood for boys, that altar girls take up spots that would otherwise be filled by boys who might pursue a vocation to the priesthood, and that girls intimidate boys who would otherwise choose to serve. Therefore, of course, altar girls are responsible for a shortage of priests.

How does one respond to charges like these? First off, I don't think my presence scared away any boys who would have served had I been male instead of female. I trained numerous boys and girls, and they all worked very nicely together. If anything, the girls were more timid than the boys and had to be encouraged to join the ranks of the altar servers.

Strategic and personal recruiting of boys would be enough to offset any intimidation they felt by seeing female altar servers—if there aren't enough boys, then make a concentrated effort to recruit boys. Have the priest offer personal invitations. If a boy truly wants to serve and is personally invited to do so by his priest, he would not likely refuse because he would have to work alongside a girl. After all, he most likely has to work next to girls in school every day.

Even if intimidation is not the issue, and eliminating female altar servers really would bring in more boys who eventually go on to the priesthood, it raises another question: Would these boys really make the best priests? The best pastor is not likely the one who has had females cleared out of his path and has been taught that if he doesn't want to deal with women in his vocation and work, he doesn't have to.

But it isn't only about the boys. Although much of the debate has centered around whether the presence of female altar servers actually reduces the number of future priests, we have to take into account the meaning and involvement girls get from their ministry as altar servers.

Without being an altar server as a child, I would never have cared as much about the Mass or learned as much about my faith—that it is something done in community, that God is indeed present in the little things we do, and that faith is something I actively do, not something I simply hear. Being an altar server taught me to take ownership of my faith.

And it didn't end when I left altar serving. I currently attend a Jesuit university where I go to Mass regularly and am a member of a Catholic group on campus that meets weekly to hear Catholic speakers and discuss theology. I am double majoring in math and theology, and I plan to take an active role in church ministry in the future.

While altar serving wasn't the only factor in these choices, it gave me a role and a responsibility at a time in life when many of my peers felt unengaged and uninterested in the church. My time altar serving kept me involved in Mass as a child and teen; it gave me a leadership position in which I thrived. It would be folly to close this opportunity off to the young girls of our church.

Is this experience, shared by girls across the world, worth nothing? A position like that tells me that the experience of boys, because they are able to become priests, is more valuable to the church than that of girls. Certain bishops and priests appear to willingly jettison girls in exchange for possibly gaining more boys—what does that tell us?

The decision to eliminate female altar servers doesn't only hurt kids. One mother, quoted in a *Washington Post* article about the boy-servers-only parish in Virginia, said that her girls' altar serving is also important because many women who attend the church are grateful for it.

My mother and I have had the same experience: Middle-aged women from our parish have frequently told my mother how much it means to them to see me up at the altar, doing what they would have done as children if they had been allowed. I have been honored to fulfill their denied dreams.

Practically, then, excluding girls from altar serving will alienate generations of female Catholics. It upsets older women who were not allowed to serve themselves, who have been uplifted by seeing young girls serving at their parishes, and who are now watching that opportunity be taken away.

Young mothers see it as an attack on their daughters. As another mother from Virginia put it in the *Washington Post*, "I'm a mama bear, and they're going after my girls." And then there are the

young girls themselves, who are being taught by their religion that they are not worthy to serve God publicly at the altar.

Some pastors allow only male altar servers but say that girls have a place in the Mass, too—behind the walls of the sacristy. Father Greg Markey, pastor of the boy-servers-only parish of St. Mary's in Norwalk, Connecticut, states on his website that, “so as to encourage the participation of the girls in the parish, I will be starting a group called the ‘Handmaids of the Altar,’ who will help with the flowers, the linens, and the sacristy.”

Are they doing the washing and ironing, too? And do the Handmaids accept boys? I'm sure most boys would be eager to assist the parish in that way, too! The irony is killing me. Girls today will not be blind to the obvious implications of the division of labor suggested by Father Markey. Young girls are brought up hearing that they can do anything and be anything—except when they enter the doors of their own church.

Arguing for boys-only altar serving, Father John Lankeit, rector of the Phoenix diocesan cathedral, said in the *Arizona Republic*, “Serving at the altar is a specifically priestly act.” That is correct—and since we are all baptized priest, prophet, and king, I see no reason why girls should not be allowed to serve right alongside the boys.

And the survey says...

1. My parish allows girl altar servers.

91% – Agree

6% – Disagree

3% – Other

2. I think that only boys should be allowed to serve at the altar during Mass.

9% – Agree

89% – Disagree

2% – Other

3. Allowing girls to be altar servers has hurt the number of vocations to the priesthood.

4% – Agree

89% – Disagree

7% – Other

Representative of “other”:

“Vocations depend on a lot more than who serves at Mass.”

4. Young girls in a parish should be:

88% – Allowed to participate in any ministry that boys are involved in.

5% – Given their own separate ministries to participate in, like the “Handmaids of the Altar.”

1% – Have their situation evaluated on a case-by-case basis depending on the parish and pastor.

3% – Permitted to join some ministries with boys but excluded from liturgical ministries.

3% – Other

5. Parishes should just be happy that any kids want to become altar servers, regardless of their sex.

90% – Agree

8% – Disagree

2% – Other

6. Having girls serve at the altar discourages boys from getting involved in the ministry.

8% – Agree

89% – Disagree

3% – Other

7. More male altar servers would probably result in more priests.

14% – Agree

79% – Disagree

7% – Other

Representative of “other”:

“I don’t think there’s any connection between altar serving and becoming a priest.”

8. I think parishes should have:

88% – Boys and girls serving together.

1% – Boys and girls who serve at separate Masses.

4% – Only boys serving, with a “Handmaids of the Altar” type of group for girls.

5% – Only boys serving.

1% – Other

9. I was an altar server in my parish when I was younger.

36% – Agree
64% – Disagree

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Results are based on survey responses from 678 USCatholic.org visitors.

Image: Flickr

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