



The Deacon at Mass

General Principles
with Annotations for the Deacon

The following norms are guidelines drawn from the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), the Order of Mass, and the Ceremonial of Bishops. These guidelines are a collaboration of the Office of Diaconate Formation, the Office of Deacons in Ministry, and the Office for Divine Worship, and apply to all deacons serving in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

When the deacon comes to serve, he must empty himself from all selfish concerns. He must see himself as servant of the liturgy and never its master. He must minister to the priest and to the altar with the humility of Him whose very Body and Blood were offered on the altar of the cross.

When he comes to proclaim the Gospel, the deacon must empty himself of all his worldly wisdom that he might be filled only with the wisdom of God. He must decrease so that the Word of God might take root in him and those who hear his voice may hear not him, but Christ Jesus who lives in him. His acclamation of “the Gospel of the Lord” must ring authentic and true.

When he proclaims intercessions or invites the people to prayer, the faithful must recognize in him the trustworthy and compassionate man to whom they may go with any of their needs. The poor must know him as their friend. Orphans must see him as their father, and all who are alone, afraid, or confused must see in him a refuge in the model of Christ Jesus. All must have such trust in his prudence and charity that his wise guidance is spontaneously welcomed.

Finally, all who receive the Savior’s Precious Blood from his hands must receive the chalice as from one who knows the meaning of sacrifice, of being poured out for God’s people, and of striving for holiness of life. The deacon too must take up the cup of salvation as one whose very life is a hymn of praise to the Lord. For the cup he bears is his salvation and a model of the life to which he is called as a deacon.

What the Roman Missal and the Church ask of the deacon is to become more like Christ. To participate in His paschal death and resurrection: by how he lives and how he prays, by what he does and who he has become.

This is the mystery of diaconal ministry at the altar. It is the mystery of the Church and the mystery of all who are called to the Supper of the Lamb!¹

¹ Monsignor James P. Moroney, “The Deacon and the Liturgy: A Search for Identity,” Address to the National Association of Directors of the Permanent Diaconate, Notre Dame, Indiana (April, 2003).

The Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass is the action of Jesus Christ (GIRM, no. 11) and of God's people, in which the faithful adore the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit (no. 16) and join themselves to Christ in giving thanks for the great things God has done (no. 78).

The Mass is the “sacrament of unity” (nos. 91, 92) in which the faithful are nourished from the table of God's Word and of Christ's Body (no. 28). This unity is expressed concretely in common posture (no. 42), communal singing (no. 47), reverential silence (nos. 45, 56), and partaking of the one bread and one cup (nos. 83, 321).

After the priest, through the virtue of the sacred ordination he has received, the deacon has first place among those who minister in the celebration of the Eucharist. The sacred order of the diaconate has been held in high honor in the Church since the time of the Apostles.²

The deacon does not concelebrate the Mass. A priest or bishop is always the celebrant; the role of the deacon is to assist the celebrant. Whenever a deacon is present at Mass, he should exercise his office, unless there are more deacons than the celebration requires. As the celebrant's primary assistant at Mass, he should always ensure that everything is prepared for proper celebration. The principal tasks of the assisting deacon are to proclaim the Gospel, prepare and serve at the altar, minister to the principal celebrant, and distribute the Eucharist to the faithful. The deacon does not share any of the duties or prayers belonging to the celebrant, nor does he directly address God in prayers; he assists.

Mass with a Deacon

(from the GIRM, with annotations in red)

Before the liturgy begins, the deacon should discuss with the celebrant the options for the celebration, including the placement of ribbons in the *Roman Missal*, the use of incense, the penitential act, the use of chanting, and the dismissal. It is also courteous for the deacon to assist the priest, sacristan, and other ministers with the necessary preparations for the Mass.

1. When a deacon assists at the Eucharistic celebration, he should exercise his ministry wearing sacred vestments (no. 338).

Ordinarily, vestments for the deacon include the alb, the stole, and the dalmatic. The alb and the stole alone can be worn for less solemn occasions. Ideally, the dalmatic should be worn on Sundays, Solemnities, and Feasts. The alb should completely cover street clothes – no necktie or shirt collar should be exposed. If necessary, the amice can be used. The stole is never worn without the alb. If the parish does not have a dalmatic available, the first to be acquired should be white.

2. The deacon:
 - a) assists the celebrant and processes at his right side (unless he is carrying the *Book of the Gospels*, in which case, he precedes the celebrant and concelebrants in the procession),

² See Paul VI, Apostolic Letter, *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, AAS 59 (1967), 697-704; Roman Pontifical, *De Ordinatione Episcopi, presbyterorum et diaconorum, editio typica altera*, 1989, no. 173

- b) gives directions to the faithful on appropriate posture, if necessary,
- c) proclaims the Gospel and, at the request of the celebrant, may preach the homily (no. 55),
- d) announces the intentions in the Universal Prayer,
- e) prepares the chalice and the Roman Missal and arranges the sacred vessels at the altar,
- f) assists the celebrant in distributing Communion, especially as minister of the Precious Blood, and cleanses the sacred vessels,
- g) performs the offices of other ministers when none of them are present (no. 171),
- h) dismisses the assembly, using one of the four dismissals found in the *Roman Missal*.

Introductory Rites

3. Vested and carrying the *Book of the Gospels* slightly elevated, facing forward, the deacon precedes the celebrant and concelebrants on the way to the altar, or else walks at the celebrant's side when the *Book of the Gospels* is not used in the procession (no. 172).

If the deacon is vested for Mass on a Sunday or solemnity, his primary duty in the procession is to carry the Book of the Gospels.

4. Upon arriving at the altar, if the deacon is carrying the *Book of the Gospels*, he omits the reverence. After placing the *Book of the Gospels* on the altar, he waits for the celebrant, and then the two of them together venerate the altar with a kiss.

The deacon with the Book of the Gospels is to be the first cleric in the procession, preceding any other clerics. When approaching the sanctuary steps or the altar, no bow of any kind is made by the one carrying the Book of the Gospels. He approaches the altar and places the book flat, face up on the altar. He then waits for the celebrant and together they reverence the altar with a kiss.

5. However, if the deacon is not carrying the *Book of the Gospels*, he customarily makes a profound bow to the altar with the celebrant, and then with him venerates the altar with a kiss (no. 274). (If, however, the tabernacle is located in the sanctuary, all the ministers genuflect toward it only when they first approach the altar and when they leave the sanctuary following the dismissal, but not during the celebration of Mass itself).

During the Mass, a tabernacle that is present in the sanctuary is not acknowledged except with the initial genuflection and the genuflection at the end of Mass. A genuflection consists in dropping the right knee to the floor. If the deacon is unable to genuflect fully and gracefully, he should bow instead.

6. If incense is used, the deacon assists the celebrant in putting incense in the censer (thurible) (no. 173). The deacon may accompany the celebrant as he incenses the altar and the crucifix by walking beside or immediately behind him. The deacon also bows whenever the celebrant does (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, no. 131).

This normally means at a minimum that the deacon holds the incense boat if an acolyte or server is holding the thurible. Or if there is no other minister, the deacon assists as needed by holding up the thurible.

7. After the incensation, the deacon goes to the chair with the celebrant, stands next to him, and assists him as required (GIRM, no. 174).

Penitential Act

8. Following the celebrant's introduction to the Penitential Act, the deacon allows a reasonable, but brief, period of silence, not rushing into the next phrase (Order of Mass, no.4).

The celebrant may ask the deacon to use the third form of the Penitential Act. The celebrant pronounces the absolution.

To be prepared, the deacon should memorize at least one option of the third form of the Penitential Act provided in the *Roman Missal*, such as:

You were sent to heal the contrite of heart, Lord have Mercy (Kyrie eleison);

You came to call sinners, Christ have mercy (Christe eleison);

You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us,

Lord have mercy (Kyrie eleison).

Sample invocations for the Penitential Act are available in Appendix VI of the *Roman Missal*.

If the celebrant uses the Confiteor ("*I confess to almighty God...*"), he may ask the deacon to say or chant the Kyrie (if the cantor or choir does not sing it) after the Confiteor:

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Liturgy of the Word

9. If incense is used, the deacon assists the celebrant in putting incense in the censer-during the singing of the Alleluia or other chant (GIRM, no. 175).

This normally means that the deacon holds the incense boat if an acolyte or server is holding the thurible. Or if there is no other minister, the deacon assists as needed by holding up the thurible.

10. The deacon makes a profound bow before the celebrant and asks for his blessing, saying in a low voice: "*Your blessing, Father.*" The celebrant blesses him: "*May the Lord be in your heart...*" The deacon signs himself with the sign of the cross and responds: "*Amen.*" (no. 175).

Kneeling in front of the bishop when asking for his blessing is not appropriate. The deacon says, "*Your blessing, Father,*" whether the celebrant is a bishop or a priest. The deacon says, "*Amen*" at the end of the blessing.

11. Having bowed to the altar, he then takes up the *Book of the Gospels* which was placed upon it. He proceeds to the ambo, carrying the book slightly elevated. He is preceded by a thurifer, carrying a thurible with smoking incense, and by servers with lighted candles." (no. 175).

12. Once at the ambo, he greets the people saying, with his **hands joined**: “*The Lord be with you.*” Then he says: “*A reading from the holy Gospel...*” signing the book with his thumb and afterwards, himself on his forehead, lips, and breast. He incenses the book and proclaims the Gospel reading.

The deacon’s hands are joined, never extended, as he greets the faithful. The greeting from the deacon to the people is one half of a two-part dialogue. The deacon should look at the people when saying, “*The Lord be with you,*” and keep looking as they complete the dialogue by responding, “*And with your spirit.*” This is not the time to be looking down at the book. Announce the reading by looking at the people and saying, “*A reading from the Holy Gospel...*” Again, keep looking at the people as they complete the dialogue with you by responding, “*Glory to you, O Lord.*” The greeting is not a personal greeting of the deacon, but rather, the beginning of a formal proclamation. Thus, no other words should be added or taken away.

If incense is used, the *Book of the Gospels* is incensed following the announcement of the reading with three swings of the thurible: one swing to the front, one to the left, and one to the right—the same pattern as the sign of the cross. The censer is then returned to the server or acolyte standing near the deacon. The deacon proclaims the Gospel reading.

13. After the reading, he acclaims: “*The Gospel of the Lord,*” to which all respond, “*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*”. He then venerates the book with a kiss and says inaudibly: “*Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away.*” (no. 175)

There should be a pause between the end of the proclamation of the reading and the announcement, “*The Gospel of the Lord.*” He says this without hand gestures and without raising the book from the ambo. No other words or formulas are to be said. Again, this is a dialogue between the deacon and the people; the deacon should look at the people when saying, “*The Gospel of the Lord*” and keep looking as they respond, “*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*” Once they have responded, the deacon kisses the book. The deacon should memorize the final words uttered by him in a low voice (*sotto voce*): “*Through the words of the Gospel, may our sins be wiped away.*”

On solemn occasions, the greeting to the people and the announcement of the Gospel may be chanted. Only those chant settings provided in the *Roman Missal* are to be used. If chant is used at the beginning of the proclamation, it should also be used at the acclamation at the end of the proclamation. The chants are available in Appendix I of the *Roman Missal*.

14. When the deacon is assisting a bishop, after the people’s response, he may carry the *Book of the Gospels* to him to be kissed. On more solemn celebrations, as circumstances allow, the bishop may impart a blessing to the people with the *Book of the Gospels*. Then, the deacon carries the book to the side table or another dignified and appropriate place (no. 175).

The deacon should ask the bishop before Mass if he will kiss the Book of the Gospels after the proclamation, or if he prefers the deacon to do so. If the bishop opts to bless the people with the Book of the Gospels, the deacon steps to the side of the bishop, facing the people. Once the blessing is concluded, he goes before the bishop again to retrieve the book.

If the bishop opts to receive the Book of the Gospels to bless the people, then the deacon does not kiss the book after proclaiming the Gospel. If the Gospel is proclaimed from a Lectionary (rather than a Book of the Gospels), the Lectionary is not kissed.

15. If there is no other qualified reader present, the deacon may proclaim the other readings, along with the Gospel (no. 176). However, every effort should be made to ensure the presence of lectors for the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy (no. 109).

The deacon's preparation for Mass should include a familiarity with and practice of all the readings of the day. The deacon should also be prepared to preach, even if no advance notice has been given.

16. After the celebrant introduces the Universal Prayer, the deacon announces the intentions from the ambo or another suitable place (no. 177). He remains at the ambo while the celebrant concludes the Universal Prayer with a prayer (*Guidelines for Lectors: Archdiocese of Los Angeles*, (no. 23).

During the concluding prayer, the deacon remains present at the ambo or the place from which the intentions were announced. He should turn away only once the people respond, "Amen" after the presider's concluding prayer. If there has been no deacon in a parish, some lectors may not understand the distinction between their role and the office of deacon. Therefore, pastoral sensitivity should be used to educate them, and sufficient flexibility shown so as not to alienate them."

17. At the conclusion of this prayer, the deacon begins the preparation of the altar.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

18. After the Universal Prayer, while the celebrant remains at the chair, the deacon prepares the altar, assisted by the servers or acolytes. Care of the sacred vessels belongs to the deacon. He assists the celebrant in receiving the people's gifts of bread and wine in a suitable place; it is permissible for the deacon to receive the gifts by himself if directed by the celebrant (no. 178).

Individual parishes have various approaches to these actions. If there has been no deacon in a parish, these protocols should be negotiated while being clear on the authentic role of the deacon. Some sacristans and adult servers may not understand the distinction between their roles and the office of deacon, and so, pastoral care should be used to educate them, and sufficient flexibility shown so as not to alienate them.

19. The deacon hands the celebrant the paten with the bread to be consecrated. He also pours wine and a little water into the chalice, saying inaudibly: "By the mystery of this water and

wine...” He then passes the chalice to the celebrant. The deacon may also prepare the chalice at the side table.

If there is more than one chalice, water is added **only** to the celebrant’s chalice. The water is not to be blessed prior to being poured into the chalice.

The prayer, “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity,” is said *sotto voce*—to himself. This prayer is to be memorized and not said aloud, especially while the celebrant may be saying the offertory prayers.

20. If incense is used, the deacon assists the priest with the incensation of the gifts, the altar, and the crucifix. Afterward, the deacon himself or the acolyte incenses the priest and the people (no. 178).

If one or more bishops are concelebrating, they are incensed after the main celebrant. Then, any priests concelebrating are incensed. Other deacons present are never incensed separately but are included with the people. For the incensation of the people, the deacon, carrying the censer, goes to the front of the altar, faces the people, and gestures with one hand for them to stand. He incenses them with three swings of the thurible, center, left, and right. The thurible is returned to the server or acolyte (or placed on a stand), and the deacon returns to his place near the celebrant at the altar.

21. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the deacon stands near but slightly behind the priest, so that when needed he may assist the priest with the chalice or the *Roman Missal* (no. 179).

The deacon should adjust his spacing from the celebrant according to the space he occupies. He should neither be so close to him as to appear to be concelebrating, nor so far away as not to be assisting. The deacon should know the *Roman Missal* well enough to be able to assist the celebrant in setting the book and turning pages for him, if requested. When concelebrants are present, they join the celebrant around the altar prior to the Preface. The deacon should avoid standing between the concelebrants and the altar (no.215).

22. From the epiclesis until the priest shows the chalice, the deacon normally remains kneeling. If several deacons are present, one of them may place incense in the thurible for the consecration and incense the host and the chalice as they are shown to the people (no. 179).

Kneeling by the deacon during the Eucharistic Prayer is done only if he can get up and down easily and gracefully. If there are two deacons present, either both should kneel or both should remain standing; split gestures are not appropriate. The deacon kneels when the celebrant imposes his hands over the gifts; this gesture occurs with slightly different timing among the various Eucharistic Prayers. During Eucharistic Prayer I (the Roman Canon), the deacon does not kneel at the first sign of the cross over the gifts. There is no explicit epiclesis in this version of the prayer, but the deacon kneels when the presider says, “Be pleased, O God, we pray, to bless....”

The directive on incensation from GIRM no. 179 is rarely done. Arrangements should be made ahead of time if it is to be done at all. This may be done in some parishes during very solemn Masses.

23. If the deacon cannot kneel:
- After the consecration of the Host, the celebrant genuflects, and the deacon makes a profound bow to the altar.
 - After the consecration of the Precious Blood, the celebrant genuflects, and the deacon makes a profound bow to the altar (no. 43).
24. At the final doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer, the deacon stands next to the celebrant, who hands him the chalice. He elevates the chalice as the celebrant raises the paten with the host until the people have responded with the acclamation, “Amen” (no. 180).

The celebrant should hand the deacon the chalice; only if the celebrant does not do so, can it be taken from the altar by the deacon. The deacon should be attentive to the degree to which the celebrant is elevating the Host and elevate the chalice at the same level.

25. After the celebrant says the prayer for peace and the greeting, “*The peace of the Lord be with you always,*” and the people respond, “*And with your spirit,*” the deacon may invite all to exchange the sign of peace, saying, with hands joined and facing the people: “*Let us offer each other the sign of peace.*” He himself receives the sign of peace from the celebrant and may offer it to the other ministers near him (no. 181).

The deacon has his hands together while inviting the sign of peace (opening hands at Mass is a gesture used **only** by the celebrant when he greets or addresses the assembly). He should memorize the exact formula without alteration. The directive is to offer **the** sign of peace, not **a** sign, or **some** sign. The deacon should not improvise, using any other words to invite the assembly to exchange the sign of peace.

26. After the celebrant’s Communion, the deacon receives Holy Communion under both species from the celebrant himself and then assists him in distributing Holy Communion to the people. If Holy Communion is distributed under both species, the deacon himself administers the chalice to the communicants (GIRM, no. 182). The deacon may also administer the hosts to the people, especially if Communion is not distributed under both species.

The distribution of Holy Communion may vary from parish to parish according to the direction of the pastor. Even when the chalice is not offered to the people, communion under both species should be offered to the deacon.

27. When the distribution of Holy Communion is completed, the deacon immediately and reverently consumes all of the remaining Precious Blood at the altar. He may be assisted, if necessary, by other deacons and priests (no. 182) or, in their absence, by extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion (“Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America,” no. 37).

28. When the distribution of Communion is over, the deacon returns to the altar with the celebrant, collects any remaining hosts, and then carries the chalice and other sacred vessels to the credence table, where he purifies them and arranges them as usual, while the celebrant returns to the chair. Nevertheless, it is also permitted to leave vessels needing to be purified on a corporal, suitably covered, on the credence table, and to purify them immediately after Mass, following the dismissal of the people (GIRM, no. 183).

The consolidation of remaining hosts should be done over a corporal, if possible. All hosts are placed in a ciborium, taken to the tabernacle in a simple manner (without candles or other processional elements, as used for Benediction), and placed in the tabernacle. The deacon genuflects just before closing the tabernacle door.

Concluding Rites

29. Following the Prayer after Communion, if there are any brief announcements, the deacon may make them, unless the celebrant prefers to do so himself (no. 184).
30. If a solemn formula for the Final Blessing is used, or even a Prayer over the People, the deacon says: *“Bow down for the blessing.”*

The deacon should ask the celebrant beforehand if a solemn blessing will be used. A different formula, such as *“Bow your heads for the blessing,”* should not be used. The deacon says this instruction after the celebrant says, *“The Lord be with you,”* and the people respond, *“And with your spirit.”*

31. After the Final Blessing, the deacon, with hands joined and facing the people, dismisses them, saying: *“Go forth, the Mass is ended”* or one of the other formulas in the *Roman Missal* (no. 185).

“The Mass is ended, go in peace” is not in the *Roman Missal*. Only one of the four Dismissal formulas listed in the *Roman Missal* should be used:

- 1) *Go forth, the Mass is ended.*
- 2) *Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord*
- 3) *Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life*
- 4) *Go in peace.*

On Easter and during the Octave of Easter, the Dismissal includes a double Alleluia, which is properly chanted:

Go in peace, alleluia, alleluia.

The Dismissal with a double Alleluia also concludes the Mass on Pentecost Sunday.

32. Along with the celebrant, the deacon venerates the altar with a kiss, makes a profound bow to the altar, and leaves in the manner prescribed for the entrance procession (no. 186).

When Archbishop José H. Gomez is the principal celebrant, the following norms (#33-35) are to be observed:

33. The Archbishop is greeted with a head bow by all who approach to assist him, leave after assisting him, or pass before him.
34. If the Archbishop is seated behind the altar, the ministers reverence either the altar or the Archbishop depending on which they approach.
35. When crossing between the altar and the Archbishop, the minister bows to the altar. If there are several bishops in the sanctuary, a bow is made only toward the one presiding (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, nos. 76-78).

Placement of Hands

36. When walking from place to place or standing, it is customary for the deacon's hands to be joined unless they are holding something. "Hands joined" means: "Holding the palms sideways and together before the breast, with the right thumb crossed over the left." (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, no. 107).
37. Whenever performing an action with one hand, the deacon should always place his unused hand on his breast so that it is not awkwardly suspended in the air (GIRM, no. 167).
38. When seated, the deacon should place his hands upon his knees (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, no. 109).

Chanting

39. Deacons should be familiar with chants specific to the parts of the Mass, such as the acclamations at the Gospel, the invitation to the Sign of Peace, and the formulas for Dismissal found in the Roman Missal.
40. The deacon does not chant at Mass unless the celebrant also does so. An exception to this general principle may occur at the Gospel greeting, with or without chanting the Gospel reading, by agreement with the celebrant.
41. The deacon should refrain from chanting any parts of the Mass if he cannot sing. Decisions to chant any parts of the Mass should always be discussed beforehand with the celebrant.

Other items to take into consideration

42. The deacon must avoid causing confusion between his ministerial (assisting) role and that of the celebrant at Mass. Some actions and gestures are presidential in nature and the deacon therefore must refrain from using them.

For example, the raising of the hands in the orans position should not be done by deacons during the Our Father or at the invitations, *“The Lord be with you,”* or *“Let us offer each other the sign of peace.”* In addition, the deacon makes no gestures with his hands during the Eucharistic Prayer and makes no bows as the celebrant elevates the Host and chalice during the Consecration. If, however, the deacon is unable to kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer, he should make a profound bow as the celebrant genuflects. Kneeling deacons should not bow. Likewise, the deacon should never recite or even mouth the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, the final doxology, or any other spoken parts reserved to the celebrant.

When Two Deacons are Assisting

43. If several deacons are present at Mass, they distribute ministerial duties among themselves and perform different parts of the same ministry or duty (GIRM no. 109).
44. When there are two deacons, one serves as the Deacon of the Word, proclaiming the Gospel and announcing the petitions of the Universal Prayer, and the other deacon serves as the Deacon of the Altar, assisting the celebrant at the chair and the altar.
45. The Deacon of the Altar enters in procession at the right side of the celebrant. The Deacon of the Word carries the Book of Gospels and enters in front of other vested deacons, concelebrants, and the celebrant (GIRM no. 172).
46. The Deacon of the Altar stands to the right and slightly behind the celebrant during the Eucharistic Prayer. The Deacon of the Word stands at the left of the celebrant (GIRM no. 179).

Notes

Deacons should be very familiar with the contents of the “General Instruction of the Roman Missal,” particularly nos. 171-186, which pertain to the celebration of “Mass with a Deacon,” and nos. 273-287, which give “Some General Norms for All Forms of Mass,” including the purification of sacred vessels, and Holy Communion under both species.