



Newsletter

COMMITTEE ON THE LITURGY

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The Care and Cleansing of Altar Linens¹

In recent years the Secretariat for the Liturgy has received multiple inquiries concerning the care and cleansing of altar linens. The following article, approved by the Committee on the Liturgy at its March 19, 2001 meeting, is provided for the information of those charged with the care of altar linens.

Whatever is set aside for use in the liturgy takes on a certain sacred character both by the blessing it receives and the sacred functions it fulfills. Thus, the cloths used at the altar in the course of the Eucharistic celebration should be treated with the care and respect due to those things used in the preparation and celebration of the sacred mysteries.

This brief statement reflects on the importance of reverently caring for altar linens which, because of their use in the liturgy, are deserving of special respect.² These linens should be “beautiful and finely made, though mere lavishness and ostentation must be avoided.”³ Altar cloths, corporals, purificators, *lavabo* towels and palls should be made of absorbent cloth and never of paper.

Altar linens are appropriately blessed according to the *Order for the Blessing of Articles for Liturgical Use*.⁴ The blessing of a number of such articles for liturgical use may take place “withih Mass or in a separate celebration in which the faithful should take part.”⁵

Altar Cloths

Just as the altar is a sign for us of Christ the living stone,⁶ altar cloths are used “out of reverence for the celebration of the memorial of the Lord and the banquet that gives us his body and”⁷ By their beauty and form

¹The term altar *linen* is traditionally used to describe cloths of any fine material used in the liturgy.

²*Book of Blessings* [BOB], no. 1343.

³BOB, no. 1344.

⁴It should be recalled that such a blessing is appropriate for “the ciborum or pyx, the monstrance, the vestments worn by ordained ministers, such linens as the corporal and altar cloths, and hymnals and service books (*Sacramentary, Lectionary, etc.*)” (BOB, no. 1343).

⁵BOB, no. 1345.

⁶*Missale Romanum, editio typica tertia, Institutio Generalis* [IGMR], no. 298.

⁷IGMR, no. 304.

they add to the dignity of the altar in much the same way that vestments solemnly ornament the priests and sacred ministers. Such cloths also serve a practical purpose, however, in absorbing whatever may be spilled of the Precious Blood or other sacramental elements. Thus the material of altar cloths should be absorbent and easily laundered.

While there may be several altar cloths in the form of drapings or even frontals, their shape, size, and decoration should be in keeping with the design of the altar.⁸ Unless the altar cloths have been stained with the Precious Blood, it is not necessary that they be cleaned in the sacarium. Care should be taken, however, that proper cleaning methods are used to preserve the beauty and life of the altar cloth. It is appropriate for those who care for sacred vessels, cloths and other *instrumenta* of the liturgy to accompany their work with prayer.

Corporals

Sacred vessels containing the Body and Blood of the Lord are always placed on top of a corporal.

A corporal is spread by the deacon or another minister in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar.⁹ When concelebrants receive the Eucharist from the altar, a corporal is placed beneath all chalices or patens.¹⁰ Finally, it is appropriate that a corporal be used on a side table, and placed beneath the sacred vessels which have been left to be purified after Mass.¹¹

Because one of the purposes of the corporal is to contain whatever small particles of the consecrated host may be left at the conclusion of Mass, care should be taken that the transferral of consecrated hosts between sacred vessels should always be done over a corporal. The corporal should be white in color and of sufficient dimensions so that at least the main chalice and paten may be placed upon it completely. When necessary, more than one corporal may be used. The material of corporals should be absorbent and easily laundered.

Any apparent particles of the consecrated bread which remain on the corporal after the distribution of Holy Communion should be consumed in the course of the purification of the sacred vessels.

When corporals are cleansed they should first be rinsed in a sacarium and only afterwards washed with laundry soaps in the customary manner. Corporals should be ironed in such a way that their distinctive manner of folding helps to contain whatever small particles of the consecrated host may remain at the conclusion of the Eucharistic celebration.¹²

Purificators

Purificators are customarily brought to the altar with chalices and are used to wipe the Precious Blood from the lip of the chalice¹³ and to purify sacred vessels.¹⁴ They should be white in color. Whenever the Precious Blood is distributed from the chalice, poured into ancillary vessels or even accidentally spilled,¹⁵ purificators should be used to absorb the spill. The material of purificators should be absorbent and easily laundered. The purificator

⁸Ibid.

⁹See Ibid, nos. 73, 118, 139.

¹⁰Ibid, no. 248.

¹¹Ibid, no. 183.

¹²While the form of the corporal is not prescribed by liturgical law, it is traditionally square in shape and folded in nine sections which form a "pocket" within which remaining fragments of the consecrated host may be contained. Accordingly, at the end of every Mass, care should be taken to fold the corporal in such a manner that whatever particles may remain will be folded within it.

¹³IGMR, no. 286.

¹⁴Ibid, no. 279.

¹⁵Ibid, no. 280: "If the Eucharistic bread or any particle of it should fall, it is to be picked up reverently. If any of the Precious Blood spills, the area where the spill occurs should be washed and the water poured into the sacarium."

should never be made of paper or any other disposable material.

Because of their function, purificators regularly become stained with the Precious Blood. It is, therefore, essential that they should first be cleansed in a sacrarium and only afterwards washed with laundry soaps in the customary manner. Purificators should be ironed in such a way that they may be easily used for the wiping of the lip of the chalice.¹⁶

Lavabo Towels

The Order of Mass calls for the washing of the hands (*lavabo*) of the priest celebrant in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar.¹⁷ Since it is his hands and not only his fingers (as in the former *Order of Mass*) which are washed at the *lavabo*, the *lavabo* towel should be of adequate size and sufficiently absorbent for drying his hands. Neither the color nor the material of the *lavabo* towel is prescribed, though efforts should be made to avoid the appearance of a “dish towel,” “bath towel” or other cloth with a purely secular use.

Other Cloths

Other cloths may also be used at Mass. A pall may be used to cover the chalice at Mass in order to protect the Precious Blood from insects or other foreign objects.¹⁸ In order that palls may be kept immaculately clean they should be made with removable covers of a worthy material which may be easily washed in the sacrarium and then laundered. Chalice veils either of the color of the day, or white may be fittingly used to cover the chalice before it is prepared and after it has been purified.¹⁹

Disposal of Worn Altar Linens

Consistent with the disposal of all things blessed for use in the liturgy, it is appropriate that altar linens, which show signs of wear and can no longer be used, should normally be disposed of either by burial or burning.

Conclusion

The manner in which we treat sacred things (even those of lesser significance than the chalice, paten, liturgical furnishings, etc.) fosters and expresses our openness to the graces God gives to his Church in every celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, by the diligent care of altar linens, the Church expresses her joy at the inestimable gifts she receives from Christ's altar.

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120. Let Pastors take care that the linens for the sacred table, especially those which will receive the sacred species, are always kept clean and that they are washed in the traditional way. It is praiseworthy for this to be done by pouring the water from the first washing, done by hand, into the church's *sacrarium* or into the ground in a suitable place. After this a second washing can be done in the usual way.

¹⁶While the form of the purificator is not prescribed by liturgical law, it is traditionally rectangular in shape and folded three times, lengthwise.

¹⁷IGMR, nos. 76, 118c, 145.

¹⁸Ibid, nos. 118c, 139, 142.

¹⁹Ibid, no. 118.