

The Ministry of Usher

The function of usher is not a modern development in the history of the Church. According to the prophet Jeremiah, the usher (or doorkeeper) was found hard at work in Solomon's Temple. In fact, the doorkeepers were so important, they lived in the Temple near the chamber of the princes. The writer of Chronicles considered gatekeepers so vital to the ministry of the priests that he even lists their genealogies and states that King David himself established them in their office of trust. In the New Testament, one of the Apostles in particular seems to have functioned as an usher on at least one occasion. St. John writes in his gospel how Philip was the one the Greeks sought out to introduce them to Jesus.

The early Church considered the ministry of ushers so critical that many of the ushering duties were assigned to Deacons. The *Pseudo-Clementines* point out that the deacon is to keep order at the liturgy, and the *Didascalica* requires the deacon to guard the doors during the Eucharist. The ancient liturgist, Hippolytus, instructs them to bring forward the peoples' oblations.

In the post-Apostolic church there existed a "minor order" of ordained ministry called *Ostiarus*, which is Latin for doorkeeper. Entitled "porter" by the modern Roman Church, Pope Paul VI abolished this minor order in 1972.

The Anglican Communion has long considered this "office of trust" (though not an ordained order since the Reformation) to be a vital and necessary ministry of assistance to the priest. Many believe that the English verger is a descendant of the ostiarus in the days when the job was handed from father to son from generation to generation.

The *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church establishes the appropriateness of assisting ministries by stating, "At all celebrations of the Liturgy, it is fitting that the principal celebrant, whether bishop or priest, be assisted by other priests, and by deacons and lay persons." (Concerning the Celebrations, p.322)

The usher functions as the eyes, ears, and arms of the Celebrant in the nave. His or her important duties include seating the congregation, answering the questions of visitors, taking up the oblations and offerings, providing an estimate of the number of communicants to the celebrant, assist-

ing communicants to and from the altar rail, and maintaining an orderly flow during reception of the Blessed Sacrament. But most importantly, the usher makes the first impression at the door and can subtly establish the tone and personality of the congregation. Therefore it is important that an usher be neat, reverent, and knowledgeable about the church and its services.

Ushers should be quickly identifiable by regular parishioners as well as visitors. In some churches, ushers wear matching jackets or entire outfits so they are distinctive. Identification badges or tags denoting them as an "usher" should be considered an integral part of the uniform. Ushers should be well schooled in the sacred gestures and postures used throughout each service, such as crossing one's self, bowing, genuflecting, sitting, standing, and kneeling. Visitors may very well watch you out of the corner of their eye for guidance. Your picking up a hymnal might be a signal to tell a stranger that a hymn is about to begin.

In small parishes or at early services in larger churches, ushers often serve as greeters. In this capacity, the usher will identify approaching visitors, introduce themselves and welcome them to the church, and ask them to sign the guest book, including their addresses so they can be added to

the parish mailing list. Often visitors are given a pin or special tag so others will know they are honored guests.

Ushers might be called upon to help maintain quiet during a service. Disruptive children should be asked to be respectful of others and not to disturb a prayerful environment. If youngsters who are not in the company of adults continue to cause commotion, it is appropriate for an usher to escort them out of the church. If a child in the care of an adult distracts the congregation (a crying baby or fidgety toddler), it is quite proper to ask the adult to take the child out of the church until it calms down. Be sure that such a request is done politely and diplomatically.

The ministry of usher has a long and noble history in Judeo-Christian worship. And it is of no less importance today. Although the environment in which we worship in this century differs greatly from that of the Temple or the Apostolic Church, there is still a need to keep order and assist worshipers that they may pray and offer their "souls and bodies" without disruption or confusion.

Share your dedications and knowledge of this ministry with young people, and encourage them to serve.

Guidelines For Ushers:

There are several aspects of the ministry of the usher that are often neglected. To be of great help to your priest, follow these guidelines, while always being ready to adapt them, with the celebrant's consent, to your local situation.

Arrive early

Since you will be the visitor's first impression, it is necessary that you be confident and calm. The best way to accomplish this is to arrive early enough that you have time to say your prayers, seek last minute instructions or changes, and compose yourself to welcome your parish family, guests, and visitors.

Look good

Once again, first impressions are often lasting ones. Even if your congregation generally dresses casually for services, you as the usher need to always be well dressed. Even during the summer in a building without air-conditioning, you can still look inviting in short sleeves and tie or a smart cotton blouse and skirt.

Be friendly

Have a warm and welcoming smile. Feel genuinely glad to see the person approaching the parish to worship God. Always extend your hand in friendship, and do not avoid eye contact.

Be gracious

When you are ministering to the congregation in an official function such as ushering, you must be willing to sacrifice a certain amount of private worship time. If, in the middle of a prayer or reading, a latecomer arrives, immediately resume your duties as usher. Then return to your own prayers.

Help keep silence

Although questions must be answered, do so in a very soft tone of voice. Some visitors may be unfamiliar with the silence before the liturgy begins. The pre-service time is for praise, prayer, adoration, and/or reception of Holy Communion. Do not carry on casual conversations even with parishioners who have finished their prayers.

Be able to give directions

The most often asked question, as you can imagine, is the route to the restrooms. Know the floor plan of your church and parish house well enough that you can give clear and brief directions. The second most often asked question by visitors is the availability of a nursery or sitter. If there is more than one usher, be prepared to lead them to the nursery, or if you are alone, to give directions

Be prepared to assist

It is never in poor taste to offer an arm to someone who is having difficulty walking, or to assist a wheelchair bound individual over an obstacle.

Certainly do not be patronizing, but do not wait to be asked either. Many people with handicaps are too proud to ask, but can be grateful when you care enough to offer.

Invite to coffee hour

Not all congregations regularly have a social or coffee hour after the Sunday Eucharist, so unless the celebrant announces this gathering, visitors may leave not knowing that Christian fellowship continues after the Mass is finished. Cordially invite them to join you and the parish family for this "eighth sacrament."

The Usher's Usual Duties:

- * Greet arriving worshippers, hand them a service bulletin, assist them in being seated.
- * Stand with latecomers until the appropriate time to seat them.
- * Take an accurate count of the number of potential communicants.
- * In some parishes, bring forward the Oblations.
- * Collect and present the people's tithes and alms, encouraging an efficient movement of the plate from one row to another.
- * Regulate the flow of communicants to the altar rail for communion.
- * Greet worshippers as they leave, inviting visitors to coffee hour.
- * Straighten Prayer Books and Hymnals in the racks and pick up discarded bulletins left in the pew.

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