

# ALTAR SERVICE IS A PRIVILEGE AND A BLESSING

## *Youth, families and the Catholic community benefit*

*By Cathi Douglas*

Celebration of the Catholic Mass is like an intricate dance, with the priest leading a flawless performance that can have few or many co-celebrants, including deacons, altar servers, liturgical ministers, Eucharistic ministers and more.

To even devout Catholics it appears simple, yet the Mass requires that its youngest participants fix their attention on the smallest details to ensure the ceremony flows seamlessly.

Pope Francis acknowledged the important role of altar servers during a special evening meeting and prayer that drew 9,000 youth from throughout Europe to St. Peter's Square in early August 2015, according to the National Catholic Reporter.

Serving at the altar, the pope told the young people, is a privileged way to draw closer to Jesus, which in turn "enables you to open yourselves to others, to journey together, to set demanding goals and to find the strength to achieve them."

Participating as altar servers allows boys and girls the satisfaction of functioning as part of the liturgical team, explains Katie Dawson, director of faith formation for the Diocese of Orange.

"It's helpful for young teens and tweens to become part of the altar-serving ministry because it's the most significant way to make a meaningful contribution to the liturgy," Dawson says. "It is a concrete way of participating in the community of faith."

In addition to contributing their support to the liturgical celebration, altar servers develop certain qualities through their service, Dawson notes.

- **Responsibility.** Altar servers must memorize the Mass and commit to a regular schedule of service.
- **Punctuality.** Servers are required to arrive early to each Mass in order to determine their roles, prepare items and dress in their albs.
- **Attentiveness.** Altar servers learn the deeper meaning behind each step of the liturgy.
- **Poise.** Servers must spring into action when mistakes are made. They know to step in when an item is misplaced and smooth out any rough edges during the Mass.
- **Maturity.** Altar service contributes to a server's maturity as they learn lessons and put their knowledge into practice.

"Altar service is an important step in a young person's contribution to the work of the liturgy," Dawson says. "The term 'liturgy' actually means the work of worship, so we are teaching them the work they do in the liturgy."

Perhaps most important, Dawson notes, altar service encourages youngsters to consider others' needs before their own and encourages their contributions to the greater good.

"We live in an environment where we are constantly urged to say no to service," she notes. "We constantly hear that there are too many demands on us. So this is a counter-cultural message: If God gives you a chance to make a contribution, it's a good thing to say yes."

Editor's note: The United State Conference of Catholic Bishops website includes an 11-point list of requirements potential altar servers must fulfill before service. It can be found at [uscbb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/frequently-asked-questions/guidelines-for-altar-servers.cfm](http://uscbb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/frequently-asked-questions/guidelines-for-altar-servers.cfm).