

Being an Altar Boy

I had just entered Grade 4 and was about to turn nine in a couple of weeks. Our classroom teacher said that we had a special guest that day for our religion class. It was Father Stein. Father Stein talked about being a good Catholic boy or girl for much of the catechism lesson. At the end of the class, he said that he was looking for boys who wanted to serve Christ as an altar boy at St. Patrick's parish. I and several other boys raised our hands and said that we would like to become altar boys. Father wrote our names and telephone numbers down and said that one of the older altar boys would be in contact with us to teach us Latin which the mass was said in, in those days.

When I got home, I told my parents that I was going to be an altar boy and that I needed to learn Latin in order to become one. My Mom said that was wonderful and that my Dad could help me with the Latin as he had gone to the seminary in Ireland. My Dad was studying to be a priest and this vocation was suddenly ended when his father died of the Spanish flu in 2018. My Dad at the age of 16, the oldest of six children, had to leave the seminary to take care of his parents' farm. My Dad said that when he went to the seminary that he had not only learned Latin but French and Greek and was also educated in mathematics and other disciplines, which I was to find out much later in life.

On Saturday my Mom and Dad took me downtown to buy a prayer book at the Catholic book store. It was a small prayer book, with green nylon on the outside and zipper to enclose the book. The book contained the Latin mass and also various Gospels that were written in English.

The following day I received a call from Tommy Dietrich, who was one of the older altar boys, to come to his house to learn Latin. Tommy's sister Clara was in my class and she later was a friend of my wife, Rita. The Dietrich family lived just down the block from my school and was a very large family. When I arrived at the house with my new prayer book in hand there were kids running around everywhere. Tommy's mother shooed the kids from the kitchen and left us to the task at hand.

Tommy gave me a small pamphlet that had the mass in Latin on it. He said that he would read the part that the priest would read and that I would read the altar boy's response. The altar boy basically was reading the response that the congregation would be saying if they knew the Latin mass. The words were all quite strange and I had no idea what they would translate into, in English. Tommy did not know the translation either but he knew how to pronounce each word and corrected my pronunciation as we went.

When I went home my Dad asked how it had gone and I said that it was difficult to remember the responses and also difficult to pronounce the responses properly. He said he could help and sat down with me to practise. He again read the priest statements and then I would respond. My Dad not only corrected my pronunciation but also gave me an understanding of what the priest was saying and what I was saying. He said that we would practise any time I wished until I felt comfortable with the order and pronunciation of the altar boy responses.

I can recall that the longer passages like the Apostles' Creed took some time to perfect. Also, there were various movements that we had to memorize that occurred as the mass progressed. In those days the altar did not face the congregation but rather the priest faced the altar with his back to the congregation. Further, there were three steps up to the altar and the altar boy had to say responses at various steps. The altar boy was expected to help the priest at various stages of the mass as well and alert the congregation of the consecration by ringing a bell at the appropriate time. But as of now learning Latin was the primary task at hand.

The following week I was asked to attend a meeting of the altar boys at the St. Patrick's Church basement. At the meeting led by Father Stein, we were given a list of the masses. I initially was assigned Sunday masses with a bunch of altar boys and we were to sit at the side of the altar and just observe. This allowed us to learn all the parts of the mass without having the responsibility of having to function in a primary role. By December I would be given an opportunity to serve mass with one of the older altar boys, Patrick Delaney. We were assigned the morning seven o'clock mass for the month of January.

I would rise at about 6:15 while my father would be getting ready for work. Mom would already have packed his lunch and be making him his breakfast which was bacon, eggs, toast, coffee and sometimes porridge. I had a fairly weak stomach and could not eat or drink anything when I arose this early. At about 6:30, I would walk with my father to his bus stop and carry on down the avenue to St. Patrick's church some six block further down the avenue. I can recall the frigid cold and the dark of those mornings and the stillness of the setting. The bus that would pick up my father was an old trolley bus and the sparks would fly due to the frost that clung to the frozen electrical lines above the bus. I can recall walking past a beat cop who was dressed in a big buffalo coat and fur hat. The policeman was walking, flashlight in hand, checking each business door and window on the avenue to ensure nothing was amiss. Apart from the occasional car, the avenue was devoid of any activity.

When I arrived at St. Patrick's, the church might be in darkness and I had to grope around to turn on the lights to the basement. After dressing into my cassock, I would go up

to the sacristy and prepare for the mass, by lighting the altar candles, readying the wine and water cruets, cleaning the paten and the like.

The priests who were to serve mass would change throughout the week. At that time there were four priests at St. Patrick's, Monsieur Donahue, Father Stein, Father Connelly, and Father Corrigan. The mass would be attended usually by older parishioners and might number a dozen in total. The same faces could be seen each morning.

After mass, which ended by about 7:45 or as late as eight o'clock depending on the priest's sermon, I would walk home, have a cup of tea and toast that my mother had readied for me. Then I would bolt out the door by 8:30 to walk to school some eight blocks away.

Being an altar boy was not always all work. Father Stein, who was in charge of the altar boy program, ensured that we had many treats and fun activities. Father knew that the altar boys for the most part came from working-class families, many of which could not afford many, if any, luxuries. I can recall father arranging for all the altar boys to go tobogganing which I had never done before. He also brought the ingredients to make us all hot chocolate. Father also recognized that some of the altar boys were always stuck serving morning mass and I recall him taking me and another server skating and then to his mother's home for lunch. Father also brought myself and another server to the Boy Scout camp where we went canoeing and had a wiener roast. All of these activities Father paid for out of his meagre pay as a parish priest.

Father Stein also made sure that weddings and funerals were served by the most deserving altar boys. Both of these services usually resulted in the altar server being given an envelope with cash from the family. I can recall making \$5 for attending these special masses which at the time as a lot of money for a young lad.

One Christmas Father was asked to serve midnight Christmas mass at the convent which was located in north Edmonton. He asked myself and another worthy server to attend. The convent was home to three of the nuns that taught at our school, Sister Dorothy our principal, Sister Julia Marie and Sister Saint Michael. After mass the nuns treated us to a nice post midnight snack and a gift. It was a very special setting for such a holy event.

I served as an altar boy from Grade 4 to Grade 9 but discontinued serving once I reached high school. Over those short five years the language of the mass changed from Latin to English as did most of the proceedings. Music was brought into the mass and the congregation became an active participant in the mass. The knowledge required of an altar server greatly diminished over that time frame as well. I was happy to have become an altar

server when I did so that I understood the solemnness of the mass and I could learn Latin from my Dad.

Being an altar boy was a positive experience not only for myself but for the 40-odd servers who made up the altar boy program in those days. Of course, the experience was made all the more enjoyable by Father Stein who had grown up in our neighbourhood and appreciated the effort involved in being an altar boy.

The most memorable part of being an altar server were those frigid dark winter mornings and walking with my father on my way to a 7 a.m. mass.

Tom Cooper
Feb. 23, 2021