Steps to the altar: a photo of 1960s altar servers stirs memories

If you wanted to become an altar boy in the early 1960s, books such as Father Charles J. Carmody’s Learning to Serve: A Guide for New Altar Boys were available to help you along your path to the altar. Undoubtedly a better source of instruction was that offered by parish priests such as Monsignor T. James McNamara and his assistant Father (now Monsignor) Lawrence Lucree at the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist. A 1960s-era photo recently furnished by Lucree showing the iconic Monsignor McNamara and a youthful Father Lucree in the company of a cherubic group of altar boys offers some insight into the steps and ritual then involved in becoming an altar server.

A note Monsignor Lucree sent along with the photograph explains some nuances of altar boy training of that time. “The little fellows in white cassocks, red capes and sashes were ‘white’ altar boys and began their training in Latin responses in the 2nd grade,” Lucree wrote, adding: “These often served at High Masses and Pontifical Masses as ‘bat boys’ (torch bearers). One would also serve as a ‘train bearer’ on those occasions when the bishop would enter and leave the Cathedral in pontifical regalia and would put on/take off Mass vestments at the throne. The ‘train bearer’ would sit on the bottom step of the throne. With the exceptions of officers and older servers (who wore Roman collars) all others wore ‘Buster Brown’ collars with white bows. Servers with a red sash over their right shoulders were officers.”

In a recent telephone conversation Monsignor Lucree recalled “a small book with a red cover” that provided potential servers with Latin terms and their pronunciations as well as an illustrated book from the Saint John Berchman’s Society that explained the rubrics and rituals of the Mass. Earlier, in his note accompanying the altar boy photo, Lucree observed that boys who faithfully studied these books and attended training classes every Saturday morning were treated to annual outings at a local theater or trips to Disney World, the Okefenokee Swamp or “Six Flags over Georgia.”

Introduction to priesthood

The picture of altar boys that Lucree captioned “Cathedral Knights of the Altar” projects a sense of preparation and readiness to serve. Unmistakably, the boys photographed wearing cassocks and neatly ironed surplices were receiving, besides reverence for the Mass and all pertaining to it, an introduction to the priestly life. Standing in the back row of the photo is one who followed up on this introduction, Father (now Monsignor) Chris Schreck. (By coincidence, Father Lucree was invested as a monsignor on June 29, 2008, at the same time as Father Schreck, his former altar boy.)

Monsignor Schreck’s brother, Gerry—now also a priest of the Savannah Diocese—also appears in the picture.

Among others identified in Monsignor Lucree’s photo are: (back row from left) Joe Sheahan, Eddie Berry, Tom Groover, Eddie Roy, Jimmy Sheahan, Terrell Courney, Chris Schreck, Tom Walsh, Andrew Pilgram, Tony Koncul, Kurt Balcom, Joe Heitman, John Cowart and Paul Kaluzne. Known names of those on the middle row include Pat Rossiter, Tony Brasili, Joe Murphy, Tommy Rochefort, Father (now Monsignor) Lawrence Lucree, Tommy Stacey, Michael Ferraro, Michael Rochefort, Michael Burke, Joe Conners, Gerry (now Father) Schreck, and Danny Muller. Front row identification is sketchier, with Monsignor sitting in the midst of younger altar boys including: Larry Shinnall, Matthew Dunn, Richie Rochefort, Karl Holman and Danny Brown. If you can provide any further identification, please e-mail me at rhdelorme@diosav.org.

Much has changed since photographer Carroll Burke snapped the picture in the chapel of the Cathedral close to a half century ago. The young boys proudly posing with their “Knights of the Altar” certificates have long since settled into their lifetime roles. Female altar servers are now permitted. The vernacular Mass of today, with the priest facing the congregation, and with its lay readers and Communion ministers, could never have been envisioned by the boys in the 1960s photograph.

Serving today

The current method of training servers might also interest them. A sampling of practices at a priest during the celebration of the Eucharist and at weddings and funerals in the parish. They are usually from fourth through eighth grades of both the parish school and Religious Education Program.” Training of servers usually takes place in the spring of each year.

Many churches in the diocese now post altar server schedules on their Web sites. Saint Anne Church, Columbus, currently offers an online July-through-September schedule to keep servers on track during busy summer months when families are traveling. According to the Web site of Saint Teresa Church in Albany, altar servers are members of teams appointed to serve on designated dates. Saint Teresa servers are required to be present 20 minutes before Mass. A fairly rigid dress code specifies types of clothing they should wear when they report for duty as servers.

The boys who gathered to have their photo taken in the long-ago picture submitted by Monsignor Lucree probably would have been surprised by such a code, theirs being a time when no one wore jeans or flip-flops to Mass. On the other hand, today’s servers are probably relieved that memorizing and enunciating Latin responses is no longer one of the requirements for becoming an altar server.

Another milestone of this story is that Father Ben Dallas, recently assigned to the church, is expected to work with the Covinos when the new school year commences. “It’s the kids,” Bob Covino says, when asked about the most rewarding part of altar server training. “We really enjoy working with them.”

Co-ordinator Patty Hahn is in charge of altar servers at Savannah’s Saint Peter the Apostle Church. The church’s Web site states that servers “are volunteers who are trained to assist the priest during the celebration of the Eucharist and at weddings and funerals in the parish. They are usually from fourth through eighth grades of both the parish school and Religious Education Program.” Training of servers usually takes place in the spring of each year.

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