

The Proper Care and Cleansing of Altar Linens & Sacred Vessels in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend

Adapted from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Divine Worship

Whatever is set aside for use in divine worship takes on a certain sacred character both by the blessing it receives and the sacred functions it fulfills. Thus, the linens [1] 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 sacred liturgy, are deserving of special respect. These linens should be "beautiful and finely made" [2]. Altar cloths, corporals, purificators, lavabo towels and palls should be all made of absorbent, easily laundered cloth, and never of paper. Aside from the lavabo towel, all these cloths should be of a fine, smooth weave, to facilitate the rinsing of particles.

Altar linens are appropriately blessed according to the *Order for the Blessing of Articles for Liturgical Use* [3].

Altar Cloths

Just as the altar is a sign of Christ the living stone, altar cloths are used "out of reverence for the celebration of the memorial of the Lord and for the banquet in which the Body and Blood of the Lord are offered" [4]. Their beauty and form add to the altar's dignity in the same way that vestments solemnly ornament the sacred ministers. Such cloths also serve a practical purpose, absorbing whatever may be spilled of the Precious Blood or other sacramental elements.

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—and the uppermost cloth must always be white [5]. 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, dignity, and life of the altar cloth.

Corporals

Sacred vessels containing the Body and Blood of the Lord are always placed on top of a corporal. A corporal is spread on the altar in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar [6]. When concelebrants receive the Eucharist from the altar, a corporal is placed beneath all chalices or patens [7]. Finally, it is appropriate that a corporal be used on a side/credence table, placed beneath sacred vessels that have been left to be purified after Mass [8].

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 is always 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 should be used.

Any apparent particles of the consecrated bread that 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. Therefore, every church or chapel should be equipped with a sacarium [9]. However, if no sacarium is present, the linens should be rinsed or hand-washed in a basin before being washed in the laundry. The water in the basin should then be reverently poured into the ground at an appropriate spot on the church property [10].

Corporals should be ironed so their distinctive manner of folding helps to contain small particles of the consecrated host. While liturgical law does not prescribe the corporal's form, it is traditionally square in shape and folded in nine sections to form a "pocket," within which remaining fragments of the Eucharist may be contained. As such, 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.

Purificators

Purificators are customarily brought to the altar with chalices and are used to wipe the Precious Blood from the rim of the chalice [11] and to purify sacred vessels [12]. They should be white in color. Whenever Precious Blood is distributed

from the chalice, or even accidentally spilled, purificators should be used for absorption (and the area where a spill occurs should be washed, and the water poured into the sacrarium [13]). Purificators must be absorbent and easily laundered.

Because of their function, purificators regularly absorb at least some Precious Blood. **It is, therefore, essential that they first be soaked in a sacrarium [14], and only afterwards washed with laundry soaps in the customary manner [15].**

Purificators should be ironed in such a way that they may be easily used for wiping the rim of the chalice [16].

Lavabo Towels

The Order of Mass calls for the washing of the hands (*lavabo*) of the priest celebrant during the preparation of the gifts and the altar [17]. Since it is his hands and not only his fingers that are washed at the *lavabo*, the *lavabo* towel should be of adequate size and sufficiently absorbent for drying his hands. Every effort should be made to avoid the appearance of a "dish towel," "bath towel," or other cloth with a purely secular use. The *lavabo* towel may be laundered in the usual way.

Other Cloths

Other cloths may also be used at Mass. A pall is 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 can be made with removable covers from a worthy material that may be easily washed in the sacrarium and then laundered. It is also a "praiseworthy practice" to use chalice veils, which are often ornate and may be either the color of the day or white (ideally, matching the vestments), to cover the chalice before it is prepared and after it has been purified [19].

Disposal of Worn Altar Linens

Altar linens with signs of wear or visible stains should no longer be used. Consistent with the disposal of all things blessed for liturgical use [20], they are properly disposed of either by burial or burning (for example, in the Easter Vigil fire).

A Word on the Cleaning of Sacred Vessels

Only after sacred vessels (patens, chalices, ciboria) have been purified according to Diocesan norms may they be washed normally. Even during washing, "when the vessels are rinsed and cleansed, the water is poured into the sacrarium so that any remaining [Eucharistic] particles that might be left will not be poured into the sewer but will go directly into the earth" [21]. Vessels often should not be entirely submerged in water, since water easily seeps into crevices, causing decay.

Conclusion

How 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. Those who care for sacred vessels, cloths and other *instrumenta* of the liturgy appropriately accompany their work with prayer.

-
1. The term altar *linen* is traditionally used to describe cloths of any fine material used in the liturgy.
 2. *Book of Blessings* [BOB], no. 1344.
 3. Blessings are appropriate for sacred vessels, the vestments worn by ordained ministers, hymnals, and liturgical books (*Roman Missal, Lectionary*, etc.) (BOB, no. 1343).
 4. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM], 304.
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. GIRM, 73, 118c, 139.
 7. GIRM, 248.
 8. GIRM, 183.
 9. GIRM, 334; See also *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* [BLS], 236: "The sacrarium also can be used to discard old baptismal water, left-over ashes, and the previous year's oils, if they are not burned."
 10. *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 120.
 11. GIRM, 286.
 12. GIRM, 279.
 13. GIRM, 280.
 14. When all that remains is a color stain, the Precious Blood is no longer present. The purificator may then be washed in a regular manner.
 15. If no sacrarium is present, see the procedure as listed for corporals.
 16. While the form of the purificator is not prescribed by liturgical law, it is traditionally rectangular in shape and folded three times, lengthwise.
 17. GIRM, 76, 118c, 145.
 18. GIRM, 118c, 139, 142.
 19. GIRM, 118.
 20. "Reverence for sacred things continues even after they are no longer useful in the liturgy" (BLS, 237).
 21. BLS, 236.