



## ***The Care and Cleansing of Altar Linens<sup>1</sup> in the Archdiocese of St. Louis*** Adapted from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Divine Worship

Whatever is set aside for use in the liturgy takes on a certain sacred character both by the blessing it receives and the sacred function it fulfills. Thus, the cloths 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 liturgy, are deserving of special respect.<sup>1</sup> These linens should be “beautiful and finely made, though mere lavishness and ostentation must be avoided.”<sup>2</sup>

Altar cloths, corporals, purificators, *lavabo* towels and palls should be made of absorbent cloth and never of paper.

Altar linens are appropriately blessed according to the *Order for the Blessing of Articles for Liturgical Use*.<sup>3</sup> The blessing and number of such articles for liturgical use may take place “within Mass or in a separate celebration in which the faithful should take part.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Altar Cloths**

Just as the altar is a sign for us of Christ the living stone,<sup>5</sup> altar cloths are used “out of reverence for the celebration of the memorial of the Lord and the banquet that gives us his body and blood.”<sup>6</sup> By their beauty and form they add to the dignity of the altar in much the same way that vestments solemnly ornament the priests and sacred ministers. Such cloths also serve a practical purpose, however, in absorbing whatever may be spilled of the Precious Blood or other sacramental elements. Thus the material of altar cloths should be absorbent and easily laundered.

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.<sup>7</sup> 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 and life of the altar cloth. It is appropriate for those who care for sacred vessels, cloths, and other *instrumenta* of the liturgy to accompany their work with prayer.

### **Corporals**

Sacred vessels containing the Body and Blood of the Lord are always placed on top of a corporal.

A corporal is spread by the deacon or another minister in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar.<sup>8</sup> When concelebrants receive the Eucharist from the altar, a corporal is placed beneath all chalices and patens.<sup>9</sup> Finally, it is appropriate that a corporal be used on a side table, and place beneath the sacred vessels which have been left to be purified after Mass.<sup>10</sup>

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 the Mass, care should be taken that the transferal of consecrated hosts between sacred

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Blessings* [BOB], no. 1343.

<sup>2</sup> BOB, no. 1433.

<sup>3</sup> It should be recalled that such a blessing is appropriate for “the ciborium or pyx, the monstrance, the vestments worn by the ordained ministers, such linens as the corporal and altar cloths, and hymnals and service books (*Roman Missal, Lectionary, etc.*)” (BOB, no. 1343).

<sup>4</sup> BOB, no. 1345.

<sup>5</sup> *Missale Romanum, edition typical tertia, Institutio Generalis* [IGMR], no. 298.

<sup>6</sup> IGMR, no. 304.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Ibid, nos 73, 118, 139.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, no. 248.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, no. 183.

vessels should always be done over a corporal. The corporal should be white in color and of sufficient dimensions so that at the least the main chalice and paten may be placed upon it completely. When necessary, more than one corporal may be used. The material of corporals should be absorbent and easily laundered.

Any apparent particles of the consecrated bread which 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 sacrarium and only afterwards washed with laundry soap in the customary manner. Corporals should be ironed in such a way that their distinctive manner of folding helps to contain whatever small particles of the consecrated host may remain at the conclusion of the Mass.<sup>11</sup>

## Purificators

Purificators are customarily brought to the altar with chalices and are used to wipe the Precious Blood from the rim of the chalice<sup>12</sup> and to purify sacred vessels.<sup>13</sup> They should be white in color. Whenever Precious Blood is distributed from the chalice, or even accidentally spilled,<sup>14</sup> purificators should be used for absorption (and the area where a spill occurs should be washed, and the water poured into the sacrarium. The material of purificators should be absorbent and easily laundered. The purificator should never be made of paper or any other disposable material.

Because of their function, purificators regularly become stained with Precious Blood. It is, therefore, essential that they should first be cleansed in a sacrarium and only afterwards washed with laundry soap in the customary manner. Purificators should be ironed in such a way that they may be easily used for the wiping of the rim of the chalice.<sup>15</sup>

## Lavabo Towels

The Order of Mass calls for the washing of the hands (*lavabo*) of the priest celebrant in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar.<sup>16</sup> Since it is his hands and not only his fingers (as in the former *Order of Mass*) which are washed at the *lavabo*, the *lavabo* towel should be of adequate size and sufficiently absorbent for drying his hands. Neither the color nor the material of the *lavabo* towel should be of adequate size and sufficiently absorbent for drying his hands. Neither the color nor the material of the *lavabo* is prescribed, though efforts should be made to avoid the appearance of a “dish towel,” “bath towel” or other cloth with a purely secular use.

## Other Cloths

Other cloths may also be used at Mass. A pall may be used to cover the chalice at Mass in order to protect the Precious Blood from insects or other foreign objects.<sup>17</sup> In order that palls may be kept immaculately clean they should be made with removable covers of a worthy material which may be easily washed in the sacrarium and then laundered. Chalice veils either of the color of the day, or white may be fittingly used to cover the chalice before it is prepared and after it has been purified.<sup>18</sup>

## Disposal of Worn Altar Linens

Consistent with the disposal of all things blessed for use in the liturgy, it is appropriate that altar linens, which show signs of wear and can no longer be used, should normally be disposed of either by burial or burning.<sup>19</sup>

## Cleaning Sacred Vessels

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<sup>11</sup> While the form of the corporal is not prescribed by liturgical law, it is traditionally square in shape and folded in nine sections which form a “pocket” within which remaining fragments of the consecrated host may be contained. Accordingly, at the end of every Mass, care should be taken to fold the corporal in such a manner that whatever particles remain will be folded within it.

<sup>12</sup> IGMR, no. 286.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, no. 279.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, no. 280: “If the Eucharistic bread or any participle of it should fall, it is to be picked up reverently. If any of the Precious Blood spills, the area where the spill occurs should be washed and the water poured into the sacrarium.”

<sup>15</sup> While the form of the purificator is not prescribed by liturgical law, it is traditionally rectangular in shape and folded three times.

<sup>16</sup> IGMR, nos. 76, 118c, 145.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, nos. 118c, 139, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, no. 118.

<sup>19</sup> “Reverence for sacred things continues even after they are no longer used in the liturgy” (BLS, 237)

Only after sacred vessels (patens, chalices, ciboria) have been properly purified 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 particles that might be left will not be poured into the sewer but will go directly into the earth”.<sup>20</sup> Vessels should not be entirely submerged in water because water can easily seep into crevices, causing decay.

## Conclusion

The manner in which 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.

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<sup>20</sup> BLS, 236