

**The Care and Cleansing of Altar Linens,
Purification and Cleansing of Communion Vessels and Use of the Sacrarium**

The following guidance is from the U.S.C.C.B.'s Committee on the Liturgy regarding the care of altar linens:

Whatever is set-aside for use in the liturgy takes on a certain sacred character both by the blessing it receives and the sacred functions it fulfills. Thus, the cloths used at the altar in the course of the Eucharistic celebration are to 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. These linens should be "beautiful and finely made, though mere lavishness and ostentation must be avoided." Altar cloths, corporals, purificators, lavabo towels, and palls are to 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. The blessing of a number of such articles for liturgical use may take place "within Mass or in a separate celebration in which the faithful should take part."

Altar Cloths: Just as the altar is a sign for us of Christ the living stone, 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 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 are to 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.

Unless the altar cloths have been stained with the Precious Blood, it is not necessary that they be cleaned in the sacrarium. Care should be taken, however, that proper cleaning methods are used to preserve the beauty and life of the altar cloth. (*A "sacrarium" is installed behind the altar wall at the Ave Maria Catholic Church. A "sacrarium" is a special sink or basin (used in the Roman Liturgy) used solely for the disposal of ablutions from the Mass. Unlike conventional sinks or basins, the drainage pipe for the sacrarium goes directly into the earth, not into the public sewage system. During or after the Mass, the Blood of the Lord is never to be poured into a drain—even the sacrarium; it must be consumed. After it is consumed and the vessel is purified, the Ordinary and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHCs) are asked to cover the chalices with the purificator and return it to the credence table or the counter top behind the altar for further cleansing after the Mass.*)

All ministers of Holy Communion are to show the greatest reverence for the Most Holy Eucharist by their demeanor, their attire, and the manner in which they handle the consecrated bread or wine. Should there be any mishap--as when, for example, the Precious Blood is spilled from the chalice--then the affected "area . . . should be washed with water, and this water [mixture of the Precious Blood and water which has been absorbed into a purificator] should then be poured [or washed out] into the sacrarium [GIRM, 280]" (Norms, 29).

Corporals: Sacred vessels containing the Body and Blood of the Lord should always be placed on top of a corporal. A corporal is spread by the priest, deacon or acolyte in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar.

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 is to be taken that the transferal of consecrated hosts between sacred vessels and should always be done over a corporal. The corporal is to be white in color and of sufficient dimensions so that at least the main chalice and paten may be placed upon it completely. The material of corporals is to be absorbent and easily laundered.

Any apparent particles of the consecrated bread which remain on the corporal after the distribution of Holy Communion are to be consumed in the course of the purification of the sacred vessels.

When corporals are cleansed they should first be rinsed in the sacarium and only afterwards washed with laundry soaps 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 Eucharistic celebration.

Purificators: Purificators are customarily brought to the altar with chalices and are used to wipe the Precious Blood from the lip of the chalice and to purify sacred vessels. They are to be white in color. Whenever the Precious Blood is distributed from the chalice, poured into ancillary vessels or even accidentally spilled, purificators are to be used to absorb the spill. The material of purificators is to be absorbent and easily laundered. The purificator is never be made of paper or any other disposable material.

Because of their function, purificators regularly become stained with the Precious Blood. It is, therefore, essential that they should first be cleansed in a sacarium and only afterwards washed with laundry soaps in the customary manner. Purificators need to be ironed in such a way that they may be easily used for the wiping of the lip of the chalice.

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. Since it is his hands and not only his fingers, which are washed at the lavabo, the lavabo towel should be of adequate size and sufficiently absorbent for the drying of his hands. Neither the color nor the material of the lavabo towel is prescribed in church norms, 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 (a piece of square cardboard covered with white cloth) may be used to cover the presider's chalice at Mass in order to protect the Precious Blood from insects or other foreign objects. In order that palls may be kept immaculately clean they should be made with removable covers of a worthy material which can be easily washed in the sacarium 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.

Disposal of Worn/Unserviceable 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 or stains and can no longer be used, are to be disposed of, either by burial or burning.

Purification of Sacred Vessels (e.g., Communion patens and chalices): After everyone has received Holy Communion and the precious blood is consumed, EMHCs are asked to return the sacred vessels to the credence table or the counter top behind the altar wall for the clergy to later purify. Purification of the vessels entails the adding of water into the vessels and moving the water around inside it to cleanse all of the remaining particles or droplets from the surfaces. If/as necessary, a purificator may be used on the edge of the instrument to prevent any inadvertent/accidental spillage. Once the vessel has been purified, the water (with the particles and/or diluted precious blood) is to be consumed by the respective clergy member. Soiled purificators, corporals, or other linens must be cleaned as noted above using the Sacarium.

Cleansing of Sacred Vessels: After the Mass has concluded, the sacristans are asked to wipe the sacred vessels used during the Mass before storage. Note, after the 9:30 a.m. Sunday Liturgy, all of the sacred vessels are thoroughly washed using warm water and mild dishwashing detergent. Since the vessels have already been purified before this cleansing, the water from this cleansing process is permitted to drain into the public sewage systems.

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.