

My life as an acolyte: Humble but wholehearted work

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

When my daughter became a teenager, she was invited to serve as an acolyte at our Episcopal church. I thought it would be a wonderful thing to do with her. With her permission, I became an acolyte too—in my mid-forties.

My daughter has since left for college, but I'm still an acolyte. In fact, it's hard to name a practice of church service I've enjoyed more. My priest has said, "All acolytes are pyromaniacs," and it is true that acolytes get to play with fire. There are the candles, of course. But even more pleasing are the duties of the thurifer, the acolyte who bears the container (the thurible) of burning incense. I like to see billows of smoke issuing forth as the priest (and then the thurifer) swing the thurible. There should be an abundant smell and quite visible clouds wafting toward heaven. So I take pains to make red hot the coal that will set the incense fogging.

On one occasion, not long after our church had completed the building of a new wing, I went down to what we acolytes call the "fire room" to heat the coal and ready the thurible for censuring. As I was transferring the heated coal to the thurible, the coal slipped from the tongs and fell to the cement floor. It shattered into several chunks.

I grabbed a broom to sweep up the glowing bits of charcoal, but failed to observe that the broom's bristles were nylon—and quickly the broom was ominously smoking from multiple spots. I rushed the broom into the adjacent kitchen and dunked it under running water. Then I returned to the fire room and ground all the ashes with my foot until they were safe for sweeping. Everything was under control soon enough, but not before I imagined myself burning down the church, brand new wing and all.

You can see how an acolyte's life can be exciting. And in addition to the fire thing, there's bell-ringing, dressing in robed vestments like the clergy and leading the parade of clergy and choir members into and out of the sanctuary.

Special occasions keep an acolyte on his or her toes. When the diocesan bishop visits, an acolyte designated the “bishop’s chaplain” is assigned to assist the bishop throughout the liturgy. This is because the bishop has an ornate, peaked hat (called a mitre), an equally ornate wood and silver shepherd’s staff, and, despite his or her exalted ecclesiastical office, only two hands.

The bishop’s chaplain shadows the bishop throughout the liturgy, handing him or taking from him the mitre or staff as occasion dictates. I was reasonably relaxed before my first service as bishop’s chaplain. Then someone who had performed these duties started telling stories about embarrassing mistakes committed by bishop’s chaplains of the past. One handed the mitre to a bishop backwards, so that when the august official rose and put on his hat, two ribbons hung down over his eyes. Another dropped the bishop’s staff, which not only clattered humiliatingly on the uncarpeted floor but broke. The bishop had to carry it out of the service in two pieces.

In such ways can acolytes get noticed. Ordinarily though, acolytes are not noticed and are not supposed to be noticed. We are trained to be inconspicuous, like butlers or maids. As the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, the acolyte “performs subordinate duties.”

All joshing aside, this is what I like most about being an acolyte. For me, at least, it’s difficult not to be self-conscious while I’m worshipping. And that’s particularly the case if I am preaching or otherwise “up front.” What acolytes do is participate integrally in worship, yet all the while blend into the background of the liturgy.

Dressed in our robes, none of us makes (or fails to make) a fashion statement. We quietly carry vessels to and from the altar. We hold the book as the deacon reads the Gospel lesson. In these and other understated ways, we enable or facilitate Eucharistic celebration and the prayer of the gathered parish. An acolyte has done his or her job when the liturgy goes smoothly and, afterward, at Sunday lunch, no one in the congregation can remember exactly who served as acolytes that morning.

With this simple, humble but wholehearted work (and play: liturgy is nothing if not play), I continually learn how to pray, and how to pray with attention first and foremost on the Trinitarian God. At this most basic but also most difficult practice of Christian spirituality, I will always and only remain a beginner, a novice—yes, an acolyte.