

The Nurse Irons Altar Linens

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I iron the finger towels, the *lavabos*,
the least holy of the altar cloths—still attention

must be paid, edges wrinkle free, the linen folded
in thirds so the small red cross is on the bottom
of the top fold, what the priest will see when

the server holds out the towel for the priest to take
and dry his washed hands before the consecration.

I bought a new iron, my old one unreliable,
likely to spit rusty spots on the white linen—
steam was needed and distilled water in a squirt bottle

so I could moisten the cloth, iron first the back,
then the front, pulling the hem to smooth any ridges,

careful not to tear the delicate lace, then the exact
fold in thirds, edges meeting, even if it meant
ironing again and again, sprinkling, steaming, folding

until it was just right, perfect for the priest
who would take the finger towel from an altar server,

not unlike the way I once handed sterile towels to surgeons
as they entered the OR suite, their scrubbed hands raised,
hands sacred in their own way, hands that also regard so tenderly

the reality of the living body, the warm reassurance
of blood, always with the same expectation of a miracle.