



# Catholic Courier

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## Female altar servers:



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer  
**Megan Westbrook, one of the altar servers during a July 17 Mass at Rochester's St. Cecilia Church, likes to serve because 'you're an important part of the Mass.'**

### Vatican announcement attempts to eliminate confusion, controversy

By Mike Latona  
 Staff writer

**L**ay persons can fulfill the function of lector during liturgical actions by temporary deputations; likewise all lay persons can fulfill the functions of commentator or cantor or other functions, in accordance with the norm of law.

Is canon 230.2 in the Code of Canon Law applicable to female altar servers?

That question has been largely a matter of individual interpretation over the past several years. And despite an announcement this past March by the Vatican condoning the use of altar girls — as well as a supporting statement made last month by the U.S. bishops — clergy and lay people within the United States remain divided on what has traditionally been a practice reserved for young males.

A letter to bishops' conferences worldwide, issued by the Vatican in mid-March, formally stated that altar service can be performed by either male or female lay people. The letter noted that the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts had made this judgment in 1992, and that the ruling has since been approved by Pope John Paul II.

Yet many parishioners from the Rochester diocese may not consider the announcement significant, since they had become accustomed to seeing female servers on their churches' altars long beforehand.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark, in a 1987 *Catholic Courier* article, declared that "all ministry that does not require ordination should be open to all qualified persons, regardless of sex."

Although it was left up to pastors to enforce the practice if they so chose, the bishop's viewpoint touched off a more widespread use of altar girls within the diocese in recent years.

Currently, Auxiliary Bishop Dennis W. Hickey estimates that "at least the majority" of diocesan parishes employ altar girls, with several others expected to adopt the practice in light of the Vatican's March proclamation.

Bishop Hickey acknowledged that while the announcement has helped settle some confusion, it has also served as a source of frustration among clergy who had refrained from using altar girls over the years out of deference to Pope John Paul's wishes.

"I really don't know why it was never clarified; that's one of the mysteries," Bishop Hickey remarked. "Many of us felt that the Holy Father was opposed to female servers. Because of that, many bishops held the line. To some of us, we were surprised at the interpretation (favoring altar girls)."

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### Altar serving played crucial role in 'Courier' writer's faith journey

By Mike Latona  
 Staff writer

Many times during preparation of this week's front-page story, I caught myself happily reminiscing about my own years as an altar server at Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece.

And, upon deeper reflection, I realized how much the experience served as a lively springboard in my faith journey.

When it all began, with Father Frederick F. Eisemann sternly laying down the law at our first training sessions back in 1971, I sensed that this altar serving was a more serious affair than watching cartoons and having snowball wars.

However, it's not so simple to convince

a bunch of 10-year-olds to conduct themselves in such a solemn manner!

It was genuine torture to try and hold back my giggles whenever either myself or one of my fellow altar servers, or even a priest, would accidentally kick the altar bells during Eucharist.

Or when pals like Mark Jansen would deliberately make faces at me just to get me to crack up in front of a crowded congregation.

There were many joys to altar serving. I'd say that the most vivid memories came from the close relationships I developed with the Mother of Sorrows priests, who previously had seemed so distant from where I sat in the pews:

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