

# Catholic Encyclopedia (1913) — Acolyte

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**Acolyte**, (Gr. ἀκόλουθος; Lat. *sequens, comes*, a follower, an attendant).—An acolyte is a cleric promoted to the fourth and highest minor order in the Latin Church, ranking next to a subdeacon. The chief offices of an acolyte are to light the candles on the altar, to carry them in procession, and during the solemn singing of the Gospel; to prepare wine and water for the sacrifice of the Mass; and to assist the sacred ministers at the Mass, and other public services of the Church. In the ordination of an acolyte the bishop presents him with a candle, extinguished, and an empty cruet, using appropriate words expressive of these duties. Altar boys are often designated as acolytes and perform the duties of such. The duties of the acolyte in Catholic liturgical services are fully described in the manuals of liturgy, e.g. Pio Matinucci, "Manuale Sacrarum Cæremoniarum" (Rome, 1880), VI, 625; and De Herdt, "Sacrae Liturgiæ Praxis" (Louvain, 1889), II, 28–39.

It is just possible that the obscure passage in the life of Victor I (189–199), erroneously attributed by Ferraris (I, 101) to Pius I (140–155), concerning *sequentes* may really mean acolytes (Duchesne, Lib. Pont., I, 137; cf. I, 161). Be this as it may, the first authentic document extant in which mention is made of acolytes is a letter (Eus., Hist. Eccl., VI, xliii), written in 251, by Pope Cornelius to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch, and in which we possess a definite enumeration

of the Roman clergy. There existed at that time in Rome forty-six priests, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons, forty-two acolytes, and fifty-two exorcists, lectors, and doorkeepers. It is worthy of note that two hundred and fifty years later the "Constitutum Silvestri," a document of about 501 (Mansi, "Coll. Conc.," II, 626; cf. "Lib. Pont.," ed. Duchesne, *Introd.*, 138), gives forty-five acolytes as the number in Rome. Pope Fabian (236–250), the immediate predecessor of Cornelius, had divided Rome into seven ecclesiastical districts or regions, setting a deacon over each one. A redistribution of the clergy of the city soon followed according to these seven divisions. The Roman acolytes were subject to the deacon of the region, or, in case of his absence or death, to the archdeacon. In each region there was a deacon, a subdeacon, and according to the numeration above, probably six acolytes. Ancient ecclesiastical monuments and documents lead us to believe that a subdeacon was a sort of head-acolyte or arch-acolyte, holding the same relation to the acolytes as the archdeacon to deacons, with this difference, however, that there was only one archdeacon, while there was a deacon for each region. As late as the first half of the tenth century we meet with the term arch-acolyte in Luitprand of Cremona ("Antapodosis", VI, 6; Muratori, "SS. Rer. Ital.", II, 1, 473), where it stands for a "dignity" ([q. v.](#)) in the metropolitan church of Capua. We may therefore regard the ministry of the subdeacon and acolyte as a development of that of the deacon. Moreover, these three categories of clerics differ

from the lower orders in this, that they are all attached to the service of the altar, while the others are not.

The letters of St. Cyprian (7, 28, 34, 52, 59, 78, 79) give ample proof of the fact that at Carthage also, in the middle of the third century, acolytes existed. Eusebius (*De Vita Constant.*, III, 8) mentions the acolytes present at the Council of Nice (325), not as designated for the service of the altar, but as persons attached to the retinue of bishops. The "*Statuta Ecclesiæ Antiqua*", often referred to as the decrees of the so-called Fourth Synod of Carthage (398), but really belonging to the end of the fifth, or the early part of the sixth, century (Duchesne, "*Christian Worship*", 332, 350), prove that this order was then known in the ecclesiastical province of Arles in Gaul, where these decrees were enacted. It would seem, however, that all the churches in the West, and more especially the smaller churches, did not have acolytes. We might conclude that at Reims, in the fifth century, there were no acolytes, if we could attach credence to the will of Bishop Bennadius, predecessor of St. Remigius. He gives all the categories of clerics except this one (Flodoard, *Hist. Rem. Eccl.*, I, ix, in P.L., LXXXV, 43). In the Christian epigraphy of Gaul mention is made, as far as is known, of only one acolyte, viz., at Lyons in 517 (La Blant, "*Inser. chrét. de la Gaule*," I, 36), and, in general, very few epigraphs of acolytes are found in the first five centuries. In the Irish Collection of Canons (*Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, ed. Wasserscheleben, Giessen, 1874, 32) the arch-acolyte is not

mentioned among the seven ecclesiastical degrees, but placed with the psalmist and cantor outside the ordinary hierarchy.

In the sixth canon of the aforementioned "Statuta" the duties of acolytes are specified, as they are by a contemporary writer, John the Deacon, in his letter to Senarius (P.L., LIX, 404). Specific information concerning the place and duties of acolytes in the Roman Church between the fifth and ninth centuries is drawn from a series of ancient directions known as the "Ordines Romani" ([q. v.](#))-Duchesne, op. Cit., 146 and *passim*). According to them there were in Rome (perhaps also in Carthage, and other large Western cities) three classes of acolytes, all of whom, nevertheless, had their duties in relation to the liturgical synaxes or assemblies: (1) those of the palace (*palatini*), who served the Pope (or bishop) in his palace, and in the Lateran Basilica; (2) those of the region (*regionarii*), who assisted the deacons in their duties in the different parts of the city; (3) those of the station (*stationarii*), who served in church; these last were not a distinct body, but belonged to the regional acolytes. Regional acolytes were also termed titular (*titulares*) from the church to which they were attached (Mabillon, "Comm. in Ord. Rom.", in his "Musaeum Italicum," II, 20; for an old epigraph in Aringhius, 156, see Ferraris, I, 100; Magani, "Antica Lit. Rom.", Milan, 1899, III, 61—see also ROME). Acolytes of the palace were destined in a particular manner to the service of the Pope, assisting him not only in church

functions, but also as ablegates, messengers of the papal court, in distributing alms, carrying pontifical documents and notices, and performing other duties of like character. These offices, however, acolytes shared with readers and subdeacons, or arch-acolytes. At Rome they carried not only the eulogia (([q. v.](#))), or blessed bread, when occasion required, but also the Blessed Eucharist from the Pope's Mass to that of the priests whose duty it was to celebrate in the churches (*tituli*). This is evident from the letter of Innocent I (401–417) to Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio, in Italy (P.L., XX, 556). They also carried the sacred species to the absent, especially to confessors of the faith detained in prison (see [TARSICIUS](#)). This office of carrying the Blessed Eucharist, St. Justin, who suffered martyrdom about 165 or 166, had previously assigned to deacons (Apolog., I, 67), which would indicate that at that time acolytes did not exist.

We learn still further from the "Ordines Romani" that when the Pope was to pontificate in a designated district all the acolytes of that region went to the Lateran Palace to receive and accompany him. In the sixth or seventh century, perhaps a little earlier, the chief acolyte of the stational church, carrying the sacred chrism covered with a veil, and, directing the procession, preceded on foot the horse on which the Pope rode. The other acolytes followed, carrying the Gospel-book, burses, and other articles used in the holy sacrifice. They accompanied the Pope to the secretarium or sacristy (see [BASILICA](#)). One of them solemnly placed the book of Gospels upon the altar. They carried seven lighted

candles before the pontiff entering the sanctuary. With lighted candles, two acolytes accompanied the deacon to the ambo (([q. v.](#))) for the singing of the Gospel. After the Gospel, another acolyte received the book, which, placed in a case and sealed, was later returned to the Lateran by the head acolyte. An acolyte carried to the deacon at the altar, the chalice and pall; acolytes received, and cared for, the offerings gathered by the Pope; an acolyte held the paten, covered with a veil, from the beginning to the middle of the canon. In due time acolytes bore, in linen bags, or burses suspended from their necks, the *oblata*, or consecrated loaves from the altar to the bishops and priests in the sanctuary; that they might break the sacred species (see [FRACTIO PANIS](#)). It will be seen from these, and other duties devolving upon acolytes, that they were in a large measure responsible for the successful carrying out of pontifical and stational ceremonies. This was particularly true after the foundation of the Schola Cantorum (([q. v.](#))) at Rome, of which there is clear evidence from the seventh century onward. Being then the only ones in minor orders engaged in active ministry, acolytes acquired a much greater importance than they had hitherto enjoyed. Cardinal priests had no other assistants in their titular churches. During Lent, and at the solemnization of baptism, acolytes fulfilled all the functions which hitherto had devolved upon the exorcists, just as the subdeacon had absorbed those of the lector or reader. Alexander VII (1655–67) abolished the medieval college of acolytes described above and substituted in their place (26 October, 1655) the twelve

voting prelates of the Signature of Justice. As evidence of their origin these prelates still retain, at papal functions, many of the offices or duties described above.

According to the ancient discipline of the Roman Church the order of acolyte was conferred as the candidate approached adolescence, about the age of twenty, as the decree of Pope Siricius (385) to Himerius, Bishop of Tarragona, in Spain, was interpreted (P.L., XIII, 1142). Five years were to elapse before an acolyte could receive subdeaconship. Pope Zosimus reduced (418) this term to four years. The Council of Trent leaves to the judgment of bishops to determine what space should elapse between the conferring of the acolythate and subdeaconship; it is also interesting to note, with Dr. Probst (Kirchenlex., I, 385), that the Council's desire (Sess. XXIII, c. 17, de ref.) concerning the performance of ministerial services exclusively by minor-order clerics was never fulfilled. In ancient ecclesiastical Rome there was no solemn ordination of acolytes. At communion-time in any ordinary Mass, even when it was not stational, the candidate approached the Pope, or in his absence, one of the bishops of the pontifical court. At an earlier moment of the Mass he had been vested with the stole and the chasuble. Holding in his arms a linen bag (*porrigitur in ulnas ejus sacculus super planetam*; a symbol of the highest function of these clerics, that of carrying, as stated above, the consecrated hosts) he prostrated himself while the Pontiff pronounced over him a simple blessing (Mabillon, op. Cit., II, 85, ed. Paris, 1724).



It may be well to mention here the two prayers of the ancient Roman Mass-book known as the "Sacramentarium Gregorianum" (Mabillon, *Lit. Rom. Vetus*, II, 407), said by the Pontiff over the acolyte, and the first of which is identical with that of the actual Roman Pontifical "Domine, sancte Pater, æterne Deus, qui ad Moysen et Aaron locutus es," etc.

According to the aforementioned "Statuta Ecclesiæ Antiqua," which give us the ritual usage of the most important churches in Gaul about the year 500, the candidate for acolyte was first instructed by the bishop in the duties of his office, and then a candlestick, with a candle extinguished, was placed in his hand by the archdeacon, as a sign that the lights of the church would be in his care; moreover, an empty cruet was given him, symbolical of his office of presenting wine and water at the altar for the holy sacrifice. A short blessing followed. (See [MINOR ORDERS](#); [FRACTIO PANIS](#); [THE BLESSED EUCHARIST AS A SACRAMENT](#); [SACRIFICE OF THE MASS](#).)

DUCHESNE, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution* (tr. 2d ed., London, 1904), 344, 352, 366; [JOSEPH BINGHAM](#), *Antiquities of the Christian Church*; FIELD, *History of the Church* (new ed., Cambridge, Eng. 1853); MAGNI, *L'antica liturgia Romana* (Milan, 1897–99), III, 59–64; LECLERQ in *Dict. d'archéol. chrét. ed de liturgie*, I, 348–356 (Paris, 1905); MAURICE in *Dict. de théol cath.*, I (Paris, 1905); BOISSONET, *Dict. des rites*; KRAUS, *Real-Encykl. der christl. Alterthümer* (Freiburg, 1880), I, 30, 31; THOMASSIN, *Vet. et Nova Eccl. Disciplina* (Paris, 1688); FERRARIS, *Prompta Biblioth.* (Roma, 1885).

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