



Episcopal Diocese of Georgia
Bishop's Liturgical Customary

November 1, 2025

Liturgical principles

Best practices around liturgy mean that liturgical decisions should be guided by reverence and clarity of meaning. All decisions regarding the liturgy should be made to support the primary purpose of worship, which is offered for the glory of God. In addition, it is best that the signs, symbols, and actions of worship are clear in what they are meant to convey and how they are meant to form the people of God. If the meaning of an action or symbol is not immediately clear (and often, even if it seems that it is), there should be teaching in the parish around why such an action or symbol is part of our worship. Any element that must be blessed to be used in worship should ideally be blessed within the assembly.

Ministers

It is ideal to have as many people involved in the liturgy as possible. While the whole assembly participates in the liturgy regardless, having as high a degree of lay involvement at the altar as possible serves as a symbol to make this more clear. Servers should be reverent, but reverence may look different in different communities, so this does not necessarily mean overly formal. Training for servers is a requirement, both canonically and because this allows them to participate more fully and more reverently because they are less likely to be anxious about what they ought to do next.

Bodily Postures

Not all bodies have the same abilities. While our Book of Common Prayer often dictates bodily postures, body postures are undoubtedly adiaphora, and we do not all need to do the same thing. In addition, it can be alienating to suggest or say that there is a "correct" posture to assume for a specific liturgical action. The liturgy can often be performed without asking people to stand, kneel, or sit, but if such stage directions seem necessary in a given context, it would be best to use permissive language rather than directive language, and a qualifier regarding ability

may also be useful (e.g., “you may stand, as able” is preferable to “please stand”).

Baptism

Baptism is the primary rite of entry into Christian community. Baptismal preparation should be taken seriously when a Baptism is planned, but we must also be ready and willing to accept and incorporate those who, like the Ethiopian eunuch to Philip, ask, “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” In those cases, the catechesis shall follow the Rite.

An abundance of water makes for a richer symbol, and so a good dousing or even full immersion are preferable to sprinkling, where possible. The gift of a candle at baptism and the anointing with chrism, while not required, help to deepen the symbolic language for Baptism. Just as with the water, using an abundance of chrism makes for a richer symbol. When the bishop presides at a liturgy containing the baptism of an infant or child, the priest usually performs the sacramental act of baptism and the bishop will usually sign with the chrism.

Eucharist

By canon, all baptized Christians shall be welcome to partake of Holy Communion. The bread and wine used are the primary symbols of eucharistic celebration, and as such should also be large and easily readable throughout the liturgical space. There is no reason to put off a “first communion” once children are baptized. Blessings may be performed by clergy for those who do not wish to receive communion, and in the interest of hospitality, care should be taken that the assembly knows how to go about receiving Holy Communion or a blessing. The rubrics stating that ministers receive the Sacrament first (BCP p. 365) is not about clergy being in a place of privilege, but only about them being purified and sanctified by the Body and Blood of Christ so that they might, having been purified, then offer it to others.

Bishop’s Visitations

At the Bishop’s visitation, he will perform all of the blessings in worship (including, e.g., of incense). In the event that the Bishop is performing confirmations, receptions, or reaffirmations at a visitation, a celebrant’s chair may be put in a central place (such as the entrance to the choir or sanctuary) before the liturgy begins. This chair will likely need to be moved before the Liturgy of the Table. In some cases, such placement does not fit with the architecture of the church and that can be worked out individually. Further guidance will be provided in the form of the Bishop’s Visitation Customary.

The rite of:

Confirmation is for those baptized persons who are making a mature public commitment to Christ for the first time, and for adults who were baptized in our Church by a priest and not a bishop.

Reception is for those already baptized and who have previously made a mature public commitment to Christ in another part of God’s Church.

Reaffirmation is for Episcopalians who have fallen away from the Church or who wish to reaffirm their faith and commitment to the Christian life and community.

Please note that the canons of the church acknowledge all who have been so prayed for by the Bishop as a confirmed communicant in good standing and the traditions of our church provide some flexibility. If the letter of the law calls for confirmation, but the person feels they made a mature profession of faith and prefer to be received, that exception can be made at the pastoral call of the priest with notice to the Bishop.

The Bishop will usually have a deacon in attendance for the service to assist with books, miter, oil, and crozier. Coordinate with the Bishop's staff beforehand to make sure that a deacon will be present, and be prepared to provide an attendant to assist the bishop in the event that a deacon will not be. Priests of the parish should stand at the altar with the bishop for the Great Thanksgiving, and should be prepared to elevate a chalice or paten at the closing doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer.

Other Rites

Confession and Absolution are a key part of the Christian life. Priests are encouraged to make the Sacrament of Reconciliation available, and to publicize such availability to their congregations.

Healing is also a key part of the Church's ministry, and so Anointing of the Sick and the Laying on of Hands is to be encouraged, both by the clergy and by those laypeople who may have a charism for this ministry.

The liturgies of Holy Week, particularly the Easter Triduum, are the focal point of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. Congregations are strongly encouraged to observe these holy days whenever possible.

Daily Office

Every ordained member of the clergy of the Diocese is expected to pray at least one office daily, and to undertake instructing members of their parish on the importance and function of the daily office.

The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage

A priest may refuse to solemnize any marriage at his or her sole discretion. When a priest does not feel she or he can solemnize the rite, another priest may do so. The Church's marriage rite is for Christians. In accordance with Church canons, at least one party must be baptized, and premarital counseling should be performed by the priest, or by another priest who resides locally, if the couple does not live in the vicinity of the church in which they will be married. The Declaration of Intention (available at the diocesan website) should be signed at the first conference with the couple and the priest, and the general details of the wedding agreed upon. The season of Lent is not usually appropriate for the celebration of Holy Matrimony. In exceptional circumstances, a very simple wedding may take place, but never in Holy Week. The banns of marriage (verbal and printed) are provided in *The Book of Common Prayer*, page 437. The inclusion of prayers for the couple in the intercessions in the weeks preceding the wedding is appropriate.

If either member of the couple has been married and divorced prior to this union, a petition for permission for remarriage after divorce is required. The forms for each member of the couple and for the priest are at the diocesan website.

The Burial of the Dead

As a decidedly pastoral rite, pastoral concerns should be paramount for the Burial of the Dead. Normatively, the casket will be closed throughout the service, as well as while the body lies in state in the church. A funeral pall for deceased civilians or a United States flag for deceased servicemen and women should cover the casket or urn. A priest will officiate at the burial of anyone; it is one of the corporal acts of charity.

The death of a priest, deacon, or bishop is a death in the diocesan family. If you live within a couple of hours of the site of the liturgical rites, please make every effort to attend. It makes no difference how well you may have known the deceased person.

Patron Saint

St. Anna Ellison Butler Alexander, Deaconess and Teacher, is the patron saint of the Diocese of Georgia. Every congregation and community in the Diocese is permitted and encouraged to observe the Feast of St. Anna Alexander, with its assigned Collect and Scripture readings as set forth by the most recent Episcopal calendar of saints (i.e., Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2024) every year on the Sunday closest to September 24. The Diocese also urges all congregations, especially endowed parishes, to take up a special collection and/or commit to an annual contribution to support the ministry of the St. Anna Alexander Center for Reconciliation & Healing and the preservation of the historic Good Shepherd Episcopal Schoolhouse every year on the Sunday closest to September 24.

Architecture

To the extent possible given the constraints of the liturgical space, the emphasis should be placed on those areas or symbols that are most central to worship. The font and the altar are the center of Christian worship, so every effort should be made to make clear even in the arrangement of space to emphasize these two centers of gravity over and above all others. Secondary spaces, such as the pulpit or lectern, may also be emphasized, but not in such a way that they overshadow these primary symbols.

Ornamentation

The ornamentation of a space should be thought through in order to emphasize the above. The central areas should receive the greatest ornamentation. Altar hangings and altar flowers help to emphasize the centrality of the altar.

The use of flowers to decorate worship space is ancient. Flowers are commonly given to the glory of God in thanksgiving for God's goodness. Flowers remind us of our Christian responsibility for the care of the earth. The use of plastic or other artificial flowers is not preferred as potted plants can provide another alternative to fresh-cut flowers. Homegrown flowers or wildflowers are to be preferred. The practice of carrying fresh altar flowers to shut-ins following community worship is a good custom.

A parish might consider how to give the font equivalent ornamentation, particularly on baptismal days (or days of the renewal of baptismal vows). Crosses and candles/torches help to highlight other areas central to our worship. While patriotism can have its place in the Christian life, our worship of God knows no national boundaries. Flags should not be processed and should be placed outside the sanctuary to avoid confusion of symbols.

Concluding Note

Any questions regarding this customary should be directed to the Bishop or the Canon to the Ordinary.