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### HOW MANY ALTAR CLOTHS ARE THERE TYPICALLY ON AN ALTAR?

Q: [Over the decades since the Second Vatican Council, arch/diocese parish churches across the U.S. have had a myriad of ways the] altar is prepared or laid out for liturgical celebrations. [In some cases, the altar is dressed as a conference table; in others, a banquet.] So, how should the altar be arranged for liturgical celebrations?

A: The Roman Missal proffers several legitimate options [at the discretion of the pastor/presiding priest], and the most appropriate layout depends on such factors as: the size of the altar and sanctuary, etc.

The altar should be covered by at least one white altar cloth (General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) #304). It should at the very least, cover the entire top surface [or mensa] of the altar and preferably hang down on either side. If other cloths are used, then the white altar cloth is always the uppermost [top] visible one. This cloth is obligatory for Mass and may be removed after the celebration. If desired and useful, another cloth may also be placed underneath the altar cloth. This under cloth may be of a different [seasonal] color.

[So in conclusion, to answer the question: There may be up to three (3) altar cloths used:

- (1) An under cloth (optional) that is of a different solid, seasonal color or year-round white (with appropriate seasonal accents (i.e., green, purple, or red));
- (2) A white altar cloth which generally drapes over both sides/ends of the altar; and
- (3) A mensa cloth (a solid white cloth which measures to the exact size of the top of the altar (also called the *mensa*)).

NB: It is upon the mensa cloth, within the Order of the Mass, that the altar is “dressed” with the candles, Roman Missal, corporal, purificators, sacred vessels and gifts of bread and wine for the Holy Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Mass.

(SR: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/Liturgy/zlitur351.htm>)