

Fun Catholic Vocabulary

The Catholic faith sure is strange! To say nothing of our rites and rituals, our funny-shaped buildings and colorful “costumes,” there is plenty of strangeness just in the words that we assign to things. After all, the Church’s official language is Latin, and the Catholic faith is heavily influenced by ancient Greek. Therefore, there is bound to be plenty of weird words going on! Maybe there is something that we see at Mass and we have no idea what they are called. Or maybe we know some of these weird words but we have no idea what they are. Well, maybe this handy guide will help.

- Alb: derived from the Latin *albus*, which means “white,” this is the plain white garment worn by altar servers during the liturgy, also worn by deacons, priests, and bishops under their outer vestments
- Ambo: a Latin word meaning “front,” this is the podium or the lectern from which the Word of God is proclaimed at Mass
- Aspergillum: from the Latin *aspergere*, which is a verb meaning “to dampen, sprinkle, or humidify,” this is the “wand” that the priest uses to fling holy water at the congregation during the Sprinkling Rite in the Easter season
- Cathedral: from the Greek *cathedra*, which simply means “chair,” this is the word given to the main church of a diocese, where the bishop’s presiding “chair” is located
- Chalice: from the Latin *calix*, which means “cup,” this is the sacred vessel that contains the wine which is consecrated into the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ.
- Chasuble: derived from the Latin *casubla*, which means “hooded garment,” this is the outer vestment worn by priests and bishops at Mass
- Corporal: from the Latin *corpus*, which means “body,” this is the altar linen that is spread out and upon which all of the sacred vessels for the Mass are placed
- Easter: English and German are the only major world languages that use this word as the name for the Lord’s Resurrection; almost every other language use some derivation of the Hebrew word “Pasch” which means “Passover”
- Missal: like our word “Mass,” this word is derived from the Latin *missa*, which is a verb meaning “sent” (other English words such as “dismissal” and “mission” also are derived from this Latin verb); the missal is the altar prayer book used by the celebrant of a liturgy
- Monstrance: from the Latin *monstrare*, which is a verb meaning “to show,” this is the vessel used during Eucharistic Adoration in which the Blessed Sacrament is enthroned and shown for the people
- Paschal (as in the “Paschal Candle” and the “Paschal Mysteries”): a derivation of the Hebrew word “Pasch” which means “Passover”
- Paten: from the Latin *patina*, which is a pan or a broad, shallow dish, this is the sacred vessel that holds the host which is consecrated into the Sacred Body of Jesus Christ
- Thurible: from the Latin *thur* and the Greek *thuos*, both meaning “incense,” this is the device that contains the incense burned at Mass and other liturgies (such as Eucharistic Adoration)
- Thurifer: this is the altar server who carries the thurible
- Transubstantiation: a compound word derived from three Greek words (*trans* meaning “through” or “across,” *sub* meaning “under,” and *stance* meaning “stand”), this is a complex word that describes what is happening when the substance of bread and wine are completely transformed and become the Sacred Body and Precious Blood of Jesus Christ, even though the mere appearances (the “accidents” according to Aristotle) remain: the appearance, the taste, the smell, the chemical composition, etc.