



CHURCH PLATE

Introduction

Ancient communion vessels provide a unique continuity of worship, and you may still be using them regularly. We can help you see the signs of damage, understand their causes, and help you with tips on practical maintenance. Church plate can be kept in regular use, but the most valuable pieces should only be cleaned by a specialist. As there may be little change in the appearance of church plate between annual inspections, keep long-term records (with photographs) to help to identify any changes. Most importantly, keep plate in dry environmental conditions to reduce corrosion.

Looking after church plate

Keep items of lead containing alloys, including pewter, away from sources of volatile organic compounds, such as oak, cardboard or MDF. Silver objects should be kept away from protein-based materials, such as wool, silk or leather, as these contain sulphur compounds which cause tarnishing. Surface coatings such as lacquer or wax may give long-term protection but are not a substitute for regular care and inspections, and may not be suitable for all metals.

Cleaning

Regular dusting is preferable to frequent polishing. Dust lightly with a clean, soft, lint-free cloth or a very soft bristle brush, taking care not to scratch the surface. Wear clean gloves in order to avoid unnecessary fingerprints.

Wash silver items in regular use in warm water with a few drops of a mild detergent, rinse with clean water and dry. You do not need to use a silver cleaner on a regular basis. Remove traces of old candlewax with a wooden or plastic spatula, never a sharp implement. Chill the object to make the wax brittle and easier to remove.

Before cleaning, remove any dust as it can scratch the surface. Remove light tarnish and fingerprints on silver objects by gently rubbing with a tarnish inhibiting cloth made for silver. However, tarnish inhibiting cleaner or polish is not appropriate for items in regular use. Be cautious about removing tarnish or thick layers of corrosion. Chemical products to dissolve the tarnish are not suitable for communion vessels as they may leave toxic traces. Liquid polishes containing powder abrasives are not recommended as the powder can accumulate in crevices where it will attract moisture and encourage further corrosion.

Consult an accredited conservator for the best cleaning and polishing methods for significant pieces.

This guidance is issued by the Church Buildings Council pursuant to its powers under section 55(1)(d) of the Dioceses, Mission and Pastoral Measure 2007. As it is statutory guidance, it must be considered with great care. The standards of good practice set out in the guidance should not be departed from unless the departure is justified by reasons that are spelled out clearly, logically and convincingly. Issued by the Cathedral and Church Buildings Division, September 2021. © Archbishops' Council.

