

## THE SACERDOTAL VESTMENTS

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When a subject wishes to approach his sovereign in a formal manner he is very solicitous about his dress. With such a motive in mind, Holy Mother Church, inspired by the Holy Ghost (St. Thomas, Suppl. Q. XL, Art. 7), prescribes certain vestments which her priests must wear when they approach the Sovereign of sovereigns, in the exercise of their sublime office of mediators at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Are we Catholics acquainted with these vestments? Do we appreciate their beauty and their meaning? What is the principal object of these vestments and are they absolutely necessary for the proper celebration of the Mass? These are a few questions which the writer proposes to answer in this article.

First of all, what are we to understand by sacerdotal vestments? "They are those vestments that, according to the rules of the Church, or from ecclesiastical usage, are to be worn by the clergy in performing the ceremonies of the services of the Church, consequently, above all, at the celebration of the Mass."<sup>1</sup> . . . The vestments which the priest wears when offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass are six in number: The amice, the alb, the cincture, the maniple, the stole and the chasuble. Each of these has an allegorical and a moral meaning, in so far as it recalls the Passion of Our Lord and the virtues which are proper to the priestly office.

The amice is a short linen cloth, oblong in shape. It is the first vestment which the priest puts on in robing for Mass. The secular clergy and the religious who follow the Roman rite, place it over the neck and shoulders. Many of the older religious orders, among which are the Dominicans, who still follow their own rite, have kept the custom of the Middle Ages of placing it over the head. At the beginning of Mass the priest folds the amice back from the head so that it falls down over the chasuble around the neck, forming a little hood. After Mass it is employed as a covering for the head instead of the customary biretta. The amice is a symbol of self-control over one's speech. When the bishop gives the amice to the sub-deacon he pronounces the following words: "Receive the amice, by which the

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<sup>1</sup> Cath. Encyc., Vol. XV, p. 388.

restraint of the tongue is signified.”<sup>2</sup> It is also termed the “helmet of salvation,”<sup>3</sup> by which the priest is to be protected from the assaults of Satan. Accordingly it is also said to be symbolical of Christian hope.

The alb is the second vestment which the priest dons. It is a long, white, linen tunic reaching to the ankles, the sleeves of which fit closely about the arms. The alb derives its name from the Latin word “alba”—white. It symbolizes the purity of soul which he who officiates at the Holy Sacrifice should possess. This spotless white garment admonishes the priest so to live, so to watch and pray that he may approach the altar with pure and holy thoughts. It is also commemorative of the white robe with which Herod clothed Our Lord.<sup>4</sup>

The cincture is put on after the alb. This is a girdle made like a cord with tassels at the ends. It surrounds the waist, keeping the alb close-fitting in such a way as not to impede the movements of the wearer. The cincture is considered a figure of the subjugation of the flesh by mortification and self-denial. By it we are also reminded of the ropes with which Our Lord was bound to the pillar.

The fourth vestment which the priest uses is the maniple. This is a short band, varying from three to four inches in width, corresponding in material and color to the stole and chasuble. The priest affixes it a little above the wrist on his left arm. It was originally made of linen and was used as a handkerchief; but as time went on, it developed into an ornament to which a spiritual meaning is attached. By this the priest is encouraged to bear the evils of this life and endure the toils and the anxious labors of his ministry with the anticipation of a certain and eternal recompense. It also serves to remind us of the fetters with which the Jews bound Jesus.<sup>5</sup> The maniple is a distinctive insignia of the sub-deacon.

The fifth vestment is the stole; a strip of the same material as the chasuble, from two to four inches wide and eighty inches long. The celebrant places it around his neck and ties it with the cincture in the form of a cross on his breast. The stole is a

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<sup>2</sup> Pontificale Romanum.

<sup>3</sup> Missale Romanum—prayer while vesting with amice.

<sup>4</sup> Luke XXIII, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. XXVII, 2

figure of sanctifying grace and reminds us of the garment of sanctity in which the priest should serve God and be a shining light to men; and also of the garment of glory which will eventually be his reward for his fidelity in the service of God.

The sixth and last garment is called the chasuble. It derives its name from the Latin "Casula" meaning "small dwelling." This name was given to it because, originally, the chasuble was bell-shape, leaving a hole in the centre for the head of the wearer, thus constituting, as it were, a shed or covering for the other five vestments. It is the principal vestment worn by the priest. The chasuble is emblematical of charity; for, since this virtue covers a multitude of sins, it is happily figured by the chasuble which covers the entire person of the priest. It also represents the purple robe which the Jews put on Our Saviour during His Passion.<sup>6</sup> Thus it is properly assumed by the priest who is about to renew the sacrifice of the Cross on the altar. The cross which ornates the chasuble is to remind the priest of the Passion of Christ, and again to bewail his own sins and those of the assistants at Mass.

Now that we have studied the vestments individually in their nature, material and meaning, we might inquire about the meaning of the different colors. Why does the priest wear white on certain days, whereas vestments of green, red, purple and black are used on other days? Here again, Holy Mother Church shows us her inexhaustible life of faith and grace. By the variety and splendor of the liturgical colors she wishes to manifest exteriorly her inner life and thus produce in us heavenly thoughts, holy affection and resolutions. The rich, deep symbolism of these colors was the determining reason which induced the Church to select them for the different feasts and seasons.

White is used to express the joy which she feels on the Feasts of the Angels, of the Virgins, Confessors, of the Blessed Mother of God and Our Lord, because of their glory in heaven. It recalls the purity of their lives.

Red is typical of the tongues of fire which descended on the Apostles. For this reason the red vestments are used on Pentecost Sunday. They are also used on the Feasts of the Apostles, Martyrs and the Holy Innocents, commemorating the blood which they shed for the Faith.

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<sup>6</sup> Matt. XXVII, 28.

Green is symbolical of hope. It represents the eternal freshness of the Church which for the last twenty centuries has continually brought forth new blossoms of sanctity. The green vestments recall to our mind that Christian hope which we should always maintain for Heaven, the haven of eternal bliss. They are employed on those week-days and Sundays to which no special festal nor joyful character has been assigned.

Purple is emblematical of moderate sadness, of penance and of humility. The purple vestments are used during the holy seasons of Advent and Lent, to produce in us a salutary sorrow for our sins and the spirit of repentance.

Black is figurative of profound sorrowful mourning, i. e., death. These vestments are worn on Good Friday, the day of the death of the Redeemer, All Souls' Day, and likewise at funeral Masses, to express grief and affliction. Each of these vestments requires a special blessing from the bishop or from a priest delegated by him, and they are all absolutely necessary for the celebration of Mass.<sup>7</sup>

The priest thus adorned, in these rich and beautiful garments ascends the altar to perform the most sublime function that ever was entrusted to human effort; to renew the awful Sacrifice of the Cross. No wonder, then, that Holy Mother Church spares no price when there is question of God's glory. "Nothing should be too precious for the Lord!" How wonderful also, is the solicitude of the Church for us, her children. She realizes that we need external aids to elevate our thoughts and rivet our attention at the hour of prayer, particularly at this solemn moment. And who cannot experience the glow they lend to our fervor and the religious sentiment they excite in us and in the priest himself. They create in the priest a spirit of recollection in order that he may the better celebrate the Holy Sacrifice, and produce in the hearts of the faithful a due reverence for that wonderful Mystery of our Redemption.

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<sup>7</sup> Summarium Theologiae Moralis, Aregui, p. 362.