



8. Why Do Clergy Wear Different Clothes For Different Services? - Part 2 - What The Well-Dressed Priest Is Wearing

We saw in the last article of this series how clerical dress tends to derive from the working dress of former ages, formalised and, often, worn over everyday clothes. (A cassock would not, in its original form, have been worn over trousers.) The formal role of a Christian priest in the early days of the Church was to preside at the Eucharist and, in time, to administer other sacraments - baptism, and, by extension, blessings, matrimony, penance, anointing, confirmation. For these, he would no doubt wear his best clothes - the ordinary clothes of a man of the time. It was not until the Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire that the Clergy began to wear distinctive garments to celebrate the Liturgy.

The alb - the garment worn by all ministers at the Eucharist - was the professional man's long white linen tunic (a working man would wear a shorter garment.) It was worn with a cord girdle to make it easier to move about in. It was not, originally, an undergarment but was a working dress in its own right.

The chasuble and the cope both derive from the heavy cloak worn outdoors, particularly when travelling. The chasuble is the cloak joined at the front, to make a tent-like garment, often worn by shepherds. It was not, originally, associated particularly with the celebration of the Eucharist but during the eighth century it gradually became the distinctive garment of the celebrant. By the thirteenth century, it had become a richly decorated 'high-priestly' garment.

In time, when worn over other clothes, it became almost impossible for the priest to move in it, and it was the duty of the deacon and sub-deacon to relieve the weight so that the celebrant could raise his arms at the Mass to elevate the Host. For the same reason the sides were cut away to make the garment almost tabard-shaped.

In the Church of England following the Reformation the use of many of the historic vestments was discontinued, and when under the influence of the Oxford movement they were revived in the nineteenth century there was a reversion to the full mediaeval style.

The distinctive vestment of the historic orders is the stole, worn only by bishops, priests, and deacons when celebrating the sacraments. The Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship says it derives from the scarf worn by Roman officials as a badge of rank. It is a strip of material, wider at the ends, often ornamented, with an embroidered cross where it touches the nape of the neck of the wearer. A deacon wears it like a sash passing over the left

shoulder, a priest wears it round the neck with the two ends crossed and tucked into the girdle. A bishop never crosses the ends, as to do so would obscure his pectoral cross.

There are further liturgical vestments, which we have at St Mary's, but rarely use at present. As we have seen, in time the chasuble became very inconvenient to use, particularly when travelling. When going on a journey, a heavy hooded cloak or cape would be worn. This became the cope, worn in processions or out of doors, e.g. when giving a blessing. After the Reformation, all processions and outdoor blessings were banned, as savouring of 'Popish superstition'. The cope survived as a processional garment, and we see it at St Mary's when worn by a visiting bishop, with his mitre.

The mitre (which of course is not among our vestments) is said to have originated as the 'forage cap' worn by a high-ranking Roman official when travelling. When Christianity became the official Roman religion, the right to wear a mitre became a distinction awarded by the Pope to high-ranking clergy. Eventually it became the distinctive headgear of a bishop, and assumed its present flame-like shape, which some take to symbolise the fire of the Holy Spirit, conferred by the Bishop at confirmation.

We have one set of vestments at St Mary's, which includes a dalmatic and a tunic. Both are somewhat similar, wide-sleeved over-tunics, richly ornamented and worn at the Eucharist on festal occasions, the dalmatic by the Deacon, the tunic (a less elaborate garment) by the Subdeacon.

The revival of eucharistic vestments in the nineteenth century caused a great deal of dispute and even litigation at the time and, most unfortunately, they became for some a focus of disunity. With the liturgical changes of the last few decades, the heat of controversy has largely evaporated and the vestments themselves have become simpler.

Although allegorical meanings have been attributed to certain items, there is, so far as I have been able to establish, no general agreement on these. Some, for example, regard the chasuble as standing for the robe worn by Christ at his Passion; others find it more helpful to think of it as symbolising the royal garment to be worn by him at the Heavenly Banquet. There are some, on the other hand, in more Protestant circles, who would find such ideas almost blasphemous.

No doubt, clerical dress and vestments will change further, over future centuries, but for the moment, we at St Mary's are well supplied.