

Vested For Salvation

This column will begin a short series on the Mass. The Mass, of course, is central to our faith. The Second Vatican Council said that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life.” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11) In other words, our life and joy flows from the Mass, which, in turn, flows back to the Mass. One of my professors once remarked that the Mass is like a landing strip where heaven meets earth.

In beginning this series, I will begin at what seems like an odd place: the vestments worn at Mass. Along with the servers, the first thing a visitor at Mass would notice is that the priest is not in his normal clothing. He or she may ask, “Why doesn’t the priest just wear a suit and tie or a golf shirt?”

The fact that the priest celebrates Mass in vestments indicates that he is not a private person. It is not simply Jim or Phil celebrating the Mass, but rather Christ Himself. By wearing vestments, the priest symbolizes that he stands in the place of another, namely, Jesus Christ. Tradition puts it this way: The priest stands *in persona Christi capitis* (in the person of Christ the head) when he celebrates Mass. He sacramentally represents Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd and High Priest.

Additionally, vestments symbolize that God wills to transform us! By virtue of our baptism, we “put off” our old sinful ways and “put on Christ.” Hence, St. Paul reminds the Galatians “put on Christ.” (Gal. 3:27) Vestments, then, symbolically remind us of our baptism and our call to be radically transformed by Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, vestments symbolically remind us of our future resurrection. Each of us is “clothed with the body.” In the resurrection, we will be “further clothed” with a resurrected body. Our resurrected bodies, of course, will be patterned after the Resurrected body of Jesus Christ. By seeing a vested priest or deacon, then, we are reminded of our future hope in the resurrection.

Let us now briefly look at the specific pieces worn by the priest and deacon. First, the priest puts on an **alb**. The word alb comes from the Latin word *albus*, which means white. It is the long gown-like garment worn under the chasuble (i.e., top colored vestment). The alb not only reminds us of our baptism, but it also reminds us of heaven. For in heaven, John tells us that all the saints “*have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*” (Rev. 7:14)

Next, the priest girds himself with a **cincture**. The cincture is a cord, typically white, that belts around the waist. It symbolizes the virtues of chastity and continence. It also symbolizes modesty and readiness for hard work in God’s

service. Scripturally, St. Paul reminds us to *"Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth."* (Gal. 6:14)

After the priest puts on the alb and cincture, he puts on the **stole**. The stole is a narrow strip of cloth worn over both shoulders by a priest. For a deacon, it is worn over the left shoulder, diagonally across the chest, and fastened near the hip. The stole symbolizes the authority that Christ gives to His bishops, priests, and deacons. It also symbolizes the promise of immortality. Scripturally, the stole reminds us of Jesus' yoke where He says, *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."* (Matt. 11:29-30)

Lastly, the priest puts on the **chasuble**. This is the colored vestment worn by the priest celebrant at Mass. It is worn over the alb, cincture, and stole. It symbolizes the virtue of charity and yoke of unselfish service to the Lord. Scripturally, St. Paul says, *"And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony"* (Col. 3:14). Notice that the chasuble is worn over the stole. In other words, a priest should always be reminded that the authority given to him must be covered by charity!

Deacons, for their part, put on a dalmatic. While at first glance a dalmatic appears to be the same as a chasuble, it is different in that it has cut sleeves. It is usually at least knee length and like the chasuble, follows the liturgical color of the day or season (e.g., green, red, violet, white). It symbolizes the joy and happiness that are the fruit of dedication to God.

Finally, if the visitor came to Mass throughout the whole year, he or she would notice the various colors of vestments. Like the vestments themselves, each color is symbolic. For example, **white** symbolizes joy and purity of soul. It is the color of Christmas and Easter, both joyful seasons. White can also be worn for feasts, such as those that honor the Blessed Virgin Mary. **Red** is symbolic on two levels. It symbolizes the shedding of blood (e.g., Good Friday, martyrs, etc.) or the burning fire of God's love (e.g., Pentecost). **Green** is worn during ordinary time. It is symbolic of hope and life, just as green in trees in early spring arouses hope of new life. **Violet**, for its part, is used during Advent and Lent. It symbolizes penance, sacrifice, and preparation.

In short, there is a lot of symbolism behind vestments! Our faith is extremely rich and symbolic! Next time, we will look at the introductory rites of the Mass: Entrance, sign of the cross, greeting, penitential act, Gloria, and opening collect (prayer).

Super Goldy



Vested to Save the World