



Episode 17: Liturgical Vestments, part 1

SUMMARY

The vestments worn during Mass are sacramental signs. This suggests that they not only serve the practical purpose of covering street clothes, but that they also represent hidden realities. They signify that the celebration of the liturgy is not something ordinary, but that it takes us beyond the experience of daily life.

The Church teaches that most fundamental sacred garment is the alb. (The word has a Latin root which means white. “Albino” and “albumen” are English cognates.)

The alb is the long white garment worn by the sacred ministers. It recalls the new and immaculate clothing that every Christian has received in baptism: “see in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity.”

Before the alb is put on, another sacred vestment, called the amice it put on over the head and around the shoulders to completely cover the ordinary clothing. For priests and deacons the amice covers the Roman collar.

The amice symbolizes the helmet of salvation mentioned by St. Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians: “In all circumstances, hold faith as

a shield, to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The prayer said by the minister asks God’s protection as he performs his duties. The cincture is the rope-like belt tied around the waist of the minister. It signifies the minister’s commitment to the virtue of chastity. The prayer calls to mind the fruits of the Spirit noted by St. Paul in the Letter to the Galatians: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (5:22)

These common, simple vestments, the amice, alb and cincture, clothe the minister, preparing him to enter into the sacred function.

Our task is to make our language less like this world and more like that of the world to come.

Roman Missal

In the Church, which is the Body of Christ, not all members have the same function. This diversity of offices is shown outwardly in the celebration of the Eucharist by the diversity of sacred vestments, which must therefore be a sign of the function proper to each minister.

General Instruction, n°. 335

The sacred garment common to all ordained and instituted ministers of any rank is the alb, to be tied at the waist with a cincture unless it is made so as to fit even without such. Before the alb is put on, should this not completely cover the ordinary clothing at the neck, an amice should be used.

General Instruction, n° . 336

IN THE TRADITION

“Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, ‘Who are these wearing white robes, and where did they come from?’ I said to him, ‘My lord, you are the one who knows.’ He said to me, ‘These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’”

Revelation 7:13-14

“Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind, live soberly, and set your hopes completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

1 Peter 1:13

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “Thus we observe that when God institutes the Old Law, He makes provision besides for sacred rites, and determines in exact detail the rules to be observed by His people in rendering Him the worship He ordains. To this end He established various kinds of sacrifice and designated the ceremonies with which they were to be offered to Him. His enactments on all matters relating to the Ark of the Covenant, the Temple and the holy days are minute and clear. He established a sacerdotal tribe with its high priest, selected and described the vestments with which the sacred ministers were to be clothed, and every function in any way

pertaining to divine worship. Yet this was nothing more than a faint foreshadowing of the worship which the High Priest of the New Testament was to render to the Father in heaven.”

Mediator Dei, n° . 16

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Place upon me, O Lord, the helmet of salvation, that I may overcome the assaults of the devil.

Prayer for the Amice

Make me white, O Lord, and cleanse my heart; that being made white in the Blood of the Lamb I may deserve an eternal reward.

Prayer for the Alb

Gird me, O Lord, with the cincture of purity, and quench in my heart the fire of concupiscence, that the virtue of continence and chastity may abide in me.

Prayer for the Cincture

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do the liturgical vestments worn at Mass help us to recall the vision of heaven in the Eternal Banquet?
2. How can the clothing worn by the laity be an expression of their commitment to the Christian virtues?
3. What does our clothing demonstrate about the value of what we are celebrating?

FOR FURTHER READING

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, March 25, 2004.