

Explaining the Mass

with Fr. Mark Bentz, STL

Part 1: Vestments

For the next few months, I'll be doing a bulletin series on the Mass. I think it's a good idea to refresh ourselves about 'why we do what we do' in Church so that we don't become numb to the great mystery we celebrate every Sunday.

Since several people have asked about the style of vestments the priest wears, I thought it would be good to explain the different clothing of sacred ministers in general and what they represent. Those who are in the sanctuary space dress differently, in sacred clothing, because what they do and where they stand is holy. This is in continuity with Old Testament priestly practice. We'll talk more about the sanctuary space and what it signifies later.

Each piece of clothing has a spiritual significance and a prayer that traditionally was said by the priest when putting it on. Essentially, the different pieces of clothing correspond to the "full armor of God" that is mentioned in Ephesians 6:11. The first piece is the *amice*, which is a square white piece of cloth with two strings attached. This is wrapped around the neck to hide the collar of street clothes. It became associated spiritually as a 'helmet of salvation' to ward off distractions of the Devil during celebration of mass. Next, the *alb* is worn. The alb is a full-body white garment that reminds us of the white garment we were clothed with at baptism. If the alb covers street clothes completely, the amice is not required to be worn. Next, the minister ties a cord called a *cincture* around his waist. This practically keeps the alb from moving around but has also been associated with chastity and continence. Next, if the priest or deacon chooses, a *maniple* is worn. A maniple is no longer required to be worn since the *motu proprio* 'Tres abhinc annos' in 1967, but it may still be worn as an option. The Maniple is a short strip of colored cloth that is tied on the left arm of the priest or deacon. Practically, it was a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from the priest's face on hot days, but also to dry

tears that came from devotion to the Holy Eucharist while celebrating mass. Over the centuries, it came to signify the sufferings and labors of the people that the priest brings to offer at mass.

Next, the priest and the deacon both put on a *stole*. The stole is a thin colored piece of fabric that hangs from the neck and drapes down the front of the body for a priest, and to the right side of the body for a deacon. The stole is the symbol of priestly authority. Lastly the Deacon wears a *dalmatic* and the priest a *chasuble*. Stylistically, the only difference between these two vestments is that a dalmatic has sleeves. The chasuble is the symbol of the charity of Christ, the sweet yolk that the Lord gives his disciples to carry. It is significant that the chasuble is put on last, because "love covers everything," and love should be what everyone sees most clearly in ordained ministers—indeed, in all Christians!

The styles of vestments have varied throughout the Church's history, but the two most popular styles in our time are popularly known as the *Gothic* and *Roman* styles. These are really misnomers from a historical perspective because they didn't originate from these regions, but for the sake of clarity, we'll use the terms. The Gothic style chasuble is closer to the very early church style of chasuble, which was long and flowing, covering all but the feet of the priest. This was very practical in cold stone cathedrals and in the winter! The Roman, or *fiddleback* style, as it is called because of its appearance, came into fashion around the time of the Renaissance. It had both an aesthetic and practical genesis--namely it freed the priest's arms to move around easily and was less hot to wear in warmer climates because it used less fabric. It was also easier to decorate and became an aid to popular piety with sacred symbols. Both styles are permitted by the Church and left to the discretion of the priest to choose.

That's it for this week—until next time...