

## Why Does the Church Use Vestments ?

It is remarkable (says 'St. Andrew's Cross') what an important position the subject of dress occupies among men, and what a tendency there is to distinguish the various grades and professions of society by some special form of dress or some official uniform.

As ages roll on and the world grows older, we see this tendency becoming more marked; at one period what is quite an ordinary part of every-day attire becomes eventually a ceremonial or official distinction—an example of a curious conservatism inherent in the nature of man, since a reluctance to part with old traditions balances his ever-increasing desire for advance and progress.

There is no more striking instance of this to be found among all the forms of official dress than in

### The Vestments of the Church,

and, in a lesser degree, the ordinary dress of clerics. At the outset it would appear to be only in accordance with the fitness of things that if the callings of secular life have their distinctive dress, that calling also which ranks above them all should be in like manner distinguished; this even those would maintain who regard the clergy as no more than one of the departments of the State.

The days when the vestments of the Catholic Church were looked upon as the 'rags of Popery' or the 'garments of Anti-Christ' have now happily gone by, except, perhaps, in the case of a few fanatics who, even in this enlightened age, still choose to make themselves ridiculous in the eyes of all tolerant men. Most of those outside the Church nowadays look upon vestments (whenever they think about them at all) with a sort of good-humored contempt, wondering why any sensible people should think it necessary to dress up in such outlandish garments for their church services. Of course they quite see the need for some kind of ministerial dress, as befitting religious decorum and decency; the surplice and the stole they can understand, but as to copes and chasubles and all the rest of such garments, they cannot make them out at all. To some, indeed, it appears that all this elaboration of vestments and ceremonies is a conversion of Divine worship into a mere theatrical display, tending to lead simple-minded people to believe that God's service consists entirely in these things, and that nothing more is needed to do Him honor.

But it is not so with Catholics; it is enough for them that the Church commands vestments to be worn in her services, and they are ready at once to uphold their use and necessity; but as to thinking that the worship of God consists entirely in going through certain ceremonies in a particular form of dress, no Catholic has ever thought or is ever likely to think such a thing. To any one who reflects upon such matters, vestments appear, as they truly are, the outward expression of the Church's reverence for God, striking symbols by which her doctrines are clearly shown forth and valuable exterior helps to keep up the interior spirit of Divine worship. But all this need not be enlarged on here; our chief purpose in this sketch is to show that the present use of vestments by the Church is merely the logical outcome of that principle which has existed from her very foundation; that whatever is used in the service of God should be specially set apart for that service alone, and should be the very best that can be procured.

### This Principle

is admitted by every Christian, at least in theory, to be only right and proper, and yet what inconsistency we see in the practice of the various forms of Christianity. It is only in the Catholic Church that true consistency is to be found; she follows out her principles to their ultimate conclusions, and as time goes on, draws them out and expresses them more and more clearly according to her opportunities.

In saying that the principle regarding the use of vestments has come down to us from the very foundation of the Church, we do not mean to imply that the Christians of the first centuries wore vestments in exactly the same way as we now use them. Such a thing could hardly be maintained, for the Church was then in a missionary state; hardly yet a defined society, it was small in numbers and was persecuted and hunted down as an illegal sect by Jews and pagans alike.

In such conditions it was not to be expected that the priests of the early Church would have made themselves conspicuous by adopting any special form of dress, and, moreover, when we consider the circumstances un-

der which they met for Divine worship and the secrecy and haste with which everything had to be carried out, we cannot imagine that the Apostles or their immediate successors, passing as they did from house to house and from city to city, could have worn any other than their ordinary dress. Nevertheless, the principle was there, and we find it showing itself as soon as opportunity arose. The Church was not to remain forever a missionary society, an obscure band of devotees. Thus we see, as she gradually began to emerge from the catacombs and the other hiding places in which she had been immured for the first three centuries, examples of what she considered due to God's honor. The feeling that it was only fitting that the garments worn at Divine service should be kept specially for that purpose and not worn in everyday life becomes more and more evident.

St. Jerome, writing in the fourth century, clearly expresses this feeling when he says: 'We ought not to go into the sanctuary just as we please and in our ordinary clothes, defiled by the usage of common life, but with a clear conscience and clear garments, handle the sacraments of the Lord.'

And again, in his work against the Pelagians: 'What is there, I ask, offensive to God if I wear a tunic more than ordinarily handsome, or if bishop, priest, and deacon and other ministers of the Church in the administration of the sacrifices come forth in white clothing?' From this it is quite obvious that it was thought befitting

### The Dignity of the Sacred Rites

to reserve special garments to wear when celebrating them, and that these should be of better quality than those in ordinary use—the Sunday best, as we should say! But we see from the above and from other instances that these primitive vestments differed from ordinary dress not so much in shape and style as by the fact that they were used on these special occasions only, and were more handsome and more richly adorned than those of every-day life.

This it is that constitutes the great difference between primitive and modern vestments, for nothing could be more unlike ordinary dress nowadays than the latter. But this fact, the marked distinction between ordinary dress and ecclesiastical vestments, is only the outcome of that conservative spirit shown even in ordinary society, by which a garment, unsuitable in changed circumstances for every-day wear, becomes restricted to the use of a special class or to certain occasions. Thus the Church, when she had at last gained her true position in the world, adopted from the dress she saw around her—those grave, flowing robes of the Imperial era—the garments most fitting for her sacred character. But as time went on and according to the dictates of fashion, each age saw the adoption of some new style of dress and setting aside of more antiquated forms, the Church refused to follow the vanity and fickleness of the world and kept to the time-honored garb she had consecrated to her own use. Even when this became restricted to the service of the altar, and the clergy were allowed in their ordinary dress to approximate more closely to the fashions of the world, we see the same clinging to the more ancient forms, the same refusal to keep pace with the giddy world in its perpetual course of change.

Here, then, we have an outline of the development of Christian vestments. First came the setting aside of special garments for the service of the altar; then, as fashions changed, the growth of a distinction, both in form and style between ordinary dress and that used in the sacred rites; finally, as a necessary result, the difference between lay and clerical dress in daily life.

Thus does the Church show her wisdom; reluctant as she always is to give up the usages consecrated by past ages, she is, nevertheless, always ready to adapt herself to circumstances, avoiding all unnecessary rigor; that she may truly be 'all things to all people.'

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