

Concordia Theological Monthly



J U L Y • 1 9 5 9

What About Vestments for Pastors?

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IN various forms this question has been asked again and again. The following pages are an attempt to answer the question for the Church of the Augsburg Confession in America.¹

Let it be emphasized at the outset that in the Lutheran community vestments are *adiaphora*, "neutral matters." They exist in the church as human traditions, instituted in the interest of good order and tranquillity in the church at large and in the individual parish. Except in time of persecution, when a hostile government tries to dictate to the church in this matter in a way that promotes heresy and schism, the community of God in every place can use or refrain from using any vestment or combination of vestments that it may choose. Fellowship among parishes and church bodies does not require an identical use of vestments, and one parish or church body will not criticize another because in Christian liberty the one uses fewer and the other more vestments in its services. Intrinsically, there is no reason why a church or church body could not require all its clergy to wear at service time the garb of an Edinburgh or a Yale Ph.D., or the vestments of an Armenian metropolitan, or the toga of a Roman senator, or the cowl and robes of a White Father, or the panoply of a Roman Catholic archbishop. Any impropriety would lie in the fact that some or all of these vestures are not in the tradition of the parish or church body and that they give a false impression. Thus the first canon which determines the propriety of vestments is the history of the denomination in which they are used.

To assign a specific mystical or devotional symbolic meaning to individual vestments — to say that the bands represent the Law

¹ See on the whole issue this writer's *The Survival of the Historic Vestments in the Lutheran Church after 1555*, 2d ed. (St. Louis: School for Graduate Studies of Concordia Seminary, 1958), and his article, "When Selecting a Vestment," in *Seminarian*, Vol. XLIX, No. 3 (March 1958), pp. 29—35, where some of the vestment types discussed below are illustrated.

and the Gospel, the stole the robe of immortality, the chasuble the yoke of Christ, and so on — is not wrong, of course, but it can be misleading. The symbolism of vestments lies less in the individual items of vesture than in the use of a combination of vestments as such. The total vesture employed is a symbol of continuity with a historic past. It is a confession of oneness with our spiritual forebears in the midst of the very service in which we affirm — as we must — the existential relevance of the church's witness and proclamation in our own generation. It is probably far better that we assert our oneness with our spiritual past in this way than that we attempt to do so by means of an archaic vocabulary that hinders our communication.

A second canon — which like the first involves no theological issue — is that of esthetic effect. Vestments can be graceful, or they can be ugly. They can be well designed or poorly designed. They can be properly proportioned, or they can be out of scale with one another or with the wearer. They can be indecently short, or they can be properly long. They can be ornamented in good taste or in bad taste. Most of the vestments used in the church have a very long history. It is possible to document almost every kind of possible variation in size, shape, proportions, and decoration. There were some eras in which people knew how to wear their clothes — including their ecclesiastical vestments — gracefully. It is to these eras that we do well to look for the basic design for our vestments, letting our individual tastes determine the details. It is in this sense that we shall say hereunder that vestments “should” or “should not” have certain characteristics.

I

We repeat: Ecclesiastical vestments are not essential either to the effectiveness of the holy Gospel or to the validity and efficacy of the holy sacraments.

The Sacred Scriptures do not prescribe them. The current liturgical legislation of Lutheranism on this continent does not prescribe them. As far as either of these norms is concerned, there is no reason why our clergy should not minister before the altar in their street clothes.

That is precisely what the church's clergy did for three centuries. To a large extent the “sacred” vestments that ecclesiastical usage

has perpetuated are survivals of the ordinary everyday garb of the Mediterranean world in the early Christian era. The amice is the neckcloth of the ancients. The alb and its variants descend from the universally worn tunic of the period. The maniple and stole hark back to the handkerchief and napkin of the noble Roman of the Golden Age. The cincture is the belt which girded the tunic in place. The chasuble and the cope are ornamental versions of the all-weather cloak which St. Paul (2 Tim. 4:13) and his contemporaries wore.²

When a bishop of the second or early third century, flanked by his committee of presbyters and assisted by his panel of deacons, celebrated the Holy Eucharist, the only difference between the clothing of the officiants and the clothing of the laymen in the congregation was likely to be in the quality of the material and the condition of the garments, rather than in any basic variation in design. As late as the fifth century St. Celestine of Rome could exhort some of his colleagues in France: "We must be distinguished from the people by our teaching and not by our clothes."³ As time went on, however, and as the lay styles gradually changed, the sedulously conserved archaic character of the officiants' vestments became a kind of ecclesiastical uniform. As lay styles evolved still further, the clothing of the clergy became liturgical vestments properly so called. Walafrid Strabo, about 841, summarizes the development: "The priestly vestments have gradually become what they are today, that is, ornaments. For in the first ages the priests celebrated Mass dressed like everyone else."⁴

If, therefore, a 20th-century pastor chooses to wear his street clothes in the chancel he admittedly has a primitive parallel to plead in defense of his action.

There is more to be said about the matter, however.

For one thing, as a general rule we no longer conduct our

² But some scholars have held that, even as early as St. Paul's time, *phailons* had become a technical term which identified the chasuble worn at celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. The question is discussed in F. Field, *Notes on the Translation of the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1899), pp. 217 f.

³ *Epistola IV, ad episcopos provinciae Viennensis et Narbonensis*, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, L (Paris, 1863), col. 431.

⁴ *De rerum ecclesiasticarum exordiis et incrementis*, Ch. XXIV, in Migne, CXIV (Paris, 1879), col. 952.

services in houses, where street clothes would appear less out of place than they would seem in the chancels of most of our churches.

Second, the ugly, ungainly, and usually drab garments which fashion currently requires adult males to wear are a far cry from the graceful garb of the classic era. The total esthetic impressions of the two types are exceedingly different. The words of Percy Dearmer, even though he is of another communion, are worth quoting: "We cannot, if we would, return to the ages when men wore garments of classical beauty in everyday life; and therefore we are obliged to continue the distinction of a thousand years between what is worn at liturgical services and what is worn outside. In these days also of sombre clothing, we are able to bear witness to the joy and brightness of the Christian religion, and to its beauty, by using in church the bright colours and graceful forms which have come down to us through so many centuries."⁵

Third, mindful of the garish neckties and the sport shirts that have appeared on occasion in chancels and ecclesiastical processions in the past, one shudders to think of what might happen. There is almost bound to be in every group some irrepressibly individualistic parson like Robert Hawker. Although a Roman Catholic priest himself, Hawker detested priests who "dressed like an undertaker, Sir." For his own person he wore red gloves even at services and, at least now and then, a long purple cloak in lieu of a cassock. Under it he wore a fisherman's jersey, with a small red cross where Our Lord's side had been pierced.⁶

Fourth, the wearing of street clothes by the officiant at the altar violates one of the deep-seated culture patterns of our society. By law or by custom our society prescribes that the custodians of our culture wear formal vestments (even though they are not always so called) in the public performance of their public duties. So we have our sable-robed magistrates, our top-hatted and morning-coated diplomats, our black-and-white-garbed social leaders — white tie and tails are ultimately as much vestments as amice and chasuble are — our piebald-hooded educators and our uniformed military personnel, fire fighters, and traffic directors.

⁵ Percy Dearmer, *The Ornaments of the Minister*, new edition (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1920), p. 35.

⁶ Calvert Alexander, *The Catholic Literary Revival* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1935), p. 49.

Fifth, it is contrary to the historic practice of the Church of the Augsburg Confession for the officiant at the altar to wear street clothes. What that practice implies we purpose to explore in the following sections.

II

The first step beyond ordinary street clothes is the *black clergy gown*. It might be well for us at the outset to try to correct a few common misconceptions.

The black gown is not specifically ecclesiastical or clerical.

It is not specifically "Lutheran."

On the other hand, it is not specifically "Reformed."

In the 16th century it was the ordinary street garb of the clergyman, the scholar, the magistrate, and the public functionary in general. When blessed Martin Luther adopted the professor's street dress for use in the pulpit in lieu of the monastic habit, it meant simply that he was exchanging one kind of street garb for another.

The gown he wore had only a superficial resemblance to the "Lutheran gowns" and "Lutheran robes" offered by some modern clerical tailors.

The gowns of the period were fitted to the shoulders by means of a short yoke, which extended down front and back no more than the yoke on a man's shirt today. From the yoke the gown fell in exceedingly full folds to the ankles, hence the German *Talar*, from *talaris* (*talus*, "ankle"). It was generally not secured in front, but draped loosely around the body. Unless it was held in place by the wearer, it must have hung open, like many modern gowns, revealing what the wearer had on under it. At the neck both sides were folded back like the lapels of a man's coat today (without notches, of course), so that in a sense a V-neckline is at least not un-Lutheran. Often these lapels were widened for ornamental effect. At the back of the neck the collar might stand up almost as high as the base of the skull, or it might be folded back; not infrequently the neckline of the yoke was merely cut somewhat higher in back and there was no collar at all. Some gowns were made of damask or brocade, although a plain woven fabric (wool or silk) was more general. The sleeves were usually quite full, measuring 30 or more inches around at the wrists. Frequently the sleeves were slashed in front from the shoulder

to within an inch or two of the wrist; for unhampered convenience the wearer could put his hand and arm through the slit, allowing the sleeve to hang straight down at the side. Sometimes the sleeves were slashed all the way to the wrist and hung down in a purely ornamental fashion. In other instances the sleeves were hardly longer than the upper arm.

The gowns were sometimes lined with fur (as appears from surviving portraits of various 16th-century Lutheran worthies); the lining could be seen on the lapels of the gown, inside the sleeves, and where the gown hung open in front. Bands (*Beffchen*) were almost unknown on the continent at this period. They became general in the Lutheran tradition less than two centuries ago. To say that they symbolize the Law and the Gospel, or that they should be worn only by the *pastor loci*, is pure fantasy. The usual garb worn underneath the gown was a kind of cassock (known as *Summar* and by other names in German), although as time went on the conventional garb of the laity came more and more into use. The old combination of cassock and gown perpetuated itself down to the recent past in certain parts of Northern Germany. It is still (with bands, three-cornered *chapeau*, scarf, and buckled shoes) the formal court dress of Church of England priests and deacons. By the middle of the 17th century, on the other hand, in Denmark and elsewhere, the cassock and gown began to be combined into a single garment. By then also the simpler collars of earlier times had developed into the elaborately fluted "millstones," which were worn with all kinds of vestments both in divine service and out-of-doors. The ruffed collar survived in the churches of Denmark and Norway, and it is still seen in their daughter churches in this country. Elsewhere it was ultimately superseded by the bands that are part of the official garb of some Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Reformed, and Roman Catholic clergymen, Jewish rabbis, Canadian jurists and clerks, English choirboys (such as those of Chetham's Hospital, Manchester, and the singing "Children of the Chapel Royal" at St. James's Palace), and various other functionaries here and abroad.

A concomitant of the gown in the British Isles and elsewhere was the scarf (or "tippet"), which kept the wearer's shoulders and neck warm in cold weather and also distinguished the ordained

clergy from similarly garbed laics. In the Church of Norway the scarf ultimately took the present purely symbolic shape of the long, narrow, tasseled satin or silk "black stole," secured to the yoke of the clergy gown and hanging down on either side of the neck in front. Despite the name, the "black stole" is not a proper stole at all, but appears to be merely another form of the *liripipium*, or scarf. It cannot therefore with propriety be converted into a black stole by squaring and fringing its ends and embroidering crosses on them. Nor can it with propriety be replaced by a colored stole.

As a service vestment, the black clergy gown was most widely adopted in the 16th century by the Reformed groups, where it represented a kind of compromise between the completely laicized dress of the Anabaptists and other enthusiasts, on the one hand, and the traditional vestments of the Church of the Augsburg Confession, on the other. While we find it quite early as a vestment for the liturgical deacon—that is, the clergyman who chanted the Holy Gospel and administered the chalice at Holy Communion—in the Church of the Augsburg Confession, in the 16th century the gown was for the most part adopted as the officiant's vestment only where Reformed pressure was strong. Here and there it was belligerently insisted upon as a protest against the obligatory wearing of other vestments under the terms of the interims. The chaotic disorder of the 17th century, the aftermath of the 'Thirty Years' War, and the subjective emphasis of Pietism resulted in its more widespread introduction. In the 18th century its use was made obligatory (under penalty of suspension) throughout the Prussian dominions by the Calvinist soldier-king Frederick William I. This directive was subsequently relaxed, but in the 19th century the arch-unionist Frederick William III succeeded where his predecessor had failed.

Accordingly, we may summarize as follows, always keeping in mind the strictly adiaphoristic character of any and all vestments:

1. The introduction of the black clergy gown as a service vestment for the officiant repeats in the post-Reformation period the same process which took place in the primitive church. The ordinary out-of-doors garb of a special class (in this case of the learned professions) becomes the special garb which symbolically

identifies the officiating cleric. One may well ask, however, why we should now perpetuate a symbol that is only from 200 to 400 years old, in preference to another symbol of precisely the same kind that has 1900 years of use to recommend it? Why should we cling to a symbolic garb that 200 and 150 years ago identified the Pietists and Rationalists who perverted the orthodox evangelical faith, and that 400 years ago identified the Calvinist reformers, when we can use a symbolic garb worn by the Apostolic Church in the first century?

2. The black clerical gown worn by blessed Martin Luther and his colleagues differed materially in design and appearance from what today is often described as an authentic "Lutheran" gown. A white gown (that is, one identical in cut with a black gown, but made of white material) is an innovation of the present generation. As we shall see, an alb (or surplice or rochet) is a much better solution of the problem.

3. Where the black gown is in use, it may be worn with or without a cassock underneath. Unquestionably the cassock is more appropriate, particularly if the gown is so designed as to reveal any article of clothing worn underneath it. Where such articles of clothing are exposed, particularly collars, neckties, and shirts, they should be clerical, or at least conservative, in character. A clerical collar, with a rabat or clerical vest, is to be preferred to a lay collar (whether of the wing or folded-down type), necktie, and shirt (whether colored, patterned, or white). In this connection it might be well to point out that a clergyman, when in church (even out of servicetime) or in his office, is always most correctly garbed when he wears a cassock. The cassock is no more a liturgical vestment than a pair of trousers, and its cut is therefore immaterial. Our church's tradition favors the type that buttons down the front; thus the frontispiece to the famed *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* shows its author, blessed John Albert Bengel, the 18th-century Lutheran Abbot of Alpirsbach, so clad, plus gown, bands, and wig. On the other hand, the double-breasted "Anglican" type with sash is completely defensible on the ground of convenience. Cassocks may close completely at the collar, but usually they are cut so as to expose part of the wearer's clerical collar. Cassocks should be worn only with clerical collars.

4. The black gown may be worn with or without bands, depending on the style of the gown. Bands should not be embroidered with ecclesiastical symbols, since they are without liturgical significance and merely identify the wearer as a member of a learned profession.

5. Where protection against the cold and the weather, indoors or out-of-doors, is needed, a skullcap or a biretta should be worn. A modern lay hat is out of place with any kind of vestment. The shape of the biretta is immaterial. In Sweden it took the form of a soft low-crowned cylindrical cap, and some of the clergy of the American daughter church of the Church of Sweden still wear birettas of this shape. In the Latin Church it developed into the familiar headgear of Roman Catholic priests, with a large pompom and three prominent blades (the bladeless side is worn to the left). The rigidity of this style makes removal and replacement easy, a highly necessary quality in view of the intricate etiquette of the biretta in the Latin rite, which calls for many donnings and doffings. In Germany the Evangelical clergyman's biretta has gone through a variety of transformations. At one point it assimilated itself for a brief period to the three-cornered *chapeau*. Currently it is a more or less circular cap resembling a tam-o'-shanter or an oversized artist's beret. The 16th-century form of the biretta, the "square cap," worn both by the continental and by the English reformers, has been revived in the Anglican Communion under various names. A variety of styles completely acceptable for use by the Church of the Augsburg Confession is available. Square caps should be made of springy felt cloth and should be purchased one size larger than the wearer's normal hat size. Where the health of the preacher or officiant and the temperature of the church require it, there is no reason why a Lutheran clergyman should not, following an established 16th-century Lutheran custom, wear a biretta in the pulpit; thus the woodcut illustrating the Third Commandment in the Small Catechism of blessed Martin Luther printed by James Berwaldt at Leipzig in 1565 shows a preacher in the pulpit, vested in surplice and square cap.

6. There is in the Norwegian "black stole" good Lutheran warrant for wearing a scarf with the gown. Such a scarf may be of

silk or wool. In its original form — of which the “black stole” of the Church of Norway and the now familiar “chaplain’s scarf” of the American and British armed forces are merely debased developments — it consists of a single piece of cloth (silk for doctors and dignitaries, wool for others) about 20 inches wide and about 9 feet long; the ends may be pinked in a zigzag pattern or hemmed. The cloth is folded once the long way and pressed, so that it becomes a double fold of cloth about 10 inches wide and 9 feet long, worn stolewise about the neck. It should not be embroidered, fringed, or pleated. Unlike the stole, it is not a sacramental vestment. Former chaplains of the United States armed services may by custom wear their chaplain’s scarves even after separation from the military service. In such cases custom also permits them to wear on the left side at breast height the ribbons denoting the decorations and service medals they have received. Strictly speaking, the chaplain’s scarf is an item of uniform rather than an ecclesiastical vestment.

7. If temperature or weather requires a garment over the gown, indoors or out, the clergyman should secure a black cape (“cemetery cloak,” “Cowley cloak,” etc.) of black waterproofed or water-resistant material; these capes are conventionally closed at the front across the chest with a metal morse, or clasp. A lay overcoat is incongruous with any kind of vestment. If a true hood is attached to the back of such a cape, it may serve in lieu of a biretta.

8. Whatever cut of black gown is decided upon, the wearer should be sure that neither the material nor the shape of the sleeves, nor the cut of the garment, nor any kind of decoration on the gown infringes on the conventions adopted by colleges and universities to symbolize a degree which the wearer does not possess. If a clergyman has an academic gown of a degree which he properly holds, he may wear it in lieu of a black clerical gown.

9. Whatever the cut of the gown, there is no warrant in the history of our communion or of any other for ever wearing a colored stole over it at a public service, even though some other Lutheran church bodies in this country authorize it.

10. In recent years the custom has arisen among some of our clergy of wearing about their necks on cords or chains a crucifix

(or cross); the sizes, materials (ranging from gold to plastics), and degrees of elaborateness vary. In the Western Church the use of a pectoral cross has been common only since the 17th century and has identified a Roman Catholic bishop or abbot. Some Anglican prelates borrowed the custom from Rome in the 19th century. In the last century the pectoral cross for bishops was introduced into Sweden and Norway by royal order. The German Emperor directed its use by some of the Evangelical prelates of Germany. The Tsar authorized its use by some Evangelical clergy in his domains. It became general among the Danish bishops only in the 20th century. Since we do not have bishops, abbots, canons, or monastic orders bound to wear such a device, some Lutherans have expressed doubt that our clergy ought to wear pectoral crosses or crucifixes over their vestments. If for his own edification a Lutheran clergyman desires to wear such a symbol of our Lord's Passion as a private ornament, they suggest that he wear it on an unobtrusive cord or chain and keep it safely inside a pocket or under his vestments where it cannot be seen by others.

11. Whether an academic hood should be worn during service time is a mooted question. Lutheran tradition does not help us here, since academic hoods as we know them are not a part of the continental academic tradition. In England, from which our academic institutions borrowed the hood, the canons of the Church of England require priests of that denomination who have academic degrees to wear their hoods when vested in gowns or surplices. To charge the wearer of a hood with unseemly pride and ostentation would be uncharitable. At the same time some Lutherans who feel that a hood may be tolerable on a preacher regard it as less fitting before the altar. Certainly an academic hood is no less appropriate than an academic gown of the same degree. If a hood is worn, it should be worn only with the corresponding academic gown or with a surplice (or rochet), never with Eucharistic vestments. If both a scarf and a hood are worn, the scarf is laid on *over* the hood. If both a stole and a hood should be worn, the hood is laid on *over* the stole.

12. An important point may be noted. If a clergyman merely preaches the sermon *and takes no other officiating part in the service*, it is proper for him to wear a black clerical or academic

gown (with or without bands, scarf, hood, or cassock, according to his own or local custom), no matter what other vestments may be worn by the officiants. Of course, if he assists with the distribution of the sacred elements at Holy Communion, or reads a lesson, or sings with or rules the choir, or takes any other officiating part in the service besides preaching the sermon, he should wear the vestments which his other duties require. For non-Eucharistic devotions, including devotions of this kind in Advent and Lent, all the participants in the service are properly vested in gowns. The same is true for lectures and addresses in church.

13. The wearing of a gown is not a privilege limited to the clergy, and a gown may be properly worn by the vergers who leads a procession and by other lay functionaries about the church, such as ushers. It should not strictly be worn by choristers, male or female, or candidates for holy confirmation.

(To be concluded)