

# **“*Casula vero significare debet opera*”: Metaphors, allegories, and the mystical significance of liturgical garments in the accounts of the Fathers of the Church**

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## **Abstract**

Liturgical clothing is always a reflection of historical, economic, and political circumstances and the construction of an imaginary that corresponds to them. Explaining the choices made is not always easy: they are often the result of a process of change in thinking that takes place for several reasons.

In the Catholic world, the explicit educational objective of promoting the Word coexisted with the need for recognition and the intention of transmitting the hierarchical expression in a language understood by all. The detailed explanations of the forms and characteristics—sometimes apparently incongruent—of liturgical garments made throughout centuries by medieval thinkers tell us how they are not only an expression of implicit functionality but also of meaningful planning.

The number and quality of the Fathers who devoted themselves to this subject give us a clear indication of how the garment was one of the most thoughtful elements of reflection.

## **Contents**

- Migne and the *Patrologia Latinae*
- Fitting the meanings – Holy Vestments and communication
- *Quorum Fit Mentio* in *Patrologiae*
- Change in the perception of liturgical robes
- Recognition and codification
- Conclusion

## **Migne and the *Patrologia Latinae***

What in the habits of the priests represents that variety of garments, that splendor of gold, that sparkle of gems; for nothing there must be without reason, but must be the form and image of holiness and of all virtues [...] Comparing then our garments with theirs we are about to see what we have that is similar or different between them and in what way also they fit the meanings of the rite (Ivo of Chartres 1844-1855, 520 seq.)

Between 1844 and 1855 the French priest Jacques Paul Migne published (with collaborators) 218 volumes (plus indexes) of *Patrologiae Latinae Cursus Completus*, a mighty collection of the writings of Latin thinkers between the 2nd and 14th centuries, one of the most extensive collections of “memories” of the Church history. It is interesting that an entire volume of the indices (Migne 1844-1855, *Indices CCXXVII*) is devoted to the robes, worn by the clergy, monastic orders, and laity.

From the very beginning, the Christian tradition has seen the image as the natural complement to the Word. The Church's awareness of the relationship between image, scene and ritual has always been present; an awareness shared with the coeval secular power world so much so that, not coincidentally, the struggles between Papacy and Empire were also struggles of "image."

It is therefore not surprising that all "images" potentially connected to the world of the sacred have been explored from different angles, clothing included, and Christian thinkers grasped and made use of the possibilities offered by clothing, considering them on a par with other forms of visual communication. Over time there have been periods in which they have been deeply meditated upon, and others in which sacred garments have progressively lost their importance, eventually being almost divorced of their meanings. It may be interesting to understand how church dress changed, especially in relation to political and social changes and new theological interpretations that were evolving over time.

The *Index of Clothing* in the *Patrologiae Latinae* requires some considerations: 1) an index entirely devoted to clothing makes us think that even Migne, engaged in such a complex task and far removed from the apparent vanity of dress, could not ignore what the more refined theologians had written on this subject, 2) the mentions of clothes in the work of the Church Fathers are so numerous that they demand reflection, and 3) by acknowledging the importance of clothes in this context, we may realize how they are not only a reflection of society, but are themselves true agents of change.

### **Fitting the meanings - Holy Vestments and communication**

"If we put on the heavenly garment (1 Cor. 15:49), we shall not be found naked. If, on the other hand, we are not found in that garment, what shall we do, brothers? [...] It would be a great shame for us, who have worn the monastic habit for so long, if in the supreme hour we were found without the wedding garment (Mt.22:13)" (Mortari 2001, 172).

Greco-Latin culture possessed a high concept of the body and dress, perceived as expressions of identity. Even in the field of sacred clothing, the entire ancient world was far from aseptic, casual, or fanciful (Von Eles 2002). The biblical context offers numerous references to clothing, including everyday as well as cultic, which always indicate a crucial moment in the narrative. Dresses may indicate prestige and status, can have legal value, and can be used metaphorically, as a symbol of artifice or to denote what is transient, and finally, represent a moment of transition between one phase of history and another. In general, in the OT, people without clothing are innocent and/or helpless. Through dress they express their place in society; through dress, and actions related to it, relationships between people and/or between them and God are expressed.

For Josephus Flavius (Edwards 2001, 156), priestly clothing is invested with a cosmic symbolism that makes visible the links between heaven and earth. But he also informs us of the political conflict over control of clothing that occurred on several occasions between the Roman administration of Judea and the Jewish priestly caste. He reports how Jewish priestly robes were kept under the control of the Roman legate, effectively limiting the free use of them by the high priest, in a political-religious seesaw of great tension.

In the NT, too, garments feature prominently in several episodes, which are then explained in various ways and become part of both common expressions and the heritage of spiritual meditations. For example, for Father Dioscurus, the "wedding garment" in Jesus' parable (Mt 22:11f.) becomes a profound tool for reflection on the consistency of his faith as a monk. Clothing, therefore, is not just an object, but a set of meanings of which contemporaries were and are aware. Even in our accelerated and transgressive times, Catholic priestly garments retain a rich range of meanings (Piccolo Paci 2008), even if celebrants are not always fully aware of them.

## ***Quorum Fit Mentio in Patrologiae***

There is more than a score of authors from the 2nd to the 14th century who dealt with the description and mystical significance of priestly garments; the explanations they give for all aspects of the liturgy, including clothes, often refer to concepts that modern people are inclined to overlook, deeming them absurd, or even erroneous. An incomplete list of them includes names such as Tertullian (155-230ca.), Cassianus (360-435), Pope Gregorius Magnus (ca.540-604), Isidoro of Siviglia (ca.560-636), Bede the Venerable (673-735), Rabanus Maurus (ca.780-856), Amalarius Metensis (ca.775-850), Ivo of Chartres (1040-1115), Johannes Rotomagens (1067-1078), Rupertus of Deutz (1075-1129), Hugo de S.Victore (1096-1141), Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Honorius of Autun (1080-1137), Thomas, Cistercians monk (ca.1180), Pope Innocentius III (1161-1215), Hugo of S.Caro (d.1263). The list includes the most important exegetes and theologians of Church history, many of whom dedicated their life to consolidate Christianity both under a spiritual as a well as a political point of view. The question, then, despite the apparent 'strangeness' of some explanations of the symbolic value of robes, is why the most respected Church Fathers felt the need to talk about a seemingly frivolous and unimportant subject like robes.

From the 7th to the 9th century, the question of the use of images in the sacred sphere intensified and commentators applied new methodologies in the interpretation of sacred texts. Inspired by imperial ceremonial and rabbinic tradition, Christianity perpetuated some traditions, modified others, and finally arrived at a language of its own. In their works, Bede the Venerable and Rabanus Maurus take up the interpretations of Leviticus, adding further allegorical interpretations: here we see how, slowly, clothes and their representation can become real agents in the formation of the social body. For Bede, "*Vestis sacerdotalis Ecclesia est*" (Bede, 1844-1855, 328), the liturgical vestments are the Church/Community, while for Rabanus, "*Vestis est caro Christis*" (Rabanus Maurus 1844-1855, 1076), the robe is the flesh of Christ.

Rabanus undertakes a reflection on liturgical vestments, listing a series of garments and accessories (the superomeral, the tunic, the girdle, the mappula, the orarium, the dalmatic, the chasuble, sandals and pallium) that denote the growth of Christian liturgical clothing in recent centuries. Each of these elements can be, and is, interpreted by medieval thinkers for both its physical, allegorical, and spiritual characteristics. These indications are by no means 'accidental', but closely linked to the theological and institutional transformations that the Church was undergoing in the meantime: they highlight the strong growth of the institutional aspect of the Church in these centuries, which was also to be reinforced through the identification of the Church/Community and the priest as emissaries and direct representatives of the divine.

### **Change in the perception of liturgical robes**

*"Alba enim vestes gloriam resurrectionis designant"*

(The Alb – which is a white dress, the first to be worn by priest under the other liturgical clothes - represent the glory of the resurrection)

(Johannes of Rouen 1844-1855, 52)

Between the 11th and 12th centuries we are on the threshold of a new social and economic order, and there are more than a dozen authors who are interested in clothing, its actual form and symbolic meaning. The slow affirmation of the decisive role of the clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in religious as well as in social life, passes through a changed perception of the symbolic value of liturgy and of liturgical clothing (Rauwel 2007, 703-712), and what is interesting is precisely the concentration of scholars dealing with the subject. It was at this time that, in competition with the development of lay clothing, fine materials, sumptuous forms and new meanings also came into ecclesiastical use.

In his work, Hugo de S.Victore (1096-1141) distinguishes between the literal meaning of the Holy Scriptures—*historia*—and the deep meaning beyond the lines—*allegory*. He is aware of the importance of the Old Testament tradition, but he thinks it is also necessary to get rid of it. Hugo devotes an entire chapter to garments and for each he proceeds to give an etymological and symbolic explanation, partly describing their shape and type—one of the very first writers to list the ‘modern’ liturgical vestments—allowing us to understand how much they have changed over time. For him, the priest should wear several specific garments that are both formal and symbolic:

These are the garments that the new priest took from the Old Testament. The linen tunic, the girdle, the superhumeral, the undergarment, the rational, and the mitre; but the tunic down below and the rational are only for the pontiff. The new priest will not have the golden foil (on his forehead), for now the forehead of the faithful sees the sign of the cross stamped on it; for the blood of the Gospel is more precious than the gold of the law" (Hugo de S.Victore 1844-1855, 437).

He lists the stole, the chasuble, the girdle, the map, the dalmatic, the sandals, socks and liturgical accessories like the episcopal staff, the ring, and archiepiscopal pallium (**Fig. 1**).



Fig. 1. 1200-1230, *San Brizio and St. Martin*, Castle of Stenico, St. Martin's Chapel (Drawing by the Author): The Diacon S.Brizio wears the alb, the dalmatic, the amictus and the Book; the Bishop St. Martin wears the alb, the dalmatic, the chasuble, the amictus, the maniple, the pallium, the staff and the mitre.

The first series is not very different from those listed by Rabanus, but the insignia that follow clearly express the growth of even temporal power of the clergy. The ring and the staff are signs also used in the ceremonials of secular power, and although here they are charged with a symbolism steeped in spirituality, the ulterior meaning concealed in them could certainly not have escaped contemporaries.

The 12th century saw the peak of creativity for liturgical vestments, but after this time there will be fewer conceptual adaptations and more formal and aesthetic changes.

### **Recognition and codification**

The clothes of priests belong to the conversations of Christians. In divine things let them dress in linen, in everyday affairs let them use wool. Linen robes are subtle orations to God; wool in truth represents the vulgar discourses of the people; [...] The chasuble, which belongs to all clerics, signifies indeed the work, which to all belong: fasting, vigil, lectio, prayer. (Honorius Augustudunensis 1844-1855, 760).

Between the 12th and 14th centuries new social categories also evolved linked to the development, and gradual abandonment, of the feudal system. This is the period in which European society undergoes profound transformations, including the codification of highly elaborate sign systems—such as heraldry—and the struggle for power between Empire and Papacy. Clothing, too, undergoes a progressive and constant acceleration: the interrelationships and symbology between secular, religious and liturgical dress (Paul 2003) become more extensive and more complex, often emphasizing the distance between the 'people' and the 'vicars of Christ', stressing the latter.

Thomas, Cistercian monk (c. 1180), tried to explain the forms that liturgical clothing had now taken according to the new demands of Christian theology. Very interesting, for example, is his interpretation of the mitre: on the one hand, translating the dress of Exodus 28, he speaks of mitre and tiara, without mentioning the form, but a little further on, the mitre is described as having two horns - as it actually was in his time – “*id est Novi ac Veteri Testamenti scientiam*” (Thomae 1844-1855, 663) an explanation that certainly could not have applied in antiquity, but did very much apply in his time.

This was the period when the great thinkers of the Church revolved around papal power (Paravicini Bagliani 2012). Prominent among them is Innocent III, who is also the pontiff who decisively asserts the pre-eminence of Peter's throne over the imperial one (Ypengo 2003). He himself writes one of the most important treatises of his time on the affirmation of papal power and does not fail to devote ample space to the form, function, and symbolism of liturgical vestments, giving a stable structure to the subject, which will only see a real update with the Council of Trent.

### **Conclusion**

In the first centuries, the focus on a symbolism that drives affiliation to the new religion and the legitimation passes mainly through the transformation of the 'signs' of dress in the OT and the classical world. Between the 10th and 13th centuries, the quest for affirmation and legitimacy of the clergy and the religious world against the secular world becomes evident. As they became historicized, even liturgical garments slowly lost the profound motivations that had generated them and went on to lose their mystical and spiritual distinctiveness; so much so that the 14th-15th and 16th centuries saw the proliferation of ostentatious garments that only the Council of Trent would in part begin to bring back towards greater simplicity and

a return of meaning. Reading the writings of the exegetes helps us not only to understand the desire for legitimation and recognition of the growing Church, but also how the institution of a series of signs relating to dress was a vital part of the conceptual elaboration of change. This is an aspect that we still need to ponder and acknowledge, in its positive as well as its negative aspects.

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