
Priestly Preparations: Vestments and Prayers

Greetings!

In my homily last Sunday, I included a small mention of the vesting prayers for the priest in reference to “carrying the sweet yoke of the Lord”. I’ve always wanted to do some teaching on this whole tradition and practice of prayerfully preparing for Mass so this seemed like a good opportunity. This Sunday, I’m actually drawing the teaching given from the Vatican’s own article on this practice because of its quality. It’s a bit longer than my usual 1-2 page message for the bulletin, but our summer bulletin schedule will be a bit unusual anyway, so enjoy it.

Before I leave you this rich teaching, one could rightly ask, “What does a practice relegated to a priest have to do with me?”. A number of answers could be given, but perhaps I’ll leave you with a couple that come to my mind: 1) If the priest must prepare to celebrate Mass spiritually and meaningfully due to its supreme importance, should I also not prepare myself spiritually and meaningfully to participate in the Mass? What are the ways that I can prepare myself and my family?; and 2) I think the practice of praying and reflecting on supernatural realities while in the midst of the ordinariness of life is a powerful way to grow in holiness. How do we allow faith to penetrate and permeate our lives in the smallest ways, like washing our hands or even getting dressed?

I am, in our Lord, yours.
Fr. Brian Trueman

The Vestments and the Prayers for the Priest before Mass

1) At the beginning of his vesting he washes his hands, reciting an appropriate prayer; beyond the practical hygienic purpose, this act has a profound symbolism, inasmuch as it signifies passage from the profane to the sacred, from the world of sin to the pure sanctuary of the Most High. The washing of the hands is in some manner equivalent to removing the sandals before the burning bush (cf. Exodus 3:5).

The prayer hints at this spiritual dimension: "*Da, Domine, virtutem manibus meis ad abstergendam omnem maculam; ut sine pollutione mentis et corporis valeam tibi servire*" (Give virtue to my hands, O Lord, that being cleansed from all stain I might serve you with purity of mind and body).



It was once common for sacristies to have the *Da, Domine, virtutem* prayer posted in the sacristy above the sink.

After the washing of the hands, the vesting proper begins.



2) The priest begins with the amice, a rectangular linen cloth, which has two strings and is placed over the shoulders and around the neck; the strings are then tied about the waist. The amice has the purpose of covering the everyday clothing, even if it is the priest's clerical garb. In this sense, it is important to recall that the amice is worn even when the celebrant is wearing a modern alb, which often does not have a large opening at the neck but fits closely around the collar. Despite the close fitting neck of the modern alb, the everyday clothing still remains visible and it is necessary for the celebrant to cover his collar even in this case.

In the Roman Rite, the amice is donned before the alb. While putting it on the priest recites the following prayer: "*Impone, Domine, capiti meo galeam salutis, ad expugnandos diabolicos incursus*" (Place upon me, O Lord, the helmet of salvation, that I may overcome the assaults of the devil).

With the reference to St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (6:17), the amice is understood as "the helmet of salvation," that must protect him who wears it from the demon's temptations, especially evil thoughts and desires, during the liturgical celebration. This symbolism is still more clear in the custom followed since the Middle Ages by the Benedictines, Franciscans and Dominicans, who first put the amice upon their heads and then let it fall upon the chasuble or dalmatic.



3) The alb is the long white garment worn by the sacred ministers, which recalls the new and immaculate clothing that every Christian has received through baptism. The alb is, therefore, a symbol of the sanctifying grace received in the first sacrament and is also considered to be a symbol of the purity of heart that is necessary to enter into the joy of the eternal vision of God in heaven (cf. Matthew 5:8).

This is expressed in the prayer the priest says when he dons the alb. The prayer is a reference to Revelation 7:14: "*Dealba me, Domine, et munda cor meum; ut, in sanguine Agni dealbatus, gaudii perfruar sempiternis*" (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).



The Alb



4) Over the alb and around the waist is placed the girdle or cincture, a cord made of wool or other suitable material that is used as a belt. All those who wear albs must also wear the cincture (frequently today this traditional custom is not followed). For deacons, priests and bishops, the cincture may be of different colors according to the liturgical season or the memorial of the day. In the symbolism of the liturgical vestments the cincture represents the virtue of self-mastery, which St. Paul also counts among the fruits of the Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:22). The corresponding prayer, taking its cue from the first Letter of Peter (1:13), says: "*Praecinge me, Domine, cingulo puritatis, et exstingue in lumbis meis humorem libidinis; ut maneat in me virtus continentiae et castitatis*" (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).

5) The maniple is an article of liturgical dress used in the celebration of the extraordinary form of the Holy Mass of the Roman Rite. It fell into disuse in the years of the post-conciliar reform, even though it was never abrogated. The maniple is similar to the stole but is not as long: It is fixed in the middle with a clasp or strings similar to those of the chasuble. During the celebration of the Holy Mass in the extraordinary form, the celebrant, the deacon and the subdeacon wear the maniple on their left forearm. This article of liturgical garb perhaps derives from a handkerchief, or "*mappula*," that the Romans wore knotted on their left arm. As the "*mappula*" was used to wipe away tears or sweat, medieval ecclesiastical writers regarded the maniple as a symbol of the toils of the priesthood.

This understanding found its way into the prayer recited when the maniple is put on: "*Merear, Domine, portare manipulum fletus et doloris; ut cum exultatione recipiam mercedem laboris*" (May I deserve, O Lord, to bear the maniple of weeping and sorrow in order that I may joyfully reap the reward of my labors).



The Maniple

As we see, in the first part the prayer references the weeping and sorrow that accompany the priestly ministry, but in the second part the fruit of the work is noted. It would not be out of place to recall the passage of a Psalm that may have inspired the latter symbolism of the maniple.

The Vulgate renders Psalm 125:5-6 thus: "*Qui seminant in lacrimis in exultatione metent; euntes ibant et flebant portantes semina sua, venientes autem venient in exultatione portantes manipulos suos*" (They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. Going they went and wept, casting their seeds, but coming they shall come with joyfulness, carrying their maniples).



6) The stole is the distinctive element of the raiment of the ordained minister and it is always worn in the celebration of the sacraments and sacramentals. It is a strip of material that is embroidered, according to the norm, whose color varies with respect to the liturgical season or feast day.

Putting on the alb, the priest recites this prayer: "*Redde mihi, Domine, stolam immortalitatis, quam perdidisti in praevaricatione primi parentis; et, quamvis indignus accedo ad tuum sacrum mysterium, merear tamen gaudium sempiternum*" (Lord, restore the stole of immortality, which I lost through the collusion of our first parents, and, unworthy as I am to approach Thy sacred mysteries, may I yet gain eternal joy).

Since the stole is an article of enormous importance, which, more than any other garment, indicates the state of ordained office, one cannot but lament the abuse, that is now quite widespread, in which the priest does not wear a stole when he wears a chasuble.



7) Finally, the chasuble is put on, the vestment proper to him who celebrates the Holy Mass. In the past the liturgical books used the two Latin terms "*casuala*" and "*planeta*" synonymously. While the term "*planeta*" was especially used in Rome and has remains in use in Italy ("*pianeta*" in Italian), the term "*casula*" derives from the typical form of the vestment that at the beginning completely covered the sacred minister who wore it. The Latin "*casula*" is found in other languages in a modified form. Thus one finds "*casulla*" in Spanish, "*chasuble*" in French and English, and "*Kasel*" in German.

The prayer for the donning of the chasuble references the exhortation in the Letter to the Colossians (3:14) -- "Above all these things [put on] charity, which is the bond of perfection" -- and the Lord's words in Matthew, 11:30: "*Domine, qui dixisti: Iugum meum suave est, et onus meum leve: fac, ut istud portare sic valeam, quod consequar tuam gratiam. Amen*" (O Lord, who has said, "My yoke is sweet and My burden light," grant that I may so carry it as to merit Thy grace).

In conclusion, one hopes that the rediscovery of the symbolism of the liturgical vestments and the vesting prayers will encourage priests to take up again the practice of praying as they are dressing for the liturgy so as to prepare themselves for the celebration with the necessary recollection.

While it is possible to use different prayers, or simply to lift one's mind up to God, nevertheless the texts of the vesting prayers are brief, precise in their language, inspired by a biblical spirituality and have been prayed for centuries by countless sacred ministers. These prayers thus recommend themselves still today for the preparation for the liturgical celebration, even for the liturgy according to the ordinary form of the Roman Rite.

-Excerpt taken from the article, "Liturgical Vestments and the Vesting Prayers" by the Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff, Vatican Website, https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/details/ns_lit_doc_20100216_vestizione_en.html
