

## **The Holy Sacrifice Of The Mass Part XI**

**Fr. James L. Meagher, D.D. 1906**

### **The Vestments Christ And The Apostles Used In The Cenacle.**

WHY do clergymen wear vestments at our altars? Why does the Church clothe her ministers in such peculiar robes? Did Christ and the apostles wear a distinctive dress at the Last Supper? Can Church vestments in material, form and color be traced back to that night of the Last Supper? People often ask these questions, for few writers trace clerical robes and vestments to their origin in Temple and Passover. Let us see the reasons and the origin of the Church vestments.

Clothes show a person's position in the community, a ragged dirty tramp excites disgust, while a well-dressed person inspires respect. An individual's clothes, their form, colour and material strike the eye and make the first impression.

In all ages dress showed the wearer's position in society, and from the beginning officials wore distinctive garments and insignia of their office. In the ancient world, the king dressed in stately robes. When in patriarchal days the priest-king offered sacrifice, he vested in priestly garments. Sculptured ruins of Assyria, Persia, Egypt, etc., show kings dressed as the high priest of the nation, vested in sandals, alb, chasuble, girdle, miter and vestments, offering sacrifices, while in Babylonian ruins a mysterious figure shows him the forbidden fruit, and near by stands the tree of life. It is startling to see the figure of pontiff-king of these empires dressed in vestments of the same kind and shape as those now used at our altars, showing that vestments have hardly changed since the days before Abraham.

### **The Vestments Of The Church Unchanged**

Fashions change, the old costumes are abandoned new styles are taken up; it is hard to find two men or women dressed alike. But the Church never changes her vestments coming down from the Temple and the Last Supper. No Pope, Council or power on earth could forbid them because they are of divine origin.

When fanatic ignorant reformers of the sixteenth century swept over the north of Europe, not understanding the nature of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, they dismantled churches of religious signs, symbols and emblems, and their ministers preached in ordinary garments. But a reaction took place; ritualism revived, clerical robes again were seen in non-Catholic pulpits; disputes waxed warm; color, shape and number of ecclesiastical garments divided denominations, and high ritualistic churches introduced vestments. Let us see the origin of vestments.

From the beginning of civilization, the want of a distinctive dress was felt, that a man's calling might be seen in his clothing. The officer, soldier, sailor, conductor, fireman, nurse, judge, ruler, king, wear a distinctive dress to picture to the eye the calling, position and office of the wearer.

When God called Aaron and his sons to the priesthood of the Hebrew religion, and the sons of Levi for his ministers, with a wealth of detail and a striking minuteness, he laid down material, color, shape and ornament of vestments worn in public worship, and forbade them at any other time. Down the ages in the Temple till its destruction by the Romans under Titus, priest and Levite wore these vestments while ministering before the Lord. A hundred and seventy-six times they are mentioned in the Old Testament, and fifty-nine texts of the New Testament refer to them.

They were always used in the Church. It was a great sin to sacrifice without them. Popes forbade them used except in Church functions. Writers of apostolic age mention them. Pictures in catacombs show them. The great Fathers write of them. Pagans mocked them. All Oriental Churches still use them. A thousand proofs from the Fathers might be given to prove them used from the beginning of Christianity.

“What is there, I ask, offensive to God,” writes St. Jerome, “if I wear a tunic more than ordinarily handsome, or, if bishop, priest, deacon and other ministers of the Church come forth in white garments in the administration of the sacrifice?”

“We ought not to go into the sanctuary just as we please, and in our ordinary clothes defiled by the usages of common life, but with a clear conscience, and in clean garments handle the sacraments of the Lord.”

Church vestments, altar cloths, etc., are of linen and not of byssus, the word given in translations of the Bible. Temple vestments, table-cloths, napkins, etc. used at Passover in the time of Christ were of linen. From that time in the Latin Rite linen has always been used for altar cloths, purificators, albs, etc., in Church services. Why was linen and no other material used?

St. Augustine, explaining the work of the wise woman of Proverbs, says flax, from which linen is made is emblematic of our bodies in which lives the soul. The flax is prepared by beating, and then woven into linen, as our flesh is purified by suffering. He says the people’s clothing and the vestments were then of linen.

### **How Silk Was Brought To Palestine**

During the Babylonian Captivity the Hebrews saw kings and nobles clothed in silk, and this material, which came from China, the Israelites brought back with them to Palestine. When Alexander conquered these countries he found the same silken clothing, his soldiers brought silk to Greece and silk garments spread over the Grecian world long before Christ. When the apostles spread the Church in the Greek empire they made the altar cloths of linen and vestments of this silken material, and that is the reason that silk is exclusively used in the Oriental Rites, and why our more costly vestments are of silk while altar cloths, albs, purificators, etc., are of linen.

God revealed to Moses the most minute details of material, form and color of the priestly vestments. They were to be made only of linen, formed of beaten flax, to signify that the perfection of the priest only comes with bearing patiently the trials of this life. The colours were white, red, violet and green, signifying innocence, suffering, penance and youth. Later, black, typifying sorrow, was added. Josephus writes that these colours of the vestments of his day were emblematic of the colorus of the sanctuary of the Lord of hosts, and that they were embellished with beautiful embroideries. They are now the five colors of Church vestments.

Gold wire was woven into the cloth. “And he cut thin plates of gold, and drew them into small threads that they might be twisted with the woof of the aforesaid colors.” Here for the first time in Holy Writ, we find the famous “cloth of gold,” still found in vestments, regalia, etc. Gold cloth is rare in this country, gilt silver wire called “half fine” and brass, gilt or varnished; takes its place.

Linen, mentioned thirty times under the name of byssus, dyed in these different colours, was used for vestments, veils, etc., in the Temple. Linen is made of flax, while byssus is formed of the long delicate silky fibers, with which the pina, a shell-fish of eastern Mediterranean waters, attaches itself to the rocks. A careful microscopical and chemical examination of ancient Biblical byssus, shows it to be linen, proving the Church right in making her altar cloths, albs, etc., of linen and not of byssus.

### **Story Of The Temple Vestments**

The Levites in the Temple dressed in simple white linen, till Herod Agrippa II. gave them permission to vest in priestly garments, which Josephus says “was contrary to the laws of our country.”

Temple priest and high priest wore four vestments of shape and colour common to both. To-day priest and bishop saying Mass wear identical amice, alb, girdle, stole, maniple and chasuble. But the Hebrew pontiff wore four other vestments proper to his office, and the bishop in addition to the priest’s vestments vests in tunic, dalmatic, cross, gloves, miter and ring. Let us see the story of the Temple vestments and of the Last Supper, whence came Church vestments.

Born of Aaron’s family, bluest blood of glorious high priests flowing in his veins, learned in the Torah, the Books of Moses, versed in the prophets and in Israel’s history, bright of mind, spotless of body, — such were the requirements of the candidate for the high priesthood of the days of Christ. Maimonides mentions a hundred and forty defects which would forever debar him, and twenty-two, which he might in time overcome. St. Paul quotes qualities required in a bishop taken from the Temple rules relating to the high priest’s office.

If he passed the strict examination, his ordination lasted seven days, each day being devoted to a part of the ceremonial. The first day they poured the holy chrism in his head in the form of the Greek + not knowing it foretold the cross, the oil flowing down on his beard. In former times this was the holy oil with which Moses had consecrated his brother Aaron and his sons, and which had been preserved in the sanctuary.

With this oil they consecrated Saul, David, and the kings of David's line, when there was no dispute about the succession, as well as the ordinary priests. The cup containing this holy oil, preserved since Moses' day Jeremias hid with the ark in a cave on Nebo. From that time the Rabbis claimed the oil was not necessary, as the consecration of their fathers sufficed for the priests of the time of Christ. The oil was put on the pontiff's head and on the priest's hands. This is where bishop and priest are anointed with oil in our day.

### **The Temple Priest's Vestments**

Priest and pontiff, before sacrificing victims to the Lord of hosts, put on the linen drawers. Over this they wore a seamless white linen garment, having sleeves and falling down to the feet. In material, shape and colour it was exactly like the alb of our day. Only descendants of Aaron's family could wear it. Christ's grandfather, Joachim, had married into Aaron's family and his Mother made this seamless robe for her Son, because he was a Priest as well as Prince of David's line. Christ wore this white alb all His life and at the last Supper. It was the robe on which the soldiers cast lots, for they could not cut and divide it among them without destroying it. This was the origin of the alb used at our altars.

Priest and pontiff bound up this seamless robe with a girdle when sacrificing in the Temple and celebrating the Passover. "Thus shall you eat it," said the Lord regarding the Passover, "you shall gird your reins," and the Hebrew word given in this text is *chagar*: "to bind up." When man first bound a sash round his waist we do not find, for the sash or girdle comes down from earliest history and was found among all ancient peoples.

The people of Christ's day wore long flat sashes wound round the body many times, the folds often serving as pockets. The bishop's girdle of our time is flat

similar to that of the Temple priests, while the priests wear over the alb a round linen cord.

The miter of the Temple priest was called the *mygboath*, “hilt-shaped,” that is opened, similar to the bishop’s miter in the Latin rite, and was formed like the inverted calyx of a flower. The high priest’s miter was higher and more ornate, like our bishop’s miter. The people always wore their turbans in Temple, synagogue and at Passover, for to uncover the head would show disrespect during divine worship. These customs of the Jewish Church are continued during the first part of the Mass, during which bishops and priests wear the miter and beretta. The drawers, alb, girdle and miter were the four vestments common to priests and pontiff in the Temple.

Now let us see the four vestments of the high priest, called by Jewish writers “the golden vestments,” because gold, symbol of purity and authority, was woven through them.

### **The Ephod, The Rational, And Miter**

The ephod, “garment,” called also the *meil*, entirely made of “woven work,” of a dark purple color without sleeves covered him to his knees. At the hem it was adorned with alternate violet, purple and red pomegranate blossoms, having seventy-two gold bells between them, tinkling when he walked, in memory of the seventy-two families descending from Noe’s grandsons, which had become the great nations of antiquity. This vestment in material and shape was like the bishop’s rochet to which it gave rise.

He wore on his breast the “rational,” bearing twelve precious stones, each representing one of the twelve tribes of Israel. They were embedded in massive gold work, arranged in four rows, three in a row, each gem having engraved on it one of the Hebrew letters. Before they fell into idolatry in the days of Solomon, Jewish writers say the stones glowed with a supernatural light one after the other enabling them to read Jehovah’s decrees. After the destruction of the first Temple the rational was lost, and the God of their fathers spoke no more through gems of the rational. Nine times the Old Testament mentions the rational.

On his shoulders he wore two great onyx stones, each engraved with six names of the twelve Hebrew tribes. They were called the Urim and Thummim: “Light and Perfection,” “Knowledge and Virtue,” dogmatic and moral theology, to foretell the faith and morals of the future priesthood of the Church.

Aaron’s miter, called *miznepheth*, Moses made of finest white linen with lace and embroidered work, covering his head like a crown.

God himself told the Hebrews to vest in sacred garments when celebrating the Passover. “And thus shall you eat it, you shall gird your reins, and you shall have shoes on your feet, holding staves in your hands, and you shall eat it in haste, for it is the phase, that is the Passage of the Lord.” In this account of the first Passover the Hebrews celebrated as a nation, we find prescribed by God himself the bishop’s shoes, girdle and crosier.

But as ages passed, the Hebrews copied the vestments of the Temple priests and vested in them for the Passover, so that at the time of Christ, they celebrated the feast vested in the elaborate robes Christ wore at the Last Supper.

### **The Vestments Christ Wore**

But did Christ wear all the vestments of the bishop in our day? We must take into consideration the peculiar climate of Judea. Sion is 2,700 feet over the sea, while the deep Jordan valley and the Dead Sea are 1,300 feet below sea level. In April Jerusalem is quite cold, while the Jordan plains are excessively hot. The people of Judea must be prepared for these changes of climate when traveling from the stifling Jordan up to Jerusalem. For these reasons Christ and his apostles wore many garments while in Jerusalem, and when celebrating the Last Supper. This is the reason that the bishop robes in so many different vestments when pontificating. Ten garments are mentioned as having been worn by Jews of that time. The first-born among the Hebrews always dressed in costly garments, and if he belonged to a royal family they were purple.

In the days of Christ every Hebrew wore the phylacteries on brow and left arm. They were capsules of rawhide calf-skins, enclosing four little square

parchments, on which was written a part of the law of Moses they recited at night and morning prayers.

The first parchment had in Hebrew: “Sanctify unto me the first-born, etc.” The next had: “And when the Lord shall have brought you into the land of the Canaanite, etc.” The third had: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, etc.” The fourth had: “If then you obey my commandments,” etc.

At the present time these four parchments are enclosed in little square boxes of rawhide making two square capsules of an inch square, the one for the head being called the *tflin-schel-rosh*, “tflin-of-the-head,” and they wear it on the top of the head while praying. Leather straps running through it bind it to the head, hang down behind, and the ends are brought forward to hang down on the breast. Each side of the capsule has the Hebrew letter S. The knot behind the head is tied in the form of four squares, making a cross, which they say represents the letter D.

The capsule of the other tflin is worn on the left arm, above the elbow next the heart, and a long strap is wound seven times round the arm, brought down, and wound three times round the two middle fingers of the left hand, the knot tying it to his arm also representing the letter D, but it is not in the form of a cross.

Taking the two Hebrew letters, Sh and D, and putting in vowels, we have the word Shadai, “Almighty God,” or “The Greatest God,” the word implying greatness, majesty, power, etc., to whom prayers are always offered in the synagogue in which Elohim represents God in strict justice and Adonai, God as Lord or Supreme Ruler.

When pontificating the high priest wore a gold band as a phylactery or tflin across his brow on which was engraved “Holiness unto Jehovah,” and the straps with which it was tied hanging down, gave rise to the two bands hanging down behind from the bishop’s miter. The Day of Atonement he did not wear a gold band across the brow when pontificating. The Pharisees very wore large phylacteries. Because of the ostentatious way they wore them Christ reproved their spirit of pride.



## **Origin Of The Phylacteries**

There is a dispute regarding the origin of the phylacteries. Jewish writers say that in the days of Moses all kinds of ornaments, armlets, rings, etc., were worn as charms and spells, often having immodest pictures, engravings, sayings, etc., and that God ordered Moses to make the phylacteries for the Hebrews to wear them from the Egyptian superstitions, as the Law says: "And it shall be as a sign in thy hand, and as a thing hung between thy eyes for a remembrance." The Hebrew writers before the Babylonian Captivity do not mention the phylacteries.

The Cairo museum, containing the richest collection in the world of ancient Egyptian relics and curios, shows that they followed all kinds of such superstitious practices.

Gods and goddesses are on all sides, and statues show kings and nobles holding forms of gods. Little scarabs, various gods, emblems, jewelry of gold and silver formed into charms, tokens and religious emblems filling many cases, prove they were very prone to superstitious practices. Jews of liberal tendencies of our time condemn the phylacteries and call the strict Jews who wear them "bridled asses."

But orthodox Jews hold that the phylacteries came from Moses. Eleazar, whom Ptolemy Philadelphus sent as ambassador to the king of Egypt, stated they came from Moses. St. Jerome and the Fathers of his day write that they were very common in their times. All Jews of Christ's day wore them in the Temple, synagogues and during their prayers especially at the Passover. Some think that Christ and the apostles wore them at the Last Supper. But we are not sure of this. Following these Jewish high priests, St. John and some of the other apostles wore gold plates on their brows when saying Mass, similar to the gold phylactery worn by the high priest when pontificating in the Temple. The early Christians wore these phylacteries. But by lapse of time the custom degenerated into an abuse, for they were worn as charms, seals, pagan devices, and gave rise to superstitious practices. Popes Gelasius and Gregory I condemned the abuse and the Council of Laodicea forbade them. Then

Christians began to use crosses, medals, etc.; and religious emblems, and pictures, crucifixes, etc., multiplied.

### **The Cassock: Its Colours And Styles**

The Jews of the days of Christ clothed themselves in a long seamless garment like a cassock, which they called the *cutoneth* and the Greeks the *xiton*. Josephus writes that it was made of a single piece of cloth without seams, with or without sleeves, and was closed at the neck with a string. The priests always wore it without seams, and this was the seamless robe of Christ.

A modification of it of fine linen worn next to the body became the shirt. Made of wool, covering the person from the neck to the feet it was opened in front, but closed with little buttons and gathered at the waist with the girdle. It was of the same form of the priest's cassock of our time. All men of the Orient wear it in our day, and it has the very same form as the clergyman's cassock.

Rulers wore this garment of different colors. That of the high priest was white, and he wore it all the time, putting over it his priestly vestments. This is the reason the Pope's cassock is white, for he is the High Priest of mankind. Jewish Rabbis still wear a white cassock the Day of Atonement.

The Roman emperor's cassock was of brilliant red and this colour is seen in the cardinal's red cassock. Kings and members of royal families wore a purple cassock — purple being the mark of authority and dominion. Hence high officials of courts wore purple. Members of royal families dressed in purple even if their dynasty did not sit on the throne. Christ, being a Prince of the House of David, highest honoured of the Hebrew kings, wore this purple garment. He is often represented in art as clothed in a purple robe, the *cutoneth* or *xiton*. This is the reason bishops wear a purple cassock, for that was the colour of Christ's cassock at the Last Supper.

The Temple priest's cassock was of linen. But laymen wore a white woolen cassock called the *simehah*. The desert Arabs, who never change, still wear it as an everyday garment. This gave rise to the white alb the priest wears at Mass; it was always put on as a sign of gladness at feasts and when celebrating

the Passover. Christ and his apostles, it seems probable, were clothed in it at the Last Supper.

This cassock was worn by both sexes at time of Christ. It was sometimes white or of various colors. It was the nuptial garment mentioned in the Gospel.

Men of the Roman empire wore it covering the whole person. In the middle ages it was cut short coming down to the knees, and became the frock-coat or "Prince Albert" of our day. The buttons in the back were used to fasten on the sword when nearly all men went armed. But although the sword has been laid aside the buttons have remained. The women's cassock became the gown or dress. The women of the Orient still wear it, having over it a skirt which they raise up and cover their head and upper part of the body with it when they appear in public.

### **Usefulness Of The Cassock**

To shield the shoulders from the fierce desert sun they let the ends of the turban fall down on the back behind. You will find the sons of the desert still wearing the garment falling down that way. The desert heat is so great, and the sunlight reflected from the dry sands so piercing, that the skin would be blistered if not shaded. This is seen in the Scotch cap, sailor hat, and perhaps bands of bishop's miter.

They came to feast with head and upper part of the body protected that way. It was a relic of the patriarchal period, when their fathers, as shepherd sheiks, pastured their flocks on the borders of the desert. The Hebrews celebrating religious, civil, and family feast wore it on their shoulders. After the banquet they took it off. Rulers and wealthy persons wore these amices made of costly materials. Sometimes it was made as large as a tunic, and covered the upper part of the body to the knees. This was the origin of the amice.

When the cincture was first used we know not. We first find it in the consecration of Aaron's sons to the priesthood. In the house the Hebrews in the days of the Kings laid it off and put it on when they went out. But by lapse of time the Jews wore it all the time.

They wore two kinds of girdles in Asia, one was a sash about six inches wide, which was fixed with a clasp in front the ends hanging down. It was of leather, wool, linen, or other material. John the Baptist was clothed with a tunic of camel's wool bound up with a leather girdle, such as you see to-day worn by the Bedouin of the deserts. The wealthy wore girdles of wool, linen, or costly material, sometimes of silk woven, embroidered and tied in front or at the side.

Women wore the girdle fastened in front with a buckle, brooch or other ornament, often they were made of costly material. Being wide the folds served as pockets. Arabs stick swords, daggers, etc., in the girdles. These vestments can be seen in the sculptured figures on the great platform of Persepolis where stood the palaces of the great Persian kings before Alexander conquered that country. The girdle survives in the waistbands and belts women wear in our day.

The priestly girdle called the Abnet was a linen band three fingers broad, very long, with tassels adorned with various colored embroidery work. Wound around the body during his ministry, the priest threw the ends over his shoulders as the clergymen of the Oriental Rites still do. Josephus says "the ends were tied in a knot in front, and hung down to the feet," as the celebrant ties the girdle in our day. The men of Palestine still wear the girdle wound around their waist many times.

Girdle and alb are fundamental religious vestments of earth and heaven. The beloved apostle saw the Son of God thus clothed. "And in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about near the paps with a golden girdle." "And the seven angels came out of the temple having the seven plagues, clothed in clean white linen, girded about the breasts with golden girdles." The Church, Bride of the Lamb, thus clothes her clergy at her altars as she is vested in heaven. "And to her it hath been granted that she should clothe herself with fine linen glittering and white. For fine linens are the justifications of saints." Thus all down the ages the white vestments represent the purity and innocence of those who minister at our altars.

## **Editor's Comment:**

When we began this series in June of 2003 we pointed out:

A common opinion holds that Christ said the First Mass at the Last Supper according to a short form of blessing and prayer, then consecrated the bread and wine, gave the Apostles Communion, and preached the sermon John's Gospel gives. When the Apostles said Mass they recited some Psalms, read the Scriptures, preached a sermon, consecrated the bread and wine recited the Lord's Prayer and then gave Communion. In the Apostolic age the saints added other prayers and ceremonies. Afterwards Popes and councils still more developed the rites, composed new prayers, and that during the Middle Ages the Mass grew and expanded into the elaborate Liturgy and Ceremonial we have today.

*These opinions are wrong.* From the beginning the Mass was said according to a long Liturgy and with ceremonies differing little from those of our time. No substantial addition was made after the Apostolic age — what the early Popes did was of minor importance — revisions and corrections. Little addition was made to the Ordinary of the Mass handed down from the days of St. Peter, founder of our Latin Liturgy.

No pagan ceremony ever formed a part of the Mass. Through holy men of the Old Testament, God Himself revealed the forms, rites and ceremonies of divine worship, and these were all combined and summed up in the Last Supper.

**Before time was in the eternity of God — at the dawn of time —**

**at the beginning of recorded history**

**— at the creation of man:**

**'I Am Who Am'**

**looked at His Only Begotten Son**

**hanging on the Cross and**

**heard the words "Consummatum est".**

*From All Eternity God structured  
the Mass and its' Ceremonies around  
this event. In this series we have  
related the history of the Mass with its Ceremonies as foretold in the  
Patriarchal Worship, in the  
Old Testament, in the Hebrew Religion, in Moses' Tabernacle, and  
in the Temple during the  
Days of Christ.*

*For from the rising of the sun  
even to the going down,  
My name is great among the Gentiles,  
and in every place there is sacrifice,  
and there is offered to My name  
a clean oblation; for  
My name is great among the Gentiles,  
saith the Lord of Hosts. (Malachias 1:11)  
The Lord has sworn,  
and He will not repent:  
Thou art a Priest forever  
according to the order of Melchisedech  
(Psalm 109:4)*

We have amply demonstrated that the Mass as we know it and celebrate it was never arbitrarily concocted or made up but was from all eternity in the mind of God.

At this time we will look directly at the Last Supper and see how Christ celebrated His Mass.

To Be Cont'd.