



# The Clerical Garb

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By Rev. Fr. Steven Webber, SSPX

The Acolyte, once he understands the office he is accomplishing, being called to the Holy of Holies, should then reflect on the vestments he wears and the honor due them. These garments are the Cassock and Surplice. We priests of the Society of St. Pius X received these special vestments on February 2nd, the feast of Candlemas. On that day we were reminded that we had to be 'a light illuminating the nations'. The black Cassock signifies our death to the world while the white Surplice invokes bright new life, the life of grace. At that moment we were marked as different from all others, called to be men of the altar, the servants of God. Do servers, especially those of the St. Stephen's Guild, recognize that they also, when vesting in the preparation for the Liturgy of the Church must first die to themselves as they put on the Cassock in order to show forth the glory of Christ embodied in the Surplice? Do they adopt this attitude as they approach the tremendous privilege of serving God at His altar?

## **History of the Cassock<sup>1</sup>**

Although in the beginning of Christianity there was no distinctive clerical dress, it soon developed from a Roman custom. The civil clerks, in the late Empire, were recognized by their 'cloaks' or birri - large, long, dark garment wrapped around the body. As early as the fourth century, the Church insisted that this garment not be confused with any purpose of following

an ascetical life. It was simply the distinct mark of a secular, Roman profession. Only over time would this pagan custom take on a Christian significance, as clerk's garments became clerical i.e. associated with the men of God. The sixth century witnessed this notable break between clerk and cleric as the clergy adopted the old Roman civil dress with its long tunic and voluminous cloak, whereas the laity instead opted for a shorter garment. Over the next few decades the Church, in different parts of the world, enjoined stricter norms for Her clergy. In Portugal, for example, sixth century documents mentioned that the cloak should reach to the feet. At the same time in England, we read that 'undraped lower limbs were not regarded as seemly in the clergy', and reminders became more frequent that clerics should not adopt the current fashions of worldly attire. Concern with proper dress was of such interest that at the Trullan Council in 691, it was prescribed that all who were enrolled among the clergy should wear at all time the robes appointed for their vocation, under pain of excommunication for a week. After the eighth century it was universally understood that all clerics were to restrain from wearing rich attire, bright colors, and extravagant ornaments. By 1222 the Church insisted that dignitaries and ordinary priests should be seen abroad becomingly clothed in the 'ecclesiastical habit' and should use 'closed copes'; indeed, this may have been the first time that clerical habits were imposed on secular clergy. This 'closed

cope' would have been a type of cassock, which fitted like a tunic. By the seventeenth century a universal rule concerning clerical dress was established in greater detail by Pope Urban VIII. The Catholic Encyclopedia notes:

[Urban] directed that the cassock should be confined with a cincture, and that the cloak worn over it should normally, like the cassock, fall as low as the ankles. The under-dress, the hose included, should be modest and dark in color. All embroidery and lace upon collar or cuffs was forbidden... Infringements of these regulations were to be punished with a pecuniary fine.'

Finally, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore (1884) states, 'We wish therefore that when at home or when engaged in the sanctuary priests should always wear the cassock which is proper to the clergy. When they go abroad for duty or relaxation, or when upon a journey, they may use a shorter dress, but still one that is black in color, and which reaches to the knees, so as to distinguish it from lay costume.' The ceremonies and prayers attached to the reception of the Cassock make a perfect conclusion to this little history, expressing beautifully the significance of this vestment.

Blessing of the Cassock: 'O Lord Jesus Christ, Who hast condescended to clothe thyself with our wounded nature, we beg Thee of Thine immeasurable goodness to bless this garment which ecclesiastical superiors have sanctioned for clerics, as a token of the innocence and humility which should be theirs. Laying aside the vanity of secular garb, may these Thy servants wear the cassock, and in so doing may they likewise put on Thee, and be recognized as men dedicated to Thy ministry.'

Prayer for vesting: 'The Lord is my portion and of my inheritance and of my cup, it is Thou who will restore my inheritance to me.'

### History of the Surplice

The Surplice is a large-sleeved, mid-length tunic, made of fine linen. It is exclusively a liturgical vestment which the lower clergy wears when in administering the sacraments or giving blessings, as well as during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The name of the

"Surplice" roughly means something worn over (super) the customary fur clothing (pelliceae), prevalent in colder climates. Originally the surplice was a full-length tunic reaching down to the feet, but from the thirteenth century onward it was continually shortened until it finally reached the length we know today, becoming a universal custom by the fifteenth century. As the distinctive sacerdotal dress of the lower clergy, the Bishop, after giving the tonsure, places the Surplice on the candidate with these words: 'May the Lord clothe thee with the new man, who is created in righteousness and true holiness after the image of God.'

May these garments, which the server is privileged to wear be a constant reminder of the inner sentiments he must foster when serving Our Lord, both in dying to himself as he puts on the Cassock and living to Christ when he dons the Surplice. May habitual reflection on these spiritual realities encourage us all to serve God with greater devotion at the altar.

**I. The following information in the article is taken from the "Catholic Encyclopedia" vol. IV & XIV, Copyright 1913.**

