

Clothing in the Worship Assembly

By Ruth Meyers | Volume 4.1 Winter 2018

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The letter to James admonishes the Christian community: “Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ or, ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” (James 2:1-5).^[1] People may come to the assembly wearing clothing that reflects their economic status, yet differences of wealth and poverty have no place in the Christian community, says James, reflecting the reversal that is also proclaimed in the song of Mary, “he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 2:53).

The Radical Equality of Baptism

Presenting a vision of radical equality in Christ, in which distinctions are erased, the apostle Paul told the Galatians, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3:27). While there is no indication that baptism in the apostolic age included a literal clothing with garments representing Christ, nor that baptized Christians wore special garb when they assembled, Paul’s assertion that in Christ “there is no longer slave or free” (Gal. 3:28) suggests that divisions arising from class, status, and wealth are overcome in resurrection life in Christ. Clothing serves as a metaphor for a new identity and unity in Christ.

By the fourth century, newly baptized Christians were literally clothed in new garments. At the beginning of the baptismal rite, the candidates stripped off their old clothes and entered the font naked, symbolically dying with Christ. Cyril of Jerusalem interpreted the nakedness of the candidates as an imitation of Christ’s nakedness on the cross.^[2] When they came up from the water, resurrected with Christ, the neophytes were clothed in white robes. Cyril explained the symbolism by quoting Isaiah: “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10). Cyril urged the neophytes to keep their spiritual dress “truly white and shining,” even though they would not always wear white clothing on their bodies.^[3] John Chrysostom interpreted the white robe as a sign of Christ, alluding to Galatians 3:27: “Now the neophytes carry Christ himself, not on their clothes, but dwelling in their souls with his Father, and the Holy Spirit has descended on them there.”^[4]

During the fourth century, Christians were often baptized at the Easter Vigil, and it became customary for the neophytes to wear their garments throughout the octave of Easter, during which time they received additional teaching. After this first week of baptismal life, new Christians removed their baptismal robes and took their place among the faithful, as Augustine explained, “Today, as you see, our infants mingle with the faithful and fly as it were from the nest.”^[5]

The interpretations of the baptismal garment emphasize salvation, resurrection, and new life, rather than signifying economic equality. Yet as a garment common to all newly baptized, the robe also points to unity in Christ in which there are no distinctions among the baptized.

The practice of clothing the newly baptized continued throughout the Middle Ages as infant baptism became normative. The Sarum rite stipulates that the “chrismal robe” is the property of the church and must be returned to the church after the baptism: “the cloth must not be put to common uses, but brought back to the church, and kept for the uses of the church.”^[6] Requiring the baptismal garment to be maintained by the church may have served a practical purpose, providing a robe during an era when clothing was very expensive and most people had a very limited wardrobe.^[7] Yet a common baptismal garment also reflects the Pauline vision of the unity and equality of Christians as baptized members of Christ.

The Emergence of Distinctive Clerical Vesture

Until the early fifth century, Christians did not adopt vesture that distinguished the presider from other members of the assembly. It is likely that all Christians, including the presider, wore their finest clothes for worship, reflecting both reverence and rejoicing.^[8]

When differences in clergy and lay vesture began to emerge in Gaul, Celestine of Rome objected, “The true distinction between a bishop and his flock is to be found in his doctrine, not in his vesture.”^[9] Eleven hundred years later, Martin Luther criticized clerical dress, emphasizing the common priesthood of baptism: “That a pope or a bishop . . . prescribes dress unlike that of the laity—this may make hypocrites and graven images, but it never makes a Christian or ‘spiritual’ man. Through baptism all of us are consecrated to the priesthood.”^[10]

Despite Celestine’s disapproval of clerical vesture, distinctive liturgical garb for clergy gradually emerged during the early Middle Ages. The alb, a white linen tunic, became the basic liturgical garment for clergy. Both the alb and the chasuble worn over it were once common clothing in the Roman empire.^[11] As fashions changed, clerical dress did not, though vestment design varied over the centuries.

The ancient Greco-Roman world distinguished rank in the civil hierarchy with particular insignia and forms of dress. As clergy came to be regarded as a distinctive class, or order, within civil society, they added signs of civil office to their liturgical dress.^[12] Eventually the stole became customary liturgical vesture for deacons and presbyters at Rome, worn in different ways to differentiate the orders.^[13]

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Distinctive liturgical garb served not only to identify the ordained ministers presiding at liturgy but also to reinforce power and authority. For centuries, ecclesiastical garb was markedly similar to imperial vesture.^[14] The use of distinctive liturgical vesture thus served not only to reinforce clerical authority but also to ally ecclesiastical authority with the power of the emperor, thus supporting the class structure of medieval Europe. The radical equality of baptism did not eliminate distinctions in daily life.

By the twelfth century, both laity and clergy were critiquing clerical clothing. Clerical critiques were aimed at “the skewed distribution and uses of wealth within the church, particularly the making and use of ornate liturgical vestments when the poor went hungry and raggedly clothed.”^[15] Wealthy laity, however, continued to donate resplendent liturgical vesture. Their critique of clergy dress focused on street attire, and ecclesiastical legislation required that street clothes were to be “modest and dark in color.”^[16]

In the sixteenth century, Protestant reformers like Martin Luther rejected the ornate vesture of the medieval West. The black academic gown became customary in Reformed churches, while Anglicans eventually adopted the surplice, a variation of the alb, as the primary liturgical garment.^[17]

Conclusions

Both baptismal garments and liturgical vesture serve symbolic functions in the liturgical assembly. Neither is essential to Christian worship, yet both have endured over many centuries, taking on different meanings in different times and places. What might Christian assemblies today consider as they discern whether and how to use these symbols?

Baptismal garments. In the Roman Catholic Church, the baptismal rites introduced after the Second Vatican Council include clothing with a baptismal garment as an “explanatory rite,” and some other churches have introduced this practice as an optional element of the celebration of baptism. The robe signifies not only the baptizand’s identification with Christ but also the radical equality and dignity of baptized Christians. Where the baptismal garment becomes a standard element of the baptismal rite, it can serve as visible sign of the new identity given in Christ. The use of the garment also offers a teaching opportunity, inviting members of the assembly to consider the implications of the proclamation, “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34).

Liturgical vesture. In a recent study of clergy clothing, Maureen Miller observed, “at the very origins of Christian liturgical dress there were within the church those who embraced majesty and solemnity in the name of honoring God and those who found ornament offensive as a betrayal of Jesus’ message.”^[18] This tension may remain for churches deciding whether and how clergy and other worship leaders will be vested. Yet vestments can not only enhance the dignity and festivity of the rite, they can also shift the focus from the individual presider to the shared action of the assembly, emphasizing “the primacy of the institutional role over the personality” of the worship leader.^[19]

The admonition in the letter of James, warning against showing favoritism in the assembly, suggests the importance of radical hospitality, embodying Christ’s all-embracing love and welcoming all regardless of how well-dressed or wealthy they are. The choice of vesture for worship leaders is but one dimension of crafting worship that celebrates the reign of God, one that is of far less importance than the primary symbols of water, bread, wine, and the members of the assembly, the body of Christ.



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[1] All citations of Scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version.

[2] Edward Yarnold, S.J., *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 76.

[3] Cyril of Jerusalem, cited in Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 89.

[4] John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions* 4.17, cited in Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 32.

[5] Augustine, Sermon 376, cited in Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 33.

[6] "The Sarum Rite," in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, ed. E. C. Whitaker and Maxwell E. Johnson, 3rd ed., Alcuin Club Collections 79 (London: SPCK, 2003), 301.

[7] See, for example, Maureen C. Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe, c. 800-1200* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 21: "For the mass of the population in early medieval Europe, garments were too valuable to be thrown away. They were passed down, patched, and reused."

[8] Christa C. Mayer-Thurman, "The Significance of Vestments," in *Raiment for the Lord's Service: A Thousand Years of Western Vestments* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1975), 43.

[9] Celestine, *Letter*, 26 July 428, cited in David R. Holeton, "Vestments," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul Bradshaw (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 466.

[10] Martin Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), 66, accessed 12/1/17, <http://bit.ly/2EcwLa5>.

[11] Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, 15; Pauline Johnstone, *High Fashion in the Church: The Place of Church Vestments in the History of Art from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Leeds, UK: Maney Publishing, 2002), 7, 10.

[12] Karel C. Innemé, *Ecclesiastical Dress in the Medieval Near East* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 6.

[13] Holeton, "Vestments," 469.

[14] Mayer-Thurman, "The Significance of Vestments," 43.

[15] Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, 241.

[16] Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, 37-38, 241-42; quotation on 241.

[17] Johnstone, *High Fashion in the Church*, 6, 18-19.

[18] Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, 17.

[19] Holeton, "Vestments," 464.

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Recommended Citation: Meyers, Ruth (2018) "Clothing in the Worship Assembly," *The Yale ISM Review*: Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 9. Available at <http://ismreview.yale.edu>