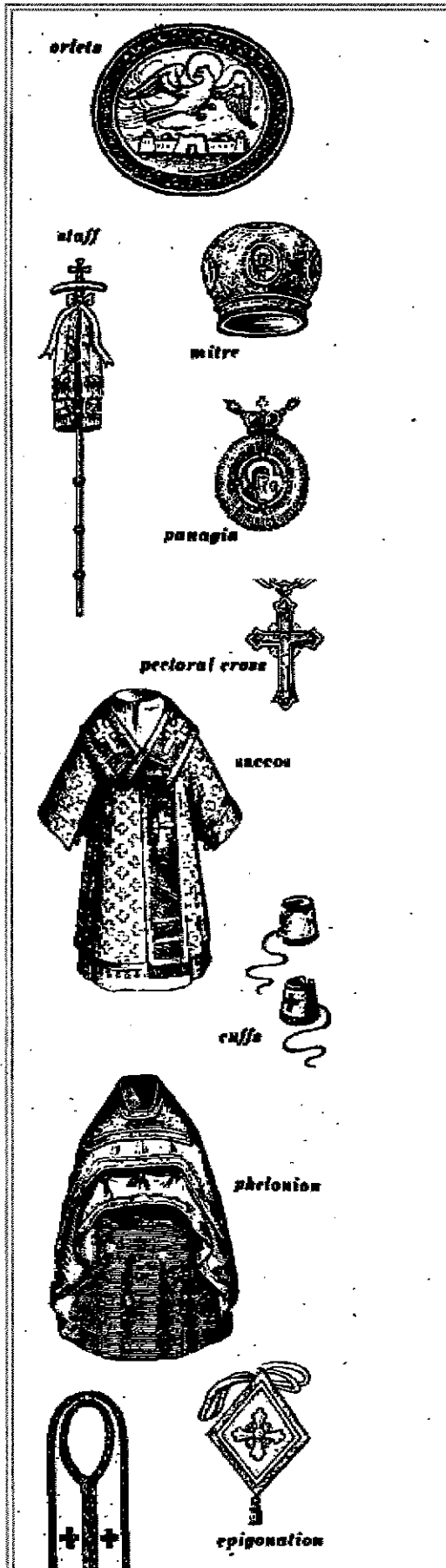


Orthodox America

The Symbolism of Vestments

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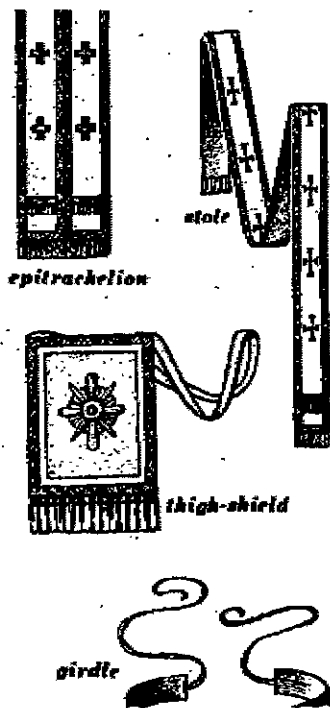
Visitors to an Orthodox church service may ask why it is that our clergy wear such seemingly peculiar garments. Accustomed to the sight of a priest in his Sunday vestments, we Orthodox Christians are rarely able to give a satisfactory explanation and our response is often Limited to something about "the beauty of the Church." While it is not necessary for us to become experts on this subject, we could benefit from a closer examination of church vestments-their historical origin and their significance-not only to be able to answer questions, But also to help ourselves enter more deeply into the services.

The historical origin and development of church vestments is a rather complex matter which has lent itself to two different approaches: the "ritualistic"- which assumes that the vestments of the early Christian Church were modeled after those of the Jewish levitical priesthood., and the "antiquarian"-which holds that it evolved from the ordinary dress of the Roman citizenry in the first few centuries of the Christian era.

That the office of the priesthood was meant to be set apart in its form of dress is clear from the Old Testament. God commanded that when the priests enter the gates of the inner court of the temple, "they shall put on linen robes... and when they go out into the outer court to the people, they shall put off their robes in which they minister and they shall lay them up in the chamber of the sanctuary" (Ezek. 44:17). Linen was considered to be a fine material in comparison with wool which was generally coarser and more commonly used. Besides a linen tunic, the order of Levites was also ordained to wear linen mitres upon their heads and "linen drawers upon their loins" and "they shall not tightly gird themselves" (Ezek. 44:18).

One cannot assume that before Christianity emerged from the catacombs any but the simplest form of vestment was used. The dress commonly worn by men and women like in the Roman Empire at that time was the *chiton* or tunic, a long garment with sleeves, which reached to the ground. The preferred color for celebrants was white as a symbol of that holiness and purity which the Lord commanded; "Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness" (Ps. 132:9). The garments set aside for Church services were decorated with crosses to distinguish them from ordinary garments. To this day the tunic remains as the vestment common to all three orders of clergy-bishops, priests and deacons-the only difference being that the deacon's tunic or *sticherion* has wide sleeves, while that of the bishop and priest has tight-fitting ones. That this garment has its origin in earliest times is a reminder of the universality of the Church and the immutability of the Faith.

Another item of clerical garb which had its origin the early centuries of the Church was the orarion or *stole*. It is likely that it



developed from the towel or scarf which was an indispensable part of the Roman attire and was generally worn over one shoulder. A fourth century law required that officials wear a sign of office. The stole served this function as well as having more purely spiritual, significance as a symbol of the grace of the holy Spirit flowing down upon the clergy. In the case of priests, the stole is worn over both shoulders as sign of the double measure of grace and is called the *epitrachelion* which means "what is worn around the neck." For convenience sake it is sewn or buttoned down the front. Although the bishop also wears - an epitrachelion, his distinctive sign of office is the *omophorion* - a long, broad strip arranged on the shoulders in such a way that one end descends in front and the other behind. The word 'omophorion' means "shoulder covering" and originally referred to a piece of sheepskin worn over the shoulders by the aged and in firm for warmth. Later it was made out of the same material as the rest of the vestment, but its origin still recalls the parable of the lost sheep which the good shepherd found and lay on his shoulders. So too the bishop is entrusted to safely guide his flock and take thought for the conversion of the erring.

The rise of Byzantium and the close relationship of the Church and State had a marked influence on the further development of Orthodox vestments which have essentially remained in the same form up to this day. The mitre, for example, - worn by all those in the episcopal office - is modeled after the crown of the Byzantine emperors. It is highly unlikely that it was modeled after the Old Testament mitre since it was not adopted by bishops of the Church until the 15th century. The mitre represents both the crown of thorns and also the power entrusted to bishops as the leaders of the Church. In more recent centuries the Russian Church has given the mitre to some archimandrites and archpriests as an honorary distinction. During the Byzantine era vestments came to be made of very beautiful fabrics such as brocaded silks, and were adorned with embroidery and jewels. With the hierarchs arrayed in such resplendent vestments, the services were reminiscent of the majestic - court ceremonies and were a striking reminder that the worshippers were in the presence of the King of kings.

The spiritual significance of all the various liturgical vestments is underlined by the special prayers read during the process of vesting; When the priest or deacon puts on the sticharon, he says: *"My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, for He hath clothed me in the garment of salvation and with the vesture of gladness hath He covered me. (Is. 61:10).* In putting on the *epimanika* or cuffs, first on the right hand and then on the left, he prays: "Thy right hand, O Lord, is glorified in strength; Thy right hand, O Lord, hath vanquished the enemy, and in the multitude of Thy glory hast Thou crushed the adversaries (Ex. 15:6). "Thy hands have made me and fashioned me..." (Ps. 118:73). The cuffs are symbolic of the bonds of Christ and serve as a reminder that a minister of the Church must rely not on his own strength, but on the help of God. Taking the epitrachelion, the priest makes over it the sign of the Cross and prays: "Blessed is God Who poureth out his grace upon His priests, like unto the oil of myrrh upon the head, which runneth down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, which runneth down to the fringe of his raiment" (PS. 132:2). In putting on the *zone* or belt, worn by both bishops and priests, he says: "Blessed is God, Who

girded me with power, and hath made my path blameless..." (Ps. 47:32-33). The zone denotes the priest's readiness to serve the Lord and is also a sign that he is bound to Christ. Those priests honored to wear the thigh-shield and also the *epigonation* (in Russian-palitsa), then put these on with the prayer: Gird Thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Mighty one.. "(Ps. 44:3) And indeed, these originated from the "knee-protectors" suspended from the belt and worn on the thigh by soldiers under their swords. The thigh-shield represents the spiritual sword denoting the celebrant as a soldier of Christ. The epigonation also represents the word of God, that is, the spiritual sword (Eph. 6:17) used to fight against all the wiles of the enemy. Over every thing the priest puts on the *phelonion* or chasuble a long, circular and sleeveless garment, shorter in front to allow the hands freedom of movement. It is symbolic of the robe Christ wore during His Passion; the ribbons which decorate it are reminders of the flow of blood on Christ's garments. The phelonion is also a token that the priest is "clothed with righteousness" (Ps. 131:9) and thus hedged off from all iniquities. For centuries it was also worn by bishops until it became customary for them to wear the *saccos*, a garment like a short tunic with half-sleeves, fashioned in all likelihood after the vestment of the Byzantine emperor; as such is a sign of special distinction and honor. Symbolically it serves as a reminder that the bishop must rise to holiness of life. The term "saccos" means a "sackcloth garment" or "garment of humility"

The pectoral is worn by both priests and bishops as a reminder that they should not merely carry Christ in their hearts, but also confess Him in the face of all men. The round or oval image of the Saviour or Mother of God, which is worn by bishops, is called a *I*, meaning 'All-holy.'

During the Divine Services bishops use a crozier or staff indicating that they are shepherds of Christ's flock. The top of the staff is made to resemble two serpents' heads, recalling the Saviours' words: "Be ye wise as serpents". As a serpent each year forces its way through thorny plants to shed its old skin, so also must the bishop lead others and follow himself along the thorny path which leads of the renewal of our souls.

The *orlets* is a small round or oval rug bearing the design of an eagle flying above a city. Bishops stand on such rugs as a reminder that they should rise high above the things of this world; through the example of their life and teaching, they are to inspire their flocks also to ascend from earth to heaven.

Although in the early Church the preferred color for vestments was white – as was mentioned above – it was not long before a wide array of colors was used. While there are no set rules as to when to use what colors, certain colors have come by tradition to be connected to particular feasts. White vestments, for example, are associated with the Paschal period (although in some churches the tradition for Paschas is to use red), as the brightest and most radiant celebration of the vanquishing of death. It is a visual reminder that, "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment" (Rev. 3:5). Green, the color of life and spring, is used at Pentecost to symbolize the beginning of the life of the Church. It is also used on feasts of certain saints, particular monk saints, who dwelt in the wilderness. Red is used at Nativity, on the Feast of the Holy

Apostles Peter and Paul, and for Martyrs. Blue is the traditional color of the Mother of God, as she is the Queen of Heaven. Deep purple is used during Lent as a reminder of the purple robe which the soldiers put on Christ to mock Him before His Passion. Outside of festal periods gold is used to remind us of the heavenly Jerusalem: "and the city was pure gold" (Rev. 21:18).

The use of vestments, then, not only adds to the visual splendor of the church; they have a far greater significance in transforming the celebrants, even young acolytes, into representatives of the Kingdom on high, reflecting that otherworldliness which is the essence of Orthodoxy.

(From a talk given at the St. Herman Winter Pilgrimage, Redding, California, 1983).

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