

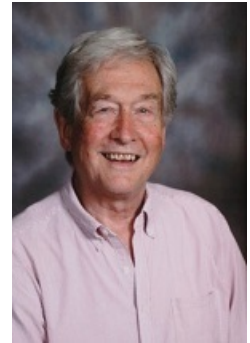
Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [pbosch@golden.net](mailto:pbosch@golden.net) ]

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## THE MANIPLE: Symbol of Service

1 The setting is an evening lakeside campfire at a church camp. There are perhaps twenty young people and a few adults gathered in a circle around the flames. A table altar has been positioned within the circle, set with bread in a wicker basket and wine in a ceramic cup. I am presiding, dressed in sandals, blue jeans, and sweatshirt. My only vestment: a maniple, a kind of white cotton towel, folded over my left wrist.

2 The young woman assisting me in administering the cup wears a maniple as well. As campers commune, we both wipe our fingers occasionally on our maniples. It's a fully functioning fabric. With the maniples on our wrists, we look like waiters in a restaurant.

3 That's precisely the point. It's meant to be a sign of service.

4 The maniple – from the Latin *manus* for "hand" – is one of several vestments suppressed in the documents of Vatican II as having outlived their usefulness. (The amice is another: a square of cotton or linen used at the neck of an alb as a kind of collar.) Both amice and maniple had evolved during the Middle Ages into entirely useless appendages.

5 Most modern albs provide their own cowl or collar to frame the face, rendering the amice redundant. As for the maniple, that had degenerated from a simple utilitarian towel – a large white napkin folded lengthwise in thirds and draped over the left wrist, and hence a sign of service, like a waiter's – into a totally non-functional silk or brocade appendage in the colour of the Day or Season, often fringed and elaborated with appliqued symbols, like a tiny stole at the wrist. No wonder that was thought to be redundant by the progressive framers of Vatican II.

6 But the original utilitarian function of the maniple remains difficult to dispute. The maniple signals service, when it is a simple white cotton towel, worn over the lower arm of those serving Communion. It is thoroughly functional and utilitarian. You wipe your fingers on it.

7 I suppose a supply of them could be used at Maundy Thursday's footwashing, to dry the feet that have been washed. See Essay 161 above.

8 Because the maniple so clearly and so profoundly signals service, I myself would use one at every Eucharist. I own a modest supply of them: white cotton – not Polyester – huck towelling with a handsome waffle texture. When I wear no other vestments at the Holy Communion – as at the campfire Communion above – I'd still use a maniple.

9 It wouldn't be fringed and coloured brocaded silk, of course. It would be a simple white cotton towel, a large tri-fold napkin.

10 Like a waiter's.

